1 Vietnam Tourism: a View from Within

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Introduction

Vietnam Tourism: Policies and Practices is a unique work offering an emic view of tourism in Vietnam. Thirteen chapters in the book cover a broad range of tourism development issues with reference to the historical, political, cultural and economic background of the country. The compendium of work in this volume fills an existing gap in tourism publications, where Vietnam is often considered a relatively minor destination within the broader context of tourism in Southeast Asia and where much of the literature overly links tourism to the Vietnam War (1959–1975). More importantly, the research represented in this volume consists of original empirical studies conducted by Vietnamese authors and contributors over a long period of engagement with tourism in the country as government officers, development consultants, tourism researchers, educators and industry workers. The writers are thus able to access government policy papers, industry reports, research documentation, data, and fieldworks in the native language, Vietnamese. This, in turn, ensures the inclusion of relevant and up-to-date insights on tourism policies, structures and governance, various forms of tourism, and the industry's operational research from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The authors are also experienced with global and regional tourism trends and theories owing to their diverse backgrounds in teaching, research and consulting inside and outside of Vietnam. This work is the culmination of their knowledge and experience and their inspiration to embrace both local and global perspectives, representing the viewpoint of a new generation of researchers in the area of Vietnam tourism.

Current Issues in Vietnam Tourism

Vietnam is situated on the east of the Indochinese Peninsula, bordering Cambodia to the west and Laos and China to the north. The territory covers an area of some 327,500 km^2. Its long and narrow territory stretches 1700 km from north to south, and in the centre it spans a mere 50 km from east to west (see Fig. 1.1).

On the one hand, Vietnam possesses 3260 km of extensive coastline, stretching from the Gulf of Tonkin to the Gulf of Thailand with a plethora of fine beaches and archipelagos. On the other hand, mountainous areas cover three-quarters of the land surface, typified by hilly terrains. Vietnam thus boasts a high level of biodiversity. Vietnam ranks as the 16th most biodiverse country in the world (Mittermeier *et al.*, 2004). It is home to several of the world's most iconic species, including the Indochinese tiger (*Panthera tigris*) and the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*). Since 1992, four mammal

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Fig. 1.1. Administrative map of Vietnam. Map courtesy of Thuy T. Duong.

species have been discovered previously unknown to science (Timmins and Duckworth, 2001). Furthermore, 109 large mammals and about 850 bird species have been recorded in Vietnam, which is also home to between 9600 and 12,000 plant species. Vietnam is also known as one of the world's richest countries in agricultural biodiversity, with over 800 plant species cultivated in diversified agro-ecological production (USAID (United States Agency for International Development), 2013).

From a cultural perspective, with over 4000 years of civilization, Vietnam has a long line of cultural heritage ranging from historical sites, monuments, both French colonial and 'Indo-Chinese' architecture, war heritage, spiritual practices and intangible heritages.

Vietnam is also ethnically diverse with a myriad of languages, cultures and traditions belonging to 54 different ethnic groups, most of whom are ethnic minorities living in the high plateau and mountainous regions (Nguyen, 2016). The combination of Vietnam's rich historical, natural and cultural resources forms a solid basis for developing unique tourism products (Jansen-Verbeke and Go, 1995), yet there are arguably significant challenges related to the sustainable use of these resources.

Travel in Vietnam had existed since the feudal era to French colonization, but it was not until the last decade of the 20th century that tourism development accelerated upon the ending of major wars and conflicts (see Chapter 2, this volume). The centralized political and economic system as the main driver of post-war reconstruction left its traces in contemporary tourism governance, policy and planning. However, the market economy with the socialist orientation has largely shaped current tourism development (see Chapter 3, this volume). Tourism has been one of the first economic sectors of Vietnam to open up to foreign investment and privatization in the era after the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) economic reforms were initiated in 1986. The tourism industry witnessed a transition from the state-owned enterprises in the early 1990s to the privatization of those in the early 2000s and the flourishing of the large domestic and international groups that dominate the hotel industry. The Law on Tourism (originating from the Tourism Ordinance of 1997, then becoming the Tourism Law in 2005, amended to its current form in 2017) highlights the importance of the operating environment in supporting tourism development (Semone *et al.*, 2011). Unlike some other countries in the region, where tourism has been encouraged but primarily left to develop organically, Vietnam has implemented a structured planning approach to the tourism sector, guided by the Master Plans (World Bank, 2019). This centralized planning approach to tourism development has been exemplified in Chapter 4 (this volume). The diversity of tourism products built on various natural and cultural resources of the country is presented from Chapters 5 to 9 (this volume), covering different forms of tourism such as marine and island tourism (Chapter 5), ecotourism (Chapter 6), community-based tourism (Chapter 7), heritage tourism (Chapter 8) and dark tourism at the former battlefields of the Vietnam War (Chapter 9). Due to its tendency to employ high shares of low-skilled, rural, and youth workers, tourism has also positively impacted poverty reduction and has facilitated some redistribution of income from richer to poorer localities in Vietnam (World Bank, 2019). The chapters covered in Part I and Part II of this volume reflect this social viewpoint of tourism development.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Vietnam has been experiencing a tourism boom, establishing itself as one of South-east Asia's top tourist destinations while achieving record growth in international and domestic visitors. In 2019, Vietnam welcomed 18 million international tourists, a target reached 10 years earlier than planned. In the same year, domestic tourism grew exponentially, reaching 85 million trips and surpassing the target set for 2030 (VNAT, 2020). Tourism's direct and indirect contribution to Vietnam's gross domestic product (GDP) reached 9.2% in 2019, with tourism as the country's single largest service export. The focus of tourism development has also switched from primarily economic objectives to social and environmental sustainability. Among other things, the institutionalization of sustainable and responsible tourism development has subsequently impacted the operation and management of tourism-related businesses. Chapters 10–13 of this volume reflect the embracement of new values in the business operations of the tourism industry. In particular, the tour operators' perception and implementation of responsible tourism practices are presented in Chapter 10. Various questions concerning corporate social responsibility in the current situation of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic are further addressed in Chapter 11. Moreover, the intertwining of policies and stakeholder engagement, reflective of the top-down governance of the event industry, are demonstrated in Chapter 12. Human resource management practices are discussed in Chapter 13.

Vietnam has achieved the most considerable overall improvement in destination competitiveness among its South-east Asian neighbours (i.e. Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) since 2015. According to *The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report*

2017 (WEF, 2017), Vietnam improved in the areas of ICT (information and communications technology) readiness, international openness, safety and security, as well as ground and port infrastructure. However, several areas remained relatively behind regional benchmarks, including tourist service, air transport infrastructure and prioritization of the tourism sector (WEF, 2017). As a whole, while the South-east Asian region performed very poorly in the dimension of environmental sustainability, Vietnam ranked 129th globally. This ranking raises critical issues, drawing immediate attention to policy making and implementation. Other concerns about current tourism development in Vietnam are visitor growth, declining visitor yield, and overcrowding pressures at some popular tourist destinations. These issues need to be addressed to ensure that future tourism growth is more sustainable, inclusive and geographically balanced (World Bank, 2019).

The unexpected factor of the global COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on the tourism industry in Vietnam. In 2020–2021, there was a paucity of international tourist arrivals and the suspension of many investment and development projects in the tourism sector. Meanwhile, with a population of nearly 100 million, Vietnamese domestic tourism has grown to be a driving force for the tourism industry's recovery during and after the pandemic. The changes caused and accelerated by the pandemic offer an opportunity for those involved in Vietnam tourism to look back, revise and reconsider a more sustainable direction for future growth of the tourism industry in this country (see Chapters 3, 6, 8 and 11, this volume). Under these circumstances, a comprehensive assessment of Vietnam tourism from multiple perspectives, accommodating rapid changes in the operating environment of the industry, is needed and is one of the key contributions made by this book.

Current Research on Vietnam Tourism

Apart from partial demand arising from uncertainty and long-standing problems, there is also a need from tourism academia for a collection of empirical work on tourism in Vietnam published in English. Research on Vietnam tourism has proliferated in the past decades owing to a growing number of students and scholars with tourism backgrounds, along with the dramatic growth of the tourism industry over the past 30 years.

The previous three books on Vietnam tourism were written by American authors and often presented Vietnam in contrast and opposition to the American viewpoint, with excessive reference to the Vietnam War. For example, *Vietnam Tourism* by Arthur Berger (2005) deconstructs the author's perception and experiences of travelling in Vietnam. Being one of the first volumes of Vietnam tourism published in the early 2000s, the data and facts presented in the book have become outdated. The ethnographic approach that the author took limits the exploration of Vietnam tourism from a touristic viewpoint and, therefore, lacks a macro-level analysis of the country's tourism system. Another work, *Tours of Vietnam: War, Travel Guides and Memory* by Scott Laderman (2009), represents Vietnam tourism through the memory of the Vietnam War and is limited to American encounters. From this perspective, the work excessively discusses only one form of tourism: dark tourism experienced by an American tourist. Other modern forms of tourism in Vietnam, and the wide range of stakeholders involved in Vietnam tourism, are absent from the volume. The most recent volume is *Entrepreneurialism and Tourism in Contemporary Vietnam*, written by Jamie Gillen (2016). The author uses a cultural-economic framework to depict everyday life in Vietnam better and demonstrate that relationships are transactional in much more than monetary terms, even among competitors in the tourism industry. The book shifts away from presenting Vietnam as a part of the American history of foreign relations and examines modern Vietnam tourism from the production or supply-side perspective. In contrast, the consumption or demand-side perspective and the issues surrounding tourism policies and governance are neglected.

To a lesser extent, Vietnam has often been presented in collections, confined to one or several chapters of edited volumes on tourism in South-east Asian countries. For example, *Tourism in Southeast Asia: a New Direction* (Chon, 2000)

discusses selected aspects of ecotourism, impacts of tourism on local communities, collaborative tourism marketing, and includes one chapter on Vietnam tourism (Mok and Lam, 2000). In the same year, the book *Tourism in South and Southeast Asia* (Hall and Page, 2000) debates tourism development in the region from a variety of perspectives (historical, social, cultural, economic, policy-based, ecological, planning, etc.), also featuring Vietnam tourism policy in the latter half of the 1990s (Cooper, 2000). *Tourism in Southeast Asia: Challenges and New Directions* (Hitchcock *et al.*, 2009) provides a wide range of themes as well as geographical areas of tourism development in the region, with a chapter on cultural politics in the border region of Vietnam and China (Chan, 2009), and Vietnam tourism business in the transitional economy (Bennett, 2009). *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia* (King *et al.*, 2010) covers issues in post-war Vietnam related to the tourist gaze at heritage sites (Johnson, 2010), heritage attractions in transition (Suntikul *et al.*, 2010a), and handicraft heritage (Hitchcock *et al.*, 2010). *Tourism and Monarchy in Southeast Asia* (Porananond and King, 2016) includes the topic of travel in monarchical Vietnam (Nguyen, 2016), and managing tourism in the former royal city of Huế (Bui, 2016). The most recent volume on *Tourism and Development in Southeast Asia* (Dolezal *et al.*, 2020) includes a chapter on the economic contribution of ecotourism in Vietnam (Pham and Bui, 2020).

Collections of books on broader Asian tourism have also included chapters about Vietnam, mainly from anthropological perspectives. *Asian Tourism: Growth and Changes* (Cochrane, 2008) is among the very few collections to introduce a historical perspective of tourism in the colonial period (DeWald, 2008). The collection of writing, *Domestic Tourism in Asia: Diversity and Divergence* (Singh, 2009), features domestic Vietnamese travelling for spiritual purposes such as meditation (Alneng, 2009). The book *Asia on Tour: Exploring the Rise of Asian Tourism* (Winter *et al.*, 2009) mentions the marginalization and preconception of domestic tourists in Vietnam in the practices of the travel agency industry (Gillen, 2009). Policies and governance of Vietnam tourism (Truong and Le, 2017) are discussed in *The Routledge Handbook of Tourism in Asia* (Hall and

Page, 2017). The issue of managing a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site in Trang An (Bui *et al.*, 2018) was featured in the edited volume *Managing Asian Destinations* (Wang *et al.*, 2018).

The past decade has also witnessed a proliferation of publications on Vietnam tourism in various academic journals. Publications on Vietnam tourism in relation to development often focus on sustainability and community-based and pro-poor tourism (Phi *et al.*, 2017; Trupp *et al.*, 2020). Recent work on policies and governance outlines the evolution of policies for tourism development (Truong, 2013; Truong and Le, 2017), with a particular focus on pro-poor tourism (Truong *et al.*, 2014; Truong, 2017). In addition, there is a growing body of work on Vietnam tourism's impacts on society, the economy and the environment (Pham, 2012; Mai *et al.*, 2014; Hampton *et al.*, 2018) as well as work covering tourism social entrepreneurs and social innovation (Phi, 2017; Phi *et al.*, 2016, 2017). Heritage tourism in Vietnam is another well-researched topic (Bui and Jolliffe, 2011a; Bui *et al.*, 2018; Bui and Dolezal, 2020), with much of the work examining the case of Hội An (Bui *et al.*, 2020; Hoang *et al.*, 2020; Thu *et al.*, 2020). Domestic tourism markets (Bui and Jolliffe, 2011b), along with differences within international and domestic markets, are addressed (Bui and Le, 2016). Meanwhile, dark tourism in Vietnam is researched through: (i) the different lenses of ideology and politics (Alneng, 2002); (ii) multifaceted practices of memory and knowledge production (Schwenkel, 2006); (iii) the visitor experience at battlefields (Upton *et al.*, 2018); (iv) migrant experiences of war sites (Le, 2014); (v) landscapes of war (Lema and Agrusa, 2013); (vi) wartime attractions (Henderson, 2000, 2007; Gillen, 2018); and (vii) interpretation of war sites (Ngo and Bui, 2019).

Ecotourism and nature-based tourism have been approached from topics such as governance and policies (Suntikul *et al.*, 2010b), partnership between private and public sectors (Ly and Xiao, 2016), destination planning and management (Buckley, 2004), gender and development (Tran and Walter, 2014), revenue diversification (Pham and Bui, 2020), carrying capacity (Ly and Nguyen, 2017) and changing landscape of the fragile environment resulted from tourism (Bui and Pham,

2021). Research on marine and island tourism emphasizes sustainability in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) (Lindsey and Holmes, 2002; Mai and Smith, 2015; Le and Ta, 2020; Pham-Do and Pham, 2020), tourism planning (Mai and Smith, 2018), governance (Khuu *et al.*, 2021a, b) and solid waste treatment (Tsai *et al.*, 2021). Besides, there is also research on heritage and tourism development on some islands such as Con Dao (Hayward and Tran, 2014). However, research on industry operations, hotels, events and human resource development has been relatively under-researched. Although the analysis is comprehensive and varied, the scope of a single article or book chapter has limits due to issues of length and focus. A holistic approach to the phenomena of tourism in contemporary Vietnam is the central point and advantage of this volume, covering the existing shortage of comprehensive research on tourism in Vietnam.

Organization of the Book

Vietnam Tourism: Policies and Practices provides a comprehensive review of tourism development in Vietnam. Part I of the volume includes four chapters, introducing and outlining the history of Vietnam tourism and the role and function of the public sector in tourism policy making, planning and governance of the industry. Part II, with five chapters, offers analysis and assessment of various types of tourism, including marine and island tourism, ecotourism, community-based tourism, heritage, and dark tourism. Part III of the book comprises four chapters that examine the practices of hotels, tour operators, events, and the general issues of human resource development and management of the industry. A summary of the parts and their chapters is outlined below.

Part I. Tourism Policies and Practices Across Time and Space

Chapter 1 by Bui and Phi defines the scope of the book with reference to the political, social and economic situation of the country. By reviewing existing work on Vietnam tourism published in English, the authors highlight the issues of minorities and fragmentation with regards to current writing on the topic. This justifies the importance and significance of compiling a compendium of current work on policies and practices of tourism development from various levels of administration across different types and forms of tourism and encompassing diverse segments of the tourism industry.

Chapter 2 looks at tourism development from the Vietnamese feudal time to French colonization, and during the Indochina War and Vietnam War when the country was divided into North and South Vietnam prior to the reunification in 1975. Bui and Bui analyse the historical context of the major forces shaping the country's production and consumption of tourism that have long-lasting impacts on modern tourism. The approach to tourism history, reaching back to the monarchical and colonial periods, is distinguished from previous writing that excessively centres on tourism post-1975.

Chapter 3 by Bui *et al.* reviews tourism policies and governance in contemporary Vietnam. In post-war Vietnam (from 1975 onwards), tourism has changed its mission, from the fulfilment of a political role under the principle of a centrally planned economy to a bridging and supporting role in a transitional period from the centrally planned economy to the market economy. The industry has continued to transform into a strategic economic sector, serving as a springboard for other sectors to grow towards full international integration with high competitiveness. Behind the transitional roles and functions of the tourism industry is the process of institutionalization of tourism, created through laws and regulations. The authors address some critical issues of policy making and implementation such as over-optimistic, quantity-driven planning for tourism development as well as challenges to overcoming the dramatic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the industry.

Chapter 4 exemplifies the process of tourism planning of Đắk Lắk province in the Central Highlands. The authors (Duong *et al.*) highlight the centralized planning approach to resource assessment for tourism product development. A systematic analysis is applied to reorient tourism development by promoting alternative forms of tourism such as ecotourism, cultural, agricultural and wellness forms of tourism. The findings indicate that tourism resources have

been vastly underestimated, and the tourism development has not matched the potential of the resources in the region yet.

Part II. Types and Forms of Tourism

Chapter 5, written by Do and Phi, focuses on marine and island tourism, one of the four strategic tourism products. The authors systematically review tourism resources and infrastructure for marine and island tourism in Vietnam and then analyse stakeholder roles and their involvement in policy formulation and implementation. Through an in-depth analysis of two case studies on Côn Đảo and Phú Quốc Island, the authors compare two different approaches to marine and island tourism and address current issues as well as challenges for the future of sustainable development.

Chapter 6 is a compilation of policy papers on ecotourism by Pham *et al.*, providing readers with an overview of ecotourism in forest-protected areas in Vietnam, from theoretical concepts and historical evolution of forest conservation to the current structure of governance and management of forest resources. The work projects ecotourism in connection to economic and socio-cultural perspectives of the country as well as in relation to the behaviours of eco-tourists. The review synthesizes existing studies published through various channels both in and outside of the country, along with numerous governmental reports and research conducted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on ecotourism, protected areas and forest conservation.

Chapter 7 defines community-based tourism (CBT) as a form of alternative tourism that seeks to engage the host community throughout the planning, development and management of tourism to reduce negative impacts and maximize the positive benefits of tourism for locals. The two authors, Phi and Pham, draw from conversations with CBT stakeholders, participant observation and secondary data to identify challenges facing CBT in the areas of marketing, capacity development and regulations. Concerning opportunities, there is an increase in cross-sectoral collaboration, digitalization in tourism and tourism policies in the (post-) COVID-19 period.

Chapter 8 examines the symbiosis of heritage conservation and tourism development at a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) cultural heritage site, one of the most popular touristic sites in Vietnam. Bui, Le and Jones present findings derived from a longitudinal study over 5 years spanning before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (from 2016 to 2020). Although Hội An has dramatically benefited from mass tourism, the excessive increase in visitor numbers and concentration in the core heritage zone of the city has negatively impacted the economic wealth of the residents of the ancient town. COVID-19 halted the development of tourism, which attracts attention to the overdependence of the city on tourism, and offers an opportunity for administrators to rethink and revise Hội An's existing tourism policies.

Chapter 9 discusses the current practices of dark tourism conducted in the former demilitarized zone (DMZ), evoking the confrontation of two ideologies between Vietnamese and American troops in the Vietnam War. The two authors, Ngo, Bui and Dimache, examine the structure of the dark tourism industry, issues of governance, promotion and production of dark tourism and the involvement of tourists and tour guides in the historic sites in the DMZ of Quảng Trị province. The analysis of construction and narration at former battlefields offers an in-depth understanding of dark tourism at former war sites in post-war Vietnam.

Part III. The Tourism Industry Practices

Chapter 10 addresses the challenges to implementing responsible tourism among tour operators. The authors of the chapter, Bui *et al.*, propose rethinking responsible tourism via a behavioural approach. Findings outline fundamental factors affecting the intention to implement responsible tourism, including management policies, group dynamics, perceived social pressure, and cultural philosophy on the implementation of responsible tourism. The discussion opens up a discussion on responsible tourism when current practices are highly driven by external social conditions; they do not come from within the awareness of the tourism business.

Chapter 11, written by Nghiem-Phu and Tran, examines how hotel businesses in Vietnam overcome the challenges caused by COVID-19 by transforming lodgings into quarantine facilities. Analysing press and user-generated content, it was found that both positive and negative images were attached to the quarantine hotels. The findings have demonstrated that corporate social responsibility (CSR) could be implemented to sustain business in the current circumstances while preparing for brand strengthening for recovery.

Chapter 12 analyses policies and stakeholders' engagement in the planning and management of festivals and cultural events. The authors, Dang *et al.*, utilize a case-study approach with four vignettes: (i) Gióng Festival (Hà Nội city); (ii) Thành Tuyên Festival (Tuyên Quang province); (iii) Tịch Điền Festival (Hà Nam province); and (iv) the Tea Festival (Thái Nguyên province). Findings from semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders reveal a range of endogenous and exogenous drivers presented on vertical axes for stakeholder engagement. Important findings from this study relate to the process of changing roles of the local community, local authorities and the central state as the events evolve over time.

Chapter 13 on human resource management practices in the Vietnam tourism industry is compiled by Hoang, Do and Le. The authors analyse current practices on recruitment, selection, performance appraisal and labour performance, training and development, and compensation in tourism and its related industries. The outcomes of the analysis are a range of recommendations for the industry in relation to job analysis and design tools to enhance the effectiveness of human resource management across different sectors of the tourism industry.

A Synthesis

The collection of work presented in this book examines Vietnam tourism from both production and consumption sides, both subject to the intervention of the governance of the public sector. The work presented in this book is original and reflects a collection of fieldwork and empirical research conducted by the authors and contributors in their decades of involvement in Vietnam tourism. The authors and contributors have uniquely drawn from their professional and consulting experience to provide insights on current tourism practices, complementing their academic viewpoints. Written and published during a time of uncertainty and rapid change caused by a global health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the tourism industry. The contents of this volume update the situation of the past 2 years (2020–2021) regarding the current policies and support the industry and cover how tourism stakeholders reinvent themselves for building resilience as they face constant changes in the markets.

This volume lays the foundation for future research and study of the tourism phenomena in Vietnam and hopes to inspire new thinking that contributes to leading Vietnam tourism towards long-term resilience and success. The book also seeks to become a reliable source of reference for students, researchers, industry practitioners and policy makers interested in modern tourism in the Vietnamese context, with implications for the broader tourism industry in South-east Asia and tourism in developing countries.

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