Analysis of the legacy of conflict among international tourists in Vietnam

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Abstract: Since the late 1980s, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) has made extensive political and economic reforms while rapidly expanding tourism. Known as Doi Moi, the reforms opened up new areas of Vietnam unconnected with the country’s wartime past while lessening the VCPs antagonistic stance towards former adversaries. Reforms have also helped broaden Vietnam’s identity among younger generations of international tourists who no longer solely associate the country with war. Although the war will always be a part of the country’s history, other factors such as Vietnam’s food, beaches, and shopping opportunities are larger draws for its fast-growing tourism industry.

Keywords: Vietnam; Vietnam War; war tourism; Doi Moi; political reform.


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1 Introduction

International trade, business, and tourism have flourished in Vietnam since the late 1980s following the Doi Moi political and economic reforms and integration of the country into the global economy. Part of this integration has been tapping the international tourism industry as a key driver of economic growth and a realisation of the importance of the country’s image in attracting foreign visitors. While Doi Moi was instrumental in reducing poverty, it had the concomitant effect of exposing millions of people to aspects of the country unconnected with the Vietnam War (known as the American War in Vietnam) through the growth of a robust tourism industry.

This article focuses on tourism in Vietnam and addresses one primary and one secondary research question based on survey and interview data collected in Ho Chi Minh City. The primary question concerns the legacy of the Vietnam War. Specifically, is the war’s legacy a significant factor in attracting international tourists to the country?
Given the fact that the war was covered as no other throughout history (at least up until that point), not to mention the innumerable amount of documentation and analysis it spurred, it would seem likely that the conflict’s continued resonance over multiple generations since its official end in 1975 would convert into tourist dollars. If the war is not a factor in drawing tourists that raises the secondary question: Why do war-related sites in Ho Chi Minh City continue to see large numbers of visitors?

War tourism has been cited as a potential avenue for tourism development, particularly among foreign veterans (Agrusa et al., 2006). Indeed, some researchers see war tourism as a key component of Vietnam’s tourism industry (Alneng, 2002; Schwenkel, 2006; Keyes, 2012). But is it? My hypothesis regarding the primary question is that the legacy of the war is not a significant factor today in drawing tourists to the country due to the expansion of tourism following Doi Moi which broadened perspectives of Vietnam away from a conflict-centred identity. The reforms proved invaluable at not only reducing poverty in the country, but also paving the way for political rapprochement with the countries of ASEAN and former combatant countries such as the USA, leading to the toning down of rhetoric by the Vietnamese Government towards erstwhile foes.

But if the war itself is not a motivating factor for those visiting the country, what accounts for the numbers of visitors at war-related sites in Ho Chi Minh City such as the War Remnants Museum? To address this secondary question, I examine factors related to Ho Chi Minh City’s tourism industry. My argument is that although these sites continue to see large numbers of visitors, for an increasing number of younger tourists their visit has less to do with coming to terms with a deeper meaning of Vietnam’s wartime past as it does engaging the limited number of points of interest throughout the city. Additionally, generational differences are also likely responsible for valuations of sites and the importance of the war in general.

Tourism, however, not only refers to historical and cultural displays such as the recreation of rituals for tourist consumption [Schramm, (2004), p.163], but the artefacts and sites used to promote interest group agendas [King, (2008), p.238], and shape regional and collective identity [Moore, (2008), pp.14–17; Tunbridge, (2009), pp.14–17]. These events include military conflicts which today serve as the basis of ‘war tourism’ such as the need to restore the memory of those killed by war (Eide, 2007), or balancing pre-modern heritage with war memorials (Figal, 2008).

War tourism has been placed within the genre of ‘dark tourism’ (also called thanatourism), or tourism related to death (Stone and Sharpley, 2008). Within this genre the individual confronts spaces of dystopian social disjunction, simulating the experiences of others or comparing reality with what they have created in their minds through the consumption of books and other media [Podoshen et al., (2015), p.8; Podoshen, (2013), pp.266–268]. While some authors cite the absence of deeper meanings and critical interrogations of conflict in war tourism (Grundlingh, 2004), others point to state driven efforts at ‘covering’ rather than commemorating conflicts for the purposes of drawing tourists (Rivera, 2008).

But these reasons stand alongside the real implications of war tourism as a means of political persuasion (Holguin 2005), thereby acting as a vehicle for sustaining authoritarianism [Hazbun, (2007–2008), p.11]. And yet, persuasion can take many forms. Vietnamese officials initially insisted that reference to South Vietnam and
non-revolutionary personnel be omitted in a 2000 requiem displaying works of Vietnamese and international photojournalists at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, although they were ultimately presented [Schwenkel, (2008), pp.59–61]. This denial of existence by the Vietnamese Government extends to the physical as well, such as the dilapidated Bien Hoa cemetery outside of Ho Chi Minh City for South Vietnamese soldiers killed during the war [Tatum, (1996), p.650]. The intense negativity over the ferocity of the war not only has led to the presentation of historical revisionism and contested opinion as fact, but also to the commoditisation of images and their ability to induce sensation [Morrison, (2009–2010), p.67], which found a ready consumer in the global marketplace.

But that marketplace is diverse as it is segmented. The data collected for this article, for example, were originally part of an unrelated project examining the tourism industries in Vietnam and Thailand and not one specifically dealing with the legacy of the Vietnam War on tourism in Vietnam. Therefore, my hypotheses and arguments are extrapolations which, admittedly, are difficult to demonstrate fully given the limited data. Some of the interviews conducted by assistants, for example, were not transcribed and covered a range of issues, many unrelated to the war, which hampers drawing concrete conclusions. Further, I will concede that interest in the war does not have to be prerequisite to visit war-related sites; individuals can have little or no interest in the conflict and still decide to visit such sites for a variety of reasons. With these limitations in mind, the article does provide enough evidence to question current understandings of tourism in Vietnam and the importance of the Vietnam War’s legacy to the country’s tourism industry.

2 Methodology and socioeconomic data

Most political analysts agree that while Vietnam has made significant strides in the political and economic arenas, there are significant issues that continue to hamper development. Within Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), the implementation of socialist measures following reunification in 1975 all but crushed the country’s economic engine while rapid modernisation and reforms throughout the 1980s and 90s led to infrastructural decay and a deterioration of cultural heritage sites [Vu, (2006), p.166]. Coupled with these internal changes are the enduring images and depictions of the war within academic literature and popular travel guides. Research design, thus, had to take into account social, economic, and political changes with the realisation that a wide range of opinions would be present in the disparate nationalities and age groups involved in the study. Over the years Vietnam has played a large part in Western popular culture including films (Platoon, Apocalypse Now), books and television documentaries (The Ten Thousand Day War), theatrical performances (Ms. Saigon), and increasingly in video games (Elite Warriors: Vietnam, Wings Over Vietnam) meaning that generations have been exposed to ‘war chic’ material and images of the country in a static temporal context. The inclusion of disparate nationalities and age groups, therefore, provides a picture of whether these images dominate perceptions of Vietnam or whether the country has moved beyond its revolutionary past in the eyes of visitors.
2.1 Sample

Three hundred and six respondents from 36 countries in North and South America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, India, and East and Southeast Asia were surveyed in Ho Chi Minh City. Given that the main focus of the surveys was foreign tourists regardless of country of origin, no systematic sampling was conducted. Some of those surveyed were also interviewed regarding the tourism industry. Interviews of local Vietnamese specifically involved in the tourism industry are also included. Vietnamese insights into the changing face of Vietnam’s tourism industry provide background details lacking in the surveys.

Figure 1 Respondents by nationality (see online version for colours)
Analysis of the legacy of conflict among international tourists in Vietnam

2.2 Instruments and data collection

The surveys were conducted in Ho Chi Minh City’s District 1. The city is divided into numerous districts with new ones being added through land reclamation as the city expands past its natural boundary of the Saigon River. District 1 contains the primary tourist activities and sites including the War Remnants Museum, the city’s opera house, Independence Palace, well known tourist markets such as Ben Thanh Market, as well as buildings from the city’s colonial past near Cultural Park.

Surveys combined questions related to demographics (age, gender, country of origin), countries visited in Southeast Asia, specific aspects of the Vietnamese tourism industry, as well as reasons for visiting the country. The latter were then compiled into a cumulative index according to country/region of origin.

Ten Vietnamese research assistants studying tourism and hotel management at local universities were recruited and placed at popular tourist sites mentioned above in District 1. Surveys and interviews were conducted in English in the morning and afternoon at each site. The response rate for the surveys was high and most tourists who were approached agreed to take part. Research assistants were fluent in English and the interviews were done at random with no preference given to nationality, however, the ability to converse in English on the part of respondents was necessary.

3 Results

The vast majority of respondents were from Western countries. More than 78% said that they had visited three or more countries in Southeast Asia, many on what could be called the ‘Mainland loop’; that is, a loop of countries in Mainland Southeast Asia including Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and perhaps Laos. Going from Thailand to Cambodia (and even more so Laos) presents a stark contrast in development. Thus, Vietnam presented many with a happy medium between the two. When asked to rank Vietnam as a tourist destination on a ten-point scale with 10 equalling ‘excellent’, more than 83% of tourists ranked the country as 7 or higher; 66% ranked it as 8 or higher; and more than 30% ranked it as 9 or higher.

Further measurements were made regarding different aspects of the Vietnamese tourism industry. Respondents were asked to rank from 1 to 5 (1 equalling ‘low’, 5 equalling ‘high’) shopping, accommodation, dining, historical attractions, and parks/green space options. More than 94% of respondents ranked shopping between 3–5 (30%, 43% and 22% respectively); 82% rated accommodation between 1–3 (7%, 19%, and 57%); more than 95% ranked dining options between 3–5 (14%, 43%, and 39%); more than 91% ranked historical attractions between 3–5 (25%, 43%, and 24%); and more than 52% ranked parks/green space between 1–3 (3%, 17%, and 32%).

However, what is important for this study is the low impact the legacy of the Vietnam War had on perceptions of the country and motivations for visiting. Respondents listed 21 categories varying widely from food, business opportunities, Ho Chi Minh City’s infamous motorbike traffic, to language and nightlife. Of the 306 people surveyed, only 12 respondents (4%) noted the legacy of the Vietnam War specifically as a reason for visiting. These included one person each from Germany, Australia, Ukraine, UK, Netherlands, and Denmark, and two people each from the USA, Ireland, and Canada.
Table 1  Reasons for visiting Vietnam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>European</th>
<th>US/other</th>
<th>SE Asian</th>
<th>Australia/ NZ</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>India/other Asian</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality/people</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language training</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiking/trekking</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of travel</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaches</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business opportunities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightlife</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam War/war memorials</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mekong Delta</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided tours</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodations</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic groups</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather/climate</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscape/scenery</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value for money</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient/colonial history</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural attractions</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the nine countries from which these 12 individuals hailed, only the USA and Australia had troops that fought in the conflict; these included one American male and one Australian male between the ages of 18–30, and another American male between 51–60.

Table 2  War tourists by country, gender, and age range

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of individuals</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>51–60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>61+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>61+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>M, M</td>
<td>18–30, 51–60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>F, F</td>
<td>18–30, 18–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>F, M</td>
<td>18–30, 18–30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Fisher’s exact test was then used to calculate the significance of the war and tourists’ country of origin. That is, whether there is an association between visiting Vietnam because of an interest in the war and originating from either a former combatant or non-combatant country.

### Table 3  
Fisher’s exact test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>War tourists</th>
<th>Non-war tourists</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Combatant countries</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-combatant countries</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this test, the two-tailed P-value equalled 1.0000 meaning that the association between the groups (rows) and outcomes (columns) is not statistically significant (and it should be remembered that these were the only individuals out of 306 respondents from 36 countries who expressed an interest in the war). This suggests several things:

1. the legacy of the war is not a significant factor in attracting tourists to the country
2. those that are interested in the conflict are by and large not from former combatant countries
3. the legacy of the war is likely not a reason why non-Western tourists are visiting the country (however, given the low number of respondents from non-Western countries, more research on this issue is needed).

None of the 306 total respondents in the survey were military personnel who served during the conflict, and of those from the USA, South Korea, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines (former combatant countries), 67% fell between the ages of 18–40. In other words, those too young to have fought and/or remembered the event as young adults. Indeed, for the majority of respondents Vietnam was a destination known for its scenery, shopping, and cuisine which in many respects puts it in direct competition with nearby Thailand, arguably the hub of tourism in the region. The conflict will long be remembered but it goes without saying that more than 40 years after the end of the war, younger generations have less of a visceral connection than those who lived during or participated in it.

### 4 Discussion

#### 4.1 Doi Moi and tourism development

By the late 1980s Vietnam was undergoing dramatic change through a series of reforms. Known as Doi Moi, literally ‘change and newness’ but often translated as ‘renewal’, the reforms were the first step towards the unravelling of the economic policies implemented following the reunification of Vietnam and the blatant corruption that was occurring, particularly after 1975 [Bui, (1995), pp.106–111]. During the Sixth Party Congress in 1986, Nguyen Van Linh, VCP General Secretary, pushed for the decentralisation of governance and bureaucracy. Doi Moi’s broad aims were the reduction of macroeconomic instability and acceleration of economic growth through the
decentralisation of state economic management; a shift to a market oriented monetary policy; land and agricultural reform; the reliance on the private sector for economic growth; the expansion of consumer goods production; and the allowance for state and private industries to deal directly with foreign markets [ANU, (2003), p.68].

Before the reforms, the Vietnamese Government monopolised the country’s tourism industry. Following 1986, the state issued the Law on Foreign Investment encouraging foreign direct investment in the country and the tourism industry in particular. Private enterprises increased along with a flood of foreign investment with greater regulatory control being allotted to municipal authorities and Provincial Party Committees, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City [Bennett, (2008), p.147]. However, as Freeman (1996, p.180) points out, many small businesses were not created by Doi Moi as much as the reforms were an acceptance of private enterprises that had largely operated in the shadows. Visitors – mostly for business and investment – began to arrive in earnest. By 1990, 25,000 travellers arrived in the country. Within five years that number rose to 1.35 million and included a much broader array of tourists of varying origins, budgets, and expectations [Ihlwan in Agrusa et al. (2006, p.225) and Suntikul, (2008), pp.13–14].

The number of accommodations rose from 3,267 in the year 2000 to 15,381 in 2012, with a total number of rooms rising from 72,200 to 277,661 in the same period. Along with this growth has come an increase in international tour operators from 428 in 2005 to 1,132 in 2012. Likewise, there were more than 6.8 million international visitors for all of 2012 representing a 13.86% growth over the previous year, and more than 7.9 million international visitors for all of 2015 (VNTA, 2015a).

While these numbers are impressive, they did not come about through the discovery of Vietnam by international tourists. Instead, they were due to a sea change in the way the Vietnamese Government, and the VCP in particular, came to view the country’s political and economic policies and its relationship with the outside world. The retreat of socialism throughout Asia and its failure to improve the lives of those its proponents championed made, perhaps, the inevitability of shifting to a market economy all the more real for Vietnamese leaders who saw regional neighbours benefitting from the bounty brought in through international tourism.

Following Doi Moi, this shift profited from a proliferation of issue-specific civic organisations and a greater awareness of regional problems, including unemployment and job creation (Wischermann, 2003). Greater relaxation of government control over the reins of the economy, robust activities by civic organisations, and the expansion of private accommodations throughout the 1990s, however, led to an ad hoc assemblage of tourism policies [Suntikul, (2008), pp.11–12]. Yet, as seen in the changing name of the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City (discussed below), these events also initiated a less antagonistic reinterpretation of Vietnam’s past as tourism began to become a significant part of the economy. As Logan (2005–2006, p.572) writes regarding tourism development in Hanoi and Hue, “The irony of a socialist government promoting and protecting an imperial heritage is largely explained by the fact that, just as the rise of French tourists led the authorities in Hanoi to begin reappraising the colonial architecture in that city, in this case [Hue] as well, money talks”.

Di Giovine (2009, p.222) describes a similar process in the revitalisation of Hoi An in northern Vietnam and the impact of guidebooks such as Lonely Planet. In 1983, Daniel Robinson stumbled upon the small town untouched by modernity and devoted a whole 14 pages – the same as to Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi – to the publisher’s 1983

Analogous revisions in popular and political discourse regarding the Nguyen Dynasty (1802–1945) and its stance towards the outside world followed in the wake of Doi Moi. Nguyen rulers served as both a lesson and warning regarding the need to integrate with the world community without abandoning the principles of socialism [Lockhart, (2001), p.48]. Hence, transnational events such as the Festival Hue, an international performing arts festival begun in 2000 in the former imperial capital of Hue, attempted to create a shared sense of identity while enhancing the image of the VCP and state via official sponsorship [Salemink, (2007), p.580].

This diversification of tourist destinations, thus, contributed to the diversification of foreign perceptions as visitors became more familiar with aspects of Vietnam unrelated to the war. As depicted in Table 1, it is clear that for the vast majority of international tourists, war is not representative of Vietnam compared to other variables such as the natural landscape, hospitality of the people, and the country’s varied cuisine.

However, this broadening of opinions stands aside the fact that the war as a tourist commodity has been actualised in sites throughout the country, as well as the adoption of American terms used during the conflict such as ‘China Beach’ and ‘DMZ’ (Demilitarised Zone) [Schwenkel, (2006), p.7]. Other well-known monikers such as Apocalypse Now, title of the 1979 movie by Francis Ford Coppola, can be found on t-shirts sold in tourist markets and the name of a popular nightclub in District 1 of Ho Chi Minh City (called ‘Apo’ by locals; at least two other establishments with the same name are in the cities of Hue and Hanoi). Although the club’s second floor is replete with camouflage netting and ammo crates as props (added only a few years ago), these images appear increasingly out of place when juxtaposed against the 68 floor Bitexco Financial Tower located only a few blocks away.

While the club attracts both locals and foreigners, it would be a mistake to assume that its Vietnamese patrons are embracing ‘alternative wartime perspectives’, which “resists current social discourses and campaigns to stamp out ‘social evils’” [Schwenkel, (2006), p.10]. Prior to the new war-themed additions to the club’s upper floor, there was no alternative wartime perspective to embrace. In fact, during the five years that I lived in the country, I found that most Vietnamese never heard of the American movie, whereas younger people generally steered clear of the club because of its reputation as a Western hangout and place for prostitution; the latter often assumed of the former in terms of bars and clubs.

Yet, one gets the impression from the literature that younger Vietnamese are imbibing equal parts nostalgia and angst over the war years. Are scantily clad women really appropriating “the era and culture of U.S. occupation” [Schwenkel, (2006), p.10], as they dance to the latest tunes in a Vietnamese disco (with a name that probably means nothing to them)? Or do they represent an aspect of modern urban life that can be found anywhere in the world? Western tourists, on the other hand, easily recognised the club’s movie-inspired name, while its location in the heart of District 1 made it a popular venue for foreigners compared to the more distinctive Vietnamese clubs dotted throughout the city.
And what of the allusions to Western tourists creating their own personal war stories vis-à-vis bars, prostitutes, and the music of the Vietnam War era? [Alneng, (2002), p.461, pp.470–471; Schwenkel, (2006), pp.9–10] Firstly, as one of the world’s major confluences for trade and migration, Southeast Asia has long had a reputation for prostitution and human trafficking; the red lights of back alleys flickered well before the first American serviceman ever stepped foot there. Within modern Southeast Asian metropolises one can find areas catering to specific clientele, Western and Asian. Certain parts of Ho Chi Minh City, for example, are filled with hostess bars and massage parlours devoted specifically to Japanese. The fact that Western men (and women) may hire prostitutes says less about their desire to clutch some figment of Vietnam War era nostalgia as it does the omnipresence of the profession in the region.

Secondly, we must acknowledge the thoroughness with which American music has influenced the musical tastes of those around the world. One can find fans of musical groups and musicians such as The Doors, Jimi Hendrix, and Creedence Clearwater Revival from Bangkok to Jakarta and everywhere in-between. To suggest that Vietnamese are playing songs such as Break on Through to cater to Westerners’ desires for a ‘Vietnam experience’ is to overlook the fact that this and countless other songs from the 1960s–1970s have played in local watering holes throughout Southeast Asia for more than 45 years. Americans may have left following the 1973 Paris Peace Accords but their music did not.

The significance of war-related sites, though, does not gravitate solely around the tourist’s gaze. It is their utilitarian value of keeping the memory of past conflicts alive for younger generations, thereby establishing continuity and legitimacy for ruling powers, which counts among their foremost reasons for being. When examining the potential of war tourism as a viable component of Vietnam’s tourism scheme, Henderson (2000, p.276) notes “Heritage attractions in Vietnam…remain a highly political issue and the influence of government policy cannot be ignored, with recent history being used to promote a message of unity and solidarity, directed as much at the resident population as visitors”.

Control over image, at least within physical sites, remains firmly within the government’s purview. But by the turn of the century sites such as the Cu Chi Tunnels just outside Ho Chi Minh City (used by resistance and insurgent groups against the French and later Americans) had lost much of their significance for Vietnamese [Schwenkel, (2006), p.18]. Younger people visiting Cu Chi did so for relaxation, thus, obviating its significance as a historical, war-related site.

Although the tunnels still draw tourists, they have taken on a theme park-like atmosphere. Foreign visitors are able to go through newly constructed – and larger – tunnels (built for Westerners), shoot AK-47s and M-16s, and rent a US pilot’s uniform for a small fee, play-acting a Vietnamese version of cowboys and Indians for the afternoon. Thus, while war-related sites promote an image of solidarity, the carnivalesque arrangement in places like Cu Chi subtracts from their historical significance.

The rapid growth of Vietnam’s tourism sector and the dichotomy in destinations has reflected the Vietnamese Government’s changing attitude towards integration in the world economy, as well as the realisation that ignoring the economic gains that come from a robust tourism industry is both economically and politically untenable. Yet, to tap into the steady stream of tourists flowing through neighbouring countries has also required a change in stance towards those it formerly called foe.
These internal changes can be seen in the Vietnamese Government’s portrayal of the decades of conflict such as altering the name (but not content) of the museum dedicated to Vietnam’s revolution, the War Remnants Museum. Following reunification in 1975, Hanoi constructed the ‘Exhibition House for US and Puppet Crimes’ in a former building of the US Information Agency in Ho Chi Minh City (then still named Saigon). The museum is a heavily politicised assemblage of images, materials, and depictions of the French, US, and former South Vietnamese Government during the years of conflict.

Over the years as tensions thawed and greater rapprochement with the West was made, the museum changed its name to the Exhibition House for Crimes of War and Aggression in 1990, and then the War Remnants Museum in 1995 following the end of the US trade embargo. The change in the museum’s name is indicative of the overall shift by Hanoi towards an image that is more in line with the desires of a growing tourism industry, while at the same time less antagonistic to those countries where many of today’s tourists are from.

The museum is not lacking in shocking imagery, but as graphic as it is, the change in its name also reflects an overall management effort that hones a message carefully cultivated by Hanoi since the 1960s of a country united but besieged by outside forces. Thuy, a tour guide for the state-run Saigontourist tourism agency in Ho Chi Minh City, admitted that while the war does not play a central part in their itineraries and advertising, the topic is not avoided:

“When we make advertisements we try to present the good and beautiful things about the country like food, the environment, and people – warm, friendly, hardworking, struggling with difficulties after war. We try not to talk about the war too much or talk about the war museum in a negative way because it may offend people from other countries who fought in the war. But when tourists come to Vietnam we don’t forget to bring them to the museum to remind them that Vietnam was a strong country. We desired peace and freedom and we needed to struggle a lot with many problems in the war and after, but now Vietnam is developing at a fast pace.”

The downplaying of the war can also be found on the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism’s website where much of the history section is dedicated to the country’s long struggle against China and victory over the French. The website’s depiction of the fight against the US labelled “Building the initial foundations of socialism and the struggle against U.S. Neo-Colonialism (1954-1973)” constitutes a mere four sentences on the section’s last page. The most damning sentence accuses the US of wanting to “turn the latter [South Vietnam] into a military base and colony of the US and set up a military and police apparatus to serve as an instrument for the enslavement of the south and reconquest of the north” (VNTA, 2015b). No explanation of what ‘reconquest’ refers to or further details of the war are given.

But if the diversification in tourist sites has led to diversified perspectives of the country and a shift away from a conflict-centred identity, we are then left with a contradiction posited in the secondary question addressed in this article. On the one hand, the overwhelming number of tourists surveyed responded that the legacy of the war was not a motivating factor for visiting the country. This would seem to cast doubt on the notion that war tourism can be a viable aspect of the country’s tourism industry. But on the other hand, we are left with the fact that places such as the war museum in Ho Chi Minh City (as well as the Hoa Lo Prison in Hanoi, known as the ‘Hanoi Hilton’) continues to draw large numbers of tourists.
The War Remnants Museum is a contested space not just in terms of memories of the war, but also in the interpretations of many researchers for whom the war is totalising in many respects. Focus is on the actions of foreign powers (specifically the US) with little effort placed on historical context and wide acceptance of the narrative expounded by the Vietnamese Government [see Li-Lian, (2001), p.387]. But, the average tourist is not a social scientist nor as the surveys in this study demonstrates on a quest for finding a deeper meaning in place such as the museum. It is reasonable, then, to ask whether there may be more mundane material factors at work in drawing tourists.

Firstly, we must consider the museum’s geographical location. As Ho Chi Minh City is one of the country’s main tourist hubs, the museum benefits from a steady supply of visitors; 4.7 million foreign tourists visited the city in 2015. Had it been constructed in another city, such as Da Nang which received 1.25 million foreign tourists in the same time period and where US troops first stepped ashore in South Vietnam, it is unlikely that it would see similar numbers of visitors.

Secondly is the importance of Ho Chi Minh City as the former capital of South Vietnam. Following reunification, the museum served the internal purpose of legitimising North Vietnam’s invasion of South Vietnam and vilifying the latter’s US-backed government. When the first international visitors began to arrive in the 1980s (mostly for business), tourism attractions were all but non-existent. Thus, the museum dominated a very small tourism market through a primacy of place given the limited number of points of interest throughout the city.

Lastly and closely related to the museum’s primacy of place, is the fact that despite a sprawling urban mass with a population of over eight million, Ho Chi Minh City’s limited tourist venues and attractions ensure that sites such as the museum and Cu Chi Tunnels continue to receive visitors. “Saigon is like a little village. You see the same people, go to the same places”, as one expat resident from Scotland put it when referring to the prominence of District 1 in the lives of expats and itineraries of tourists, echoing Harms (2011) analysis of Ho Chi Minh City’s periurban zone and the distinction Vietnamese have of the inner and outer city. The outer districts do not merely see a drop off in terms of points of interest but also municipal investment with low-slung, concrete slab buildings the most common architectural feature throughout the city’s many districts. It is only as one crosses into District 1 that grey monotony gives way to glass and steel shopping malls and high-rises.

Several younger tourists (18–30) remarked that compared with Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City provided relatively few tourist options, something not lost on tour operators. The numerous local travel agencies within the tourist area along Pham Ng Lao Street place the museum and Cu Chi prominently on their brochures alongside Notre Dame Cathedral and trips to places further afield such Cao Dai Temple in Tay Ninh, 90 km northwest of the city, the beach resort of Vung Tau, and the Mekong Delta. “There’s not much to do in Saigon”, noted a young woman handing out brochures in front of a tour shop amidst the tightly packed restaurants and guest houses on Bui Vien Street, a block east of Pham Ng Lao; a sentiment similarly voiced by Thuy, the tour guide quoted above.
Figure 2  Screenshot of the lonely planet’s webpage for Ho Chi Minh City (see online version for colours)

Note: The War Remnants Museum and Cu Chi Tunnels are first and third from left, respectively.

Source:  https://www.lonelyplanet.com/vietnam/ho-chi-minh-city

And perhaps it may be that for individuals in their 20s and 30s the war is ancient history and time allows them to take a more measured look at the meaning there is to be gleaned from war-related sites. 67% of the respondents in this study were 40 or younger and roughly 50% younger than 30, representing not only a disconnection with the conflict in terms of time but also in experiential space. An American, Shawn, 31, when asked about the museum said “I figured it would be one-sided, at least that’s what I heard. I mean, the communists could do no wrong. It’s expected”, a sentiment shared by other tourists his age. Others only learned about the conflict after visiting the museum. When it was pointed out that Thailand also fought in the war, Ta, a 24-year-old from Bangkok replied with a hint of surprise “I never heard about it [the war] till now”. The motivation to visit the museum (and perhaps war-related sites in general) for many is not a crystalised desire to know more about the conflict or discover some objective truth regarding war and morality as is commonly seen in Western academic interpretations [see Gillen, (2014), p.1316]. Instead, limited time and options made a visit a viable and perhaps likely choice.

This was not the case with every tourist and many did make it a point to visit the museum even though the war itself did not serve as a motivating factor for visiting the country. “I cried my eyes out”, said Jim, a British tourist in his late ’50s when referring to the short film in the museum about the lasting legacy of Agent Orange. “I knew about it. But when you see it, see the effects”. The reasons behind the conflict and the motivations of those who took part did not enter into the conversation, and perhaps after decades were even irrelevant. It was the legacy of the war on those truly innocent – children – that impacted him the most.
Indeed, one cannot help but notice that those sitting through the film tend to be older tourists. This may be due to memories of the war during its prosecution or the fact that with age and parenthood come reflections on life that younger individuals have yet to appreciate. Either way, what can be said is that the legacy of the war and the experiences taken away from its engagement are varied ranging from emotive to indifference; younger individuals tending to fall more towards the latter.

But this has not stopped the commodification of the war by local merchants. Walking along Pham Ngú Lào and Bùi Vien one is met with replica North Vietnamese propaganda posters, fake ‘GI’ Zippo lighters, and t-shirts with movie titles such as *Good Morning Vietnam*. Compared to the government’s efforts to retain the historical significance of sites such as Cu Chi and younger Vietnamese indifference to it noted above, foreign consumption of the war revolves around ‘war chic’ material culture and US symbolism of the conflict as portrayed by Hollywood and photojournalists [Hamilton, (1986), p.53]. In this manner, the war’s commodification has relatively clear divisions. Beach resorts and shopping opportunities cater to higher-end tourists while independent tourists and ‘backpackers’ are met with tours of Cu Chi and cheap ‘war’ trinkets sold on the street and haggled over for a few dollars.

Tourism numbers are expected to continue to climb dramatically in the coming years. Current numbers provided by Vietnam’s General Statistics Office have risen from roughly 1.5 million in 1995 to more than 7.8 million in 2014, and more than 3.2 million for the first four months of 2016 alone. These numbers are not lost on Vietnamese working in the tourism industry and interviewed for this study who noted that international tourism has become a pillar of the country’s economy, which cannot be ignored.

What does this ultimately mean for war-related tourism? There will always be those who are interested in the war as well as tours specifically designed for foreign veterans. However, given the responses in this study, it remains unclear whether this is a viable tourism niche in its own right or even if it is necessarily connected to the darker aspects of humanity which many researchers contend. Is someone who visits the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, ticking off a box on a list of the ‘things to see’ really a war tourist? And what about the person who is interested in visiting Vietnam to see things unrelated to the conflict they have been exposed to through television, books, and movies? Are they, too, part of the war tourism market?

In the end, it may not matter. The fact that the war is not a motivating factor for most visiting the country is not detracting tourists from visiting war-related sites. However, at the same time the war continues to slip further away from the memories of Vietnamese and foreigners alike. Once the conflict’s participants are gone, will tourism associated with it remain? Probably so, but it is reasonable to question its long-term viability when compared to international perceptions of Vietnam’s growing list of non-war-related attractions.

5 Conclusions

Decades since the collapse of South Vietnam, the image of a country disconnected from a war that bears its name was reflected in the views expressed by international tourists. Vietnam’s natural beauty, culture, and cuisine ranked high as reasons for visiting the country while the legacy of the war proved to be of little importance. The growth of
tourism and influx of much needed tourism dollars have paralleled the government’s relaxation on foreign ventures and the shift to a market-based economy. It likewise reflects an outlook towards the West that has gone from total distrust to what could best be described as a wary acknowledgement of mutual and increasingly intertwined economic interests.

According to Tuong Vu, a political scientist with the University of Oregon, “The communist party is no longer seen as patriotic or invincible”, adding that perceptions of the Vietnam War have changed in the country (Al Jazeera, 2015). Forty years after the fall of Saigon, many within and without Vietnam have moved on from its war-time past leaving war-related tourism a questionable avenue in the country’s overall tourism scheme. As Vietnam moves further away in time from the end of the war, the Vietnamese Communist Party can no longer rely solely on its revolutionary credentials for international tourists and Vietnamese alike for whom the Vietnam War is more commodity or ancient history than meaningful narrative.

Tourists still visit the War Remnants Museum and Cu Chi Tunnels but their numbers are not necessarily indicative of a fascination with the war or a desire to garner a greater understanding of the nature of human conflict. Rather, at least in the case of Ho Chi Minh City, issues related to geographic location and limited points of interest may be more important reasons for current numbers. And while some foreign tourists are put off by war-related sites, this may not be an issue for Hanoi. The government is likely more concerned about having its own citizens accept its version of history, particularly as Vietnamese increasingly place little value on the events of April 30th, 1975.

Would Vietnam see a change in tourism numbers if war-related sites were made off-limits to foreign tourists? This most certainly would not be the case given the year-on-year increase in international visitors to the country, most of whom visit for reasons that have nothing to do with the conflict. Further, as foreign veterans have been identified as a potential market for war tourism (Agrusa et al., 2006), the fact that most are now in their ‘60s to ‘70s raises valid issues as to the long-term viability of such a niche industry. There will always be those who are interested in the war. But a more cogent strategy would likely be to continue to promote war-related sites within the country as part of more varied tour programs as is currently done by private and state-run tour agencies.

References


