



50 Shades of Red: Recreational Communism in Post-Socialist Vietnam

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Abstract

Using a post-socialist framework, this article analyzes recreational communism, that is, the commodification of communism through commercial places that use Bao Cấp (subsidy period in Vietnam) for tourism and leisure. These places include cafés, restaurants, souvenir shops, art galleries, or flea markets. Why do places dedicated to pleasure make use of such a painful period? I propose to go beyond this paradox by focusing not only on the economic, but also the emotional, political, and memorial value of Bao Cấp, both in the way they are designed by their owners and practiced by customers. The visual descriptions and interviews I accumulated since 2006 allow me to address the dynamics of social interactions between people, place, and space. The spatial analysis of this material explores recreational communism as a practice of social distinction in the sense that it involves upper classes within the most globalized cities of the country.

Keywords

communism, kitsch, nostalgia, political skills, urban distinction, Vietnam

In memory of Lisa Drummond (1961–2021), brilliant scholar and sharp observer of urban practices and leisure in Vietnam.

Introduction

Communism as a touristic and leisure resource

During the past decade, the commodification of communism through recreational places has blossomed. Bars, cafés, restaurants, gift and decoration shops, art galleries, or flea markets now proudly raise the red flag. This is particularly true in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí

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Figure 1. Inside the Propaganda Café (Hồ Chí Minh City).

Source: Peyvel (2018).

Minh City (Sài Gòn), the country's two main cities, where this fashionable style attracts a young and affluent clientele, both foreign and Vietnamese. To a lesser extent, they are also to be found in international tourism places, such as the seaside resort of Nha Trang or the UNESCO-listed old town of Hội An and Huế in the center of the country.

The communist spirit is everywhere in these sites. The decoration and furniture, the staff's outfits, or the objects on sale, all recall the aesthetics of socialist realism: propaganda slogans, naive representations of folk heroes such as farmers or workers (Figures 1 and 2), ubiquitous red stars and khaki green, and objects from this period that are deflected into kitsch commodities.

This communist aesthetic has entered the realm of recreation, transforming places frequented not only by locals during their leisure time, but also by domestic and foreign tourists (Figure 1). Paradoxically, the meticulously crafted communist replications also include painful reminders of this past. For instance, in the entrance of the Hà Nội restaurant Mậu Dịch [the cooperative], a notice warns: "Here, the walls have ears, keep your secrets to yourself," a nod to the close surveillance the population was subjected to. Inside, karaoke playlists replay propaganda music and films of that period are projected. The menu recreates some emblematic dishes, such as burned rice scrapped of the pan with sauce (*xôi cháy*), or rice mixed with sweet potatoes, an old tactic when the white rice provisions were scarce. Next to the counter, the restaurant's business card mimics the food vouchers that were used for rationing (Figure 3).

Recreational communism makes use of communist antiquities, particularly Chinese thermos flasks, Russian transistors, refrigerators, and fans. Authentic objects are mixed



Figure 2. Objects reminiscent of Bao Cấp for sale in Saigon Kistch (Hồ Chí Minh City). Source: Peyvel (2018).

with fake ones that are produced to mimic the codes of socialist realism, such as notebooks, textiles bearing infamous Chinese floral motifs [*Chăn Con Công*], tire shoes, propaganda posters, tin cups, and trays (Figure 2).

Bao Cấp: That obscure object of desire

Recreational communism is rooted in a very particular period of Vietnamese contemporary history: the Bao Cấp, that could be translated as “subsidy economy.” It began in 1976 following the country’s reunification, and officially ended in 1986, the year of the 6th Congress of the Communist Party. The Renovation policy (*Đổi Mới*) was then introduced, signaling a relative loosening of the control over individual freedoms and the gradual return to a market economy. This led to the end of the American embargo in 1994 that was an important milestone in this process.

In practice, this chronology is not strictly respected by the owners, decorators, and managers of recreational communist places. They might use objects that are older than the Bao Cấp (for instance, the propaganda posters used during the war) or newer vintage imitations. As we will see in the final part of the article, the degree of historical relevance of this material culture varies according to the actors and projects involved.

Resorting to those 10 years of Bao Cấp as a recreational asset is a surprising turn, given how difficult it was from an economic and social perspective (Beresford and Dang, 2000; Brocheux, 2009; Đặng, 2006; Fforde, 1996). The strict enforcement of Marxist-Leninist principles left the country haggard. The suppression of private property and the



Figure 3. The business card of Mậu Dịch mimicking food ration coupons.
Source: Peyvel (2016).

nationalization of companies entailed traumatic confiscations and generalized impoverishment. Both the 1976–1980 and the 1981–1985 periods of planning gave priority to heavy industry and the collectivization of agriculture. As a consequence, the production of goods and their supply chain were severely disorganized. Inflation was soaring. With the international embargo hitting hard, the needs of the population were barely met, despite the food vouchers allocated by the State and the black market offerings. Each household received a ration of rice, determined by the family size and the position held

by the parents. The entire lifecycle was regulated by the State: getting a house, a bicycle, or furniture, accessing culture—Western production being strictly forbidden. On top of that, war was a constant burden with the occupation of Cambodia from 1978 to 1989, and the population was also heavily controlled: the residence permit strictly regulated travel, contacts with foreigners were rare and monitored, and cultural productions were heavily censored.

Some groups suffered particularly during this period, facing repression and confiscation, like the Hoas, descendants of Chinese immigration, or categories considered as enemies of the regime such as the reactionaries (*phản động*), the puppets of the regime in the South (Nguyễn), and more generally the capitalists (*tu bản*). Consequently, this collective memory cannot be considered as a singular one. Indeed, the diet of city dwellers was more restricted than that of country dwellers, and cities generally suffered more because they were ideologically conceived as places of capital accumulation and inequality. Saigon was probably the city that suffered the most, being the most affluent. Conversely, the regime's officials and senior military enjoyed substantial privileges. Thus, the collective memory of this period is not unequivocally shared.

Theoretical background: Red tourism versus post-socialist theories

The case of Recreational Communism in Vietnam provides a new insight into the “tourist gaze” as defined by John Urry (1990) because of its ability to glorify what it focuses on, particularly the past. Indeed, John Urry emphasized the growing importance of history in the imagination and practice of tourism: the proliferation of museums, the enhancement and sometimes the invention of the faintest historical vestige, the broadening of the concept of heritage to the daily stories and testimonies of past lives. With the tourist gaze, even the slightest object is force-fed with history. Recreational Communism, as a category within Red Tourism, is undoubtedly part of this dynamic. It has consisted in glorifying communism in countries that had clearly broken with it (former East Germany, former USSR or Eastern Europe) but also more recently in countries that still claim to be communist, such as China or Vietnam.

The scientific literature on Red Tourism demonstrates how tourism enhances communist ideology and transforms its protagonists into heroes. By the same token, tourism provides a new appreciation of communism, adding symbolic, sentimental, and even, as we shall see, economic value to its political and historical base. However, there is an important distinction to be made between the places studied in this article and those described within the scientific literature on Red Tourism that are part of an official communist tourism, in China or Vietnam (Gu et al., 2007; Rioux, 2008; Zuo et al., 2016). While these two types of places can nowadays be frequented by the same people, their significance differ considerably, and they should thus not be confused. Tourist sites that are officially celebrating communism belong to the State. For example, the State still promotes walking in the footsteps of Mao in China or Hồ Chí Minh in Vietnam, visiting war sites, history and anthropology museums (Li and Hu, 2008, Li et al., 2010). The cult of great men and the creation of landmarks, showcasing its greatness and independence, contribute in these tourist places to national construction, building unity beyond diversity (Anderson, 1991). Existing scholarship provides a better understanding of how the State remains an active player in domestic tourism development, as well as in the

management of certain visits (Caraba, 2011; Zuo et al., 2017). However, this literature is mainly focused on the relation between ideology and tourism making. These studies seldom tackle the reception of these sites by the actual tourists, the practices they are able to negotiate beyond ideological processions and their representations (Peyvel, 2016; Shengnan and Dallen, 2017). Another shortcoming is that the heavy focus on official tourism sites may overlook important conversations taking place between a population and its political system, enacted through tourism and leisure.

This highlights the relevance of post-socialist theories to tackle the places studied in this paper. Indeed, the literature on post-socialism in Eastern Europe and Russia tackles socialism neither as an obsolete system that was beaten by capitalism, nor as a transition period, but rather as a set of institutions, values, actors, and practices that constitute a collection of resources that can be used to define and accomplish projects (Bridger and Pine, 2016; Grabher and Stark, 1997; Stenning, 2010), including leisure and tourism projects (Gorsuch and Koenker, 2006; Koenker, 2013). Through these theories, it is possible to break out of a dual vision of history, opposing a before and an after (Kott et al., 2006; Kliems and Dmitrieva, 2010), to better understand how socialism and the market economy of tourism are nowadays subtly intertwined. The Party-State should indeed be regarded as a prime economic agent of change (Gainsborough, 2010; McCargo, 2004), a ubiquitous entity that reaches even everyday lives through a politically loaded visual landscape. These post-socialist theories understand this popular revival as

red legacies [. . .] found in the remnants of public culture from the 1950s to the 1970s and contemporary representations and reinventions of the revolutionary past, as well as in inherited aesthetic forms, practices and mindsets. Mediated by monuments and artifacts, texts and images, bodies and places, red legacies pose critical questions for the continuity and transformation of identity from the socialist to the post-socialist eras. (Li and Zhang, 2016: 1–2).

Vietnamese cities, outposts of market reform and now gateways to globalization, are the places where wealth and inequality have increased the most (Harms, 2016; Waibel, 2006). They are therefore fertile grounds to investigate post-socialism. In that context, tourism and leisure provide a better understanding not only of post-socialist urban production, but also of how, in turn, the flourishing economy of cities has shaped specific urban sociabilities, however still framed by an authoritarian regime (Drummond and Thomas, 2003; Earl, 2004; Gillen, 2016; Peyvel and Gibert, 2016). Indeed, despite a looser control over individual liberties since Đổi Mới in 1986, censorship is a reality and political expression remains sensitive. The political skills involved in civil society are therefore often expressed through diverted ways. These arts of doing stem from the socialist times (Droit, 2009; Figes, 2007), when the private space of trust and the public space of control were strictly dissociated. Today, these political skills are remixed, leading researchers to look at the diversity of places where they are practiced, including places of tourism and leisure. Recreational communism has an ambiguous relation with its politicization and may both demean and exalt the socialist idea.

Therefore, is it legitimate to consider whether these recreational places that use Bao Cấp may or not carry political messages, and if so, which ones? In order to address this question from a geographical perspective, I will try to understand not only the owners' intentions (where and how these sites were designed) but also the clients' expectations

(why do they come there)? In other words, this paper explores the value assigned to these places, both by their owners and their clients. I will show how these actors are interlinked in a chain of values initiated before the *Đổi Mới* and that glorifies the communist ideology through various material productions with easily recognizable aesthetics. The first sections of the article will explore the construction of this value chain. In order to grasp all the social uses of communism for tourism and leisure, the notion of “value” must encompass not only the commercial sense (the price), but also affective, memorial, and political dimensions. By focusing on the question of value, it becomes possible to go beyond the apparent paradox of enjoying a painful past.

Study methods and data collections

My research raised the following questions. (1) How can we explain that such a recent and painful period can now serve the thematization of places devoted to tourism and leisure? Who are the stakeholders that have contributed to this renewed value? (2) How can these sites be invested with political messages beyond their recreational purpose, both in the ways their owners conceived them (production) and in the ways customers experience them (reception)?

To answer these questions, I used qualitative research methods in a spatial and social perspective. Initially, I relied on participant observations. The earliest was a visit to the Hà Nội Museum of Ethnology in 2006, where an exhibition entitled “Hanoi life under the subsidy economy” was organized. Living in Hà Nội for over a year as part of my PhD fieldwork, I was attending a social gathering with Vietnamese friends and didn’t really measure the importance of the findings at the time. The guidance of locals not only allowed me to better apprehend the contents of the exhibition, but also to capture informal conversations on how they felt and the memories the exhibition stirred up. The surprise of hearing them share both positive and negative comments was the starting point for this work: how could such a dark period inspire pleasant memories? In the months that followed, I returned several times to the museum, read the guest book comments, and carefully observed the visitors, Vietnamese in their majority, photographed them, transcribed their conversations, and used my status of a young researcher learning Vietnamese to gain confidence and dare more engaging questions. From this material, the same ambiguity was apparent: both good and bad memories were stirred, the relief that this period is over and the pride of having survived it.

These first research findings were supplemented by participatory observations over several years in these cafés, restaurants, souvenir shops, art galleries, and flea markets using *Bao Cấp* aesthetic and that I witnessed gradually proliferating: I met with Vietnamese friends there, I was invited to openings, and noticed them appear in international tourist guides or comments about them on travel blogs. I kept a record of this material in my field notebooks, including photographs and website screenshots. The visual descriptions I accumulated allowed me to go beyond the spoken word, to address the dynamics of social interactions between people, place, and space (Scarles, 2009, 2010). Whenever I could, I questioned the waiters, salespeople, or customers in informal conversations about the paradox of using a painful time for recreation. Depending on the trust I was able to gain and the time the respondents were willing to spend, I became

aware of the diversity of practices, from the most casual to the most politicized. All of these elements also allowed me to better understand the clientele's social profile.

Taken as a whole, the accumulation of these visits gradually justified the relevance of this study, and the subsequent formalization of biographical and semi-directive interviews. I undertook three in-depth semi-directive interviews with the pioneering owners of private establishments: Audrey Trần from Saigon Kitsch on 23 March 2016 at Hồ Chí Minh City, Phạm Quang Minh from Mậu Dịch on 3 April 2016 at Hà Nội, and Linh Dung from Cộng Cà Phê on 11 April 2016 at Hà Nội. In addition, the 16th May 2017, I conducted a semi-directive interview with Nguyễn Văn Huy, the former director of the Museum of Ethnology and organizer of the 2006 Bao Cấp exhibition, in his home village of Lai Xá near Hà Nội. These interviews were completed with a survey conducted in April 2016, May 2017, and January 2018 in Hà Nội, Nha Trang, and Sài Gòn with 45 clients, mostly in Vietnamese, and occasionally in English. Finally, I conducted two interviews with European entrepreneurs based in Hồ Chí Minh City: Noelle Carr-Ellison, owner of Propaganda Café, on February 17, 2021, and Dominic Scriven, president and founder of Vietnam's largest private equity fund, Dragon Capital, and owner of the largest collection of Vietnamese propaganda posters, on March 5, 2021.

I processed all of this material to carry out a content analysis. This allowed identifying the frequency of certain features, grouping them into meaningful categories in an inductive way, and classifying the opinions formulated by the respondents, whether positive or negative. Semi-directive interviews, dealing with the social profile of the respondents, their motivations, and their views on the Bao Cấp provided valuable insights into how these products are received by the customers, the practices they develop and the meaning they attach to them. The final sections of the article are focused on them.

Red is dead: A consensual depoliticization of communism

The new interest in Bao Cấp was first sparked by the 2006 "Hanoi life under the subsidy economy (1975-1986)" exhibition. It was divided into eight spaces: Food Store, Tet's Goods Kiosk (Tet is the name of the New Lunar Year in Vietnam), The model of Distribution, Social Management, The Space of Family, Ingenuity and Creativity, Dreams, and Đổi Mới Policy. The primary intent was to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Đổi Mới and legitimize its policies. Thus, the introductory statement claimed the following:

More than 20 years ago, Vietnam had fallen into a comprehensive crisis: the economy was stagnant and trust among people was disrupted. Facing this difficult situation and accommodate people's expectations, a Đổi Mới (Renovation) policy was launched at the 6th Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in order to help the country eliminating poverty and backwardness as well as integrating into the world. After 20 years of renovation and development, not only poverty has been reduced, but also tremendous multi-dimensional achievements have been reached.

The exhibition occurred at the Hà Nội Museum of Ethnology rather than the History Museum that would have been the logical candidate to host this kind of content. Nguyễn



Figure 4. Copy of Mr. Pham Trang and Mrs. Dang Thi Mim Son's apartment in 1982.
Source: Exhibition catalog, p. 74.

Văn Huy, who was the acting director of the Museum of Ethnology at the time, explains the political reasoning of this choice:

*Many actions were officially supported to remind people that the situation since the *Đổi Mới* has in fact improved, but the History Museum lacked the courage to host such an exhibition, because this period was a huge mistake for the Party. Finding the best angle, to explain rather than accuse, was difficult but also crucial. I came up with the idea of the exhibition, and it was eventually accepted. Officially, the reason was that the ethnographic museum's mission was to show Vietnamese daily life. Besides, the objects were speaking for the people, so there was no threat what so ever for the Party. It was the first time the *Bao Cấp* was covered in that way and it was an inconspicuous approach.*

Interview in Lai Xá, 05/16/17

The exhibition was a great public success. Initially planned for 6 months, it continued for an additional 6 months, and attracted over 400 000 visitors. The exhibition catalog, which has been widely used in the press to promote the exhibition, is now out of print. Undeniably, the familiar objects on display struck a chord for the audience. These include rare objects, such as the Russian Saratov refrigerators prized by Party elites, the *Xà Cừ* wood armchairs or bicycles (Figure 4), and also the most usual: food coupons, flowered tin basins and cups, parcels delivered by the State Party for the Tết. The exhibition stirred up a lot of emotions, as evidenced by the museum's visitors' book.

By focusing the exhibition on the material culture and the domestic sphere, the organizers encouraged the public to leave politics aside. Indeed, the narrative showcased people doing everything but politics, turning a blind eye on division, oppression, confiscations, and denunciations that were commonplace under the communist regime. The image of the Vietnamese people is rather depicted as collectively making do, not having a choice, a perspective that blocks more critical readings. The heroes of the show are the survivors of daily life and their ingenuity in the face of hardship: finding ways to reload ball pens, repairing shirt collars, making toys out of old cardboard. The exhibition therefore tuned into the grand socialist narrative, exalting the courage, and the sense of duty of the Vietnamese people as a whole, suggesting there were actually positive values in this dark period. In other words, yesterday's hardships are today's achievements and something to be proud of. Along those lines, a statement above the piece displayed in Figure 4 quotes Mrs. Trinh Thi Lan Anh, senior officer of the Vietnamese Social Sciences Academy: "Living in such a cramped space, people had to be really considerate and sympathetic with each other's situations."

Thus, this event provided an alternative meaning to fragments of past daily life that avoided conflicts. Instead, it aroused complex affects. Having visited the exhibition with two Vietnamese friends, it was astonishing to witness contradictory emotions, both painful (privation, waiting, promiscuity, hunger, and even fear) and happy such as joyful youth memories. For instance, one of my friends remembered a warm coat brought back from East Germany by an uncle and that she shared with her younger brother every other day despite it being too small for her, and too large for him. In substance, the Bao Cấp was harsh, but it is now the past, and the interpenetration of this period with childhood memories contribute to this ambivalence. This emotional relationship with Bao Cấp makes it possible to tame it while increasing its appeal as a touristic attraction, as demonstrated by the following interview extract:

- Ha, 41years old: *"It is hard, yes, it is hard to explain why I like coming here [she bites her lips while hesitating]. Let me say it is like a return to childhood, the setting is familiar, I remember the objects I had at home, like the cups, the chairs and tables."*
- Me: *"But, isn't it strange to have fun here, while the Bao Cấp was such a difficult time?"*
- Ha: *"Older people suffered, for sure, and they would probably be uncomfortable coming here. By the way, I never came with my parents, it would be like diving back into war time. But for me, its childhood."*

Interview in Cộng Cà Phê, Giảng Võ Street, Hà Nội, 05/16/17

This excerpt demonstrates the generational gap in the experience of *Bao Cấp*: Ha acknowledges the symbolic violence of making such a period of time consumable and desirable (Schwenkel, 2006), and therefore avoids taking her parents there. Removing the political dimension of Bao Cấp serves the economic interests of tourism. Indeed, only non-conflictual products can be sold efficiently. Audrey Trần, for example, explains the sensitive aspects that could harm the business:

- Audrey Trần: *“My uncle spent last week at my place. He saw a propaganda poster and told me: ‘you can’t put that at home’. I answered with a smile that it was pretty and I liked the cheerful colors. I didn’t experience this period. I don’t have any hard feelings against it. But we don’t talk much about it in the family. I know it can be a painful memory, that it was a rough time (. . .) I can see it in the eyes of the Việt Kiều [Vietnamese diaspora] who visit my shop. Even if you don’t talk, I can guess they don’t like it.*
- Me: *“Have people blamed you for being cynical or complained about this type of business?”*
- Audrey Trần: *“No, that never occurred. I would be ashamed if anyone called me a cynic or an opportunist, and I would be sad if it hurt people that way. That’s why I avoid using some slogans. For instance ‘Victory is when all the French are killed’, or the poster that depicted children with knives at their throats, I can’t use the most extreme material.”*

Interview in Hồ Chí Minh City, 03/23/16

During my interview with Nguyễn Văn Huy, the previous museum director stated that the success of the exhibition came as a surprise even for him, and that it changed something that was unimaginable back then. Since retired, he spent the last years writing about the museum, and specifically about that exhibition (Nguyen, 2017). He now sees five main consequences of the exhibition: a renewed collective conscience that broke the silence on that period; a boosted editorial interest for Bao Cấp; a new trend in other official museums such as the History Museum with exhibitions focused for instance on agrarian reform; the opening of restaurants and cafés that recreate Bao Cấp daily life; and finally the emergence of a new trade of Bao Cấp objects.

It is clear for him that the Museum of Ethnology brought this period up to date, both from a material point of view by exhuming objects that deeply marked the period, but also from a discursive one: it was once again possible to talk about this period by adopting the more consensual angle of material culture. It is in this sense that this exhibition should be understood as initiating a value chain, subsequently exploited not only by public stakeholders (public museums and publishing houses) but also private ones: bars and restaurants, artists, designers, antique dealers, etc.

No such business as nostalgia

It is precisely these private actors that I will now focus on, in order to understand the construction of Recreational Communism. To capitalize on the new Bao Cấp value as a recreational asset, private actors relied on two mutually beneficial elements. The beautification of everyday life Bao Cấp objects provides a distinct identity within the tourism market. Also, promoting a sense of nostalgia is a key component of a customer experience based on the internationally recognized kitsch esthetic.

The aesthetization of daily life Bao Cấp objects is derived from their rarity, providing a distinctive authenticity to the places they adorn. For the purposes of the Hà Nội



Figure 5. One of the Mậu Dịch restaurant lounge, Hà Nội.
Source: Peyvel (2016).

exhibition, objects were gathered from private homes during ethnological surveys. Nothing was purchased by the museum: many items were returned, others were donated to the City Museum or thrown away altogether (interview with M. Nguyễn Văn Huy in Lai Xá, 16/05/17). As a result, the permanent collection of the museum doesn't contain anything from that exhibition. However, the interest of Museum curators triggered a gradual awareness of such items' value, creating a new market which quotations tend to formalize. For example, a Russian fan sells for 4–5 million đồngs (around \$US200), and a Saratov fridge can reach 20 million đồngs (over \$US850). Within this commodification of the Bao Cấp the value and price of the objects are mostly a function of their rarity.

The owner of Mậu Dịch, Phạm Quang Minh, had been approached for the exhibition. He contributed by lending objects that he had been collecting. Acknowledging the success of the exhibition, he was inspired to rethink his practice and the idea arose not only to collect more systematically, but also to make permanent use of his own collections. Having travelled to the former East Germany, he had seen that this was possible. As a trained cook, he decided to open his first restaurant in 2010 and he now owns three establishments in the capital. The similarities between Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the reclaiming of the exhibition's scenography for recreational purposes.

Audrey Trần, creator of Saigon Kitch, and Linh Dung, owner of Cộng Cà Phê, say they did not visit this exhibition because they were abroad at the time, but heard about it. Like Phạm Quang Minh, they possess a certain international capital (Wagner and Réau, 2015), allowing them not only to draw inspiration from what is happening in Eastern Europe and Russia, but also to better position their business within globalized consumption patterns.

Audrey Trần comes from a family that partly fled the war: born in France in 1978 of mixed-race parents, she maintains links with other family members living in Australia and the United States. After the loss of her parents in her twenties, she decided to move back to her grandmother's home in Hồ Chí Minh City. There, she began studying business at RMIT, an expensive branch of a Melbourne university, while working in a souvenir shop in the city center. It was there that she became aware of the touristic trend for propaganda posters and decided to produce them, having witnessed the success of such items in Eastern Europe and Russia. She gradually bought back the entire building she used to work in, and has been living off it since 2010. By her own account, "it's has been a huge success, especially since I was spotted by Vietnam Airlines Magazine. I've had all the Air France staff come here to do their shopping and last April, a journalist from Elle Déco contacted me" (interview in Hồ Chí Minh City, 03/23/16). She then opened a second shop in Hội An, a UNESCO-listed city in the center of the country frequented by both domestic and foreign tourists.

Linh Dung is at the head of seventy *Cộng Cà Phê* in the country and is starting to expand in Korea and Malaysia (Figure 6). Before turning to business, she was first a relatively well-known singer in Việt Nam with her band Đại-Lâm-Linh. Well-integrated in Hanoian cultural circles, she frequented artists, some of whom visited and even worked for the exhibition. In 2007, when the band became less successful, she seized an opportunity to make use of her cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979) by converting to decoration activities. She developed the Bao Cấp esthetic, first for acquaintances, and then opened her first *Cộng Cà Phê* in 2007, closely following the end of the Ethnology Museum exhibition:

At that time everything was ugly: plastic tables and chairs, there was no concept of decoration in cafés and restaurants. I didn't want to be like the others, I wanted a style that was both simple and recognizable, and at that time there was no vintage [hoài cổ] café.

Interview in Hà Nội, 04/11/16

Linh Dung, Audrey Trần, and Phạm Quang Minh are pioneers in the chronology of this commodification. Since the 2010s, a host of shops have mainstreamed this esthetic. For example, in Hà Nội's Old Quarter of 36 Streets, a crockery shop now includes tin-plate articles for tourists; in Phạm Ngũ Lão, Hồ Chí Minh City's backpacker district, a little tourist shop specializes in the reproduction of propaganda posters. . . More substantial infrastructures have also appeared in 2013, such as the Propaganda Café (Figure 1) located right between the Reunification Palace and the cathedral. With her two Vietnamese associates, Noëlle Carr-Ellison, already owner of two other restaurants in District 1, was seeking to capitalize on the sudden opportunity of a vacant neighboring storefront:

I wanted something like propaganda art, but not related to war, guns, knives. . . It had to be friendly. That's why I hired a graphic designer to paint the restaurant's mural: I wanted something colorful, supporting my Vietnamese concept, but above all, I didn't want any trouble. I went to buy by myself the posters that we display as secondary decoration and chose only things on farming and energy.

Interview via Zoom, 02/17/21

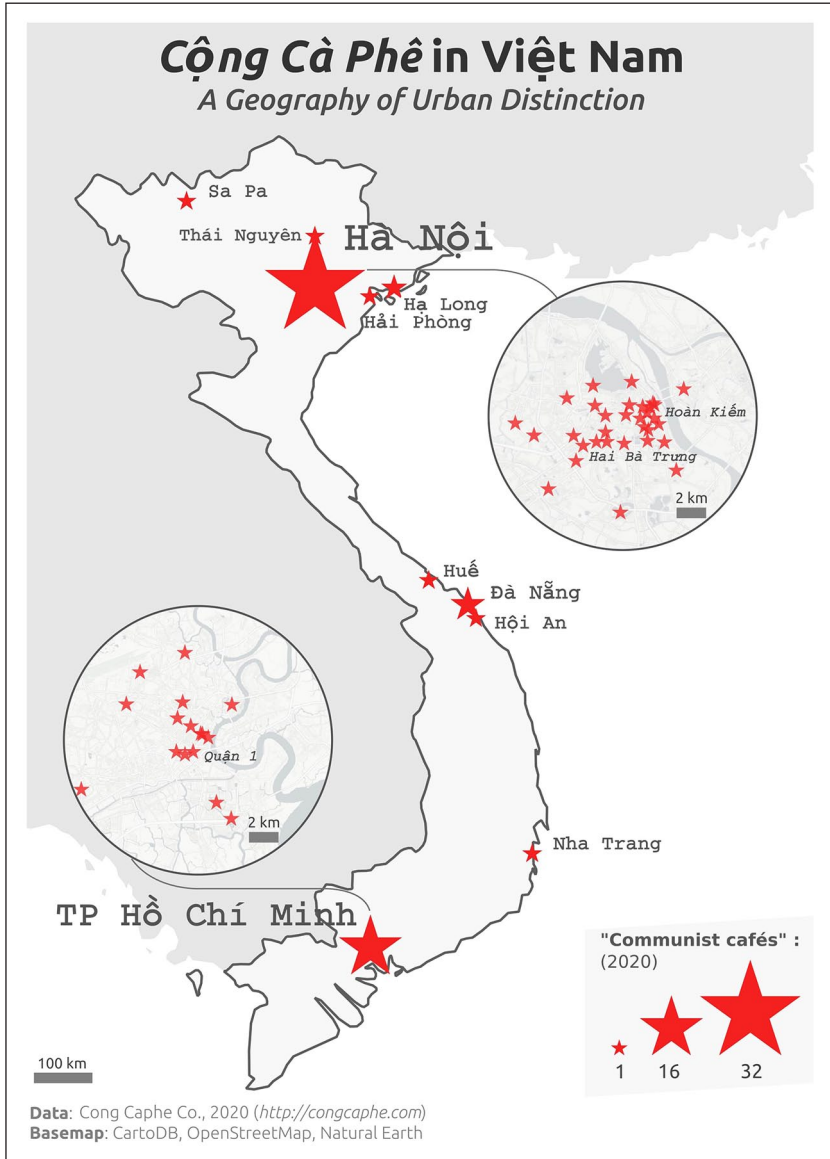


Figure 6. Location of Cộng Cà Phê in Vietnam.

The reason Noëlle Carr-Ellison was “terrified to get into trouble” is that she was deeply affected by the troubles of Dominic Sriven, an influential figure in the Vietnamese economy. This character first appears to be contradicting the chronology I have so far assembled: he started collecting propaganda posters in the mid-1990s in Hà Nội, and opened not only the Dogma art gallery but also, with his wife, founded a souvenir store in the backpacker district of the city in the early 2000s, that is, 7 years before the exhibition at

the Hà Nội Museum of Ethnology, which he did not see. In fact, his posters cover a much broader period (1945–85) than the Bao Cấp itself, which is not of particular interest to him. Importantly, the problems they encountered exemplify precisely the depoliticization that this nostalgia business must undergo in order to be profitable. Indeed, the two original posters displayed in Phạm Ngũ Lão's souvenir store were quickly confiscated by the police, on the grounds that they could not belong to him: they were state works. The store finally closed in the early 2010s, as did the gallery, which is now an archive that can only be visited on appointment. For security and conservation reasons, his collection of over a thousand posters is now scattered between Vietnam, Singapore, Switzerland and his homeland, the UK. Even during his 2015 exhibition at the Hồ Chí Minh City Fine Arts Museum, a third of the posters had to be removed 2 hours before the opening because they were censored. Dominic Scriven sees it as a political problem: the posters were too openly anti-American at a time when the United States appeared to be an ally against a threatening China. In that regard, he does not conceal the fact that he used his collection to express political opinions:

*I was really interested to do it at the time that president George Bush f*cked around with the UN and my Prime Minister Blair created the invasion of Iraq. [. . .] I was extremely angry, and in the collection, there were lots of anti-American posters and I thought, let's make t-shirts and posters, and just show how much we think this is wrong.*

Source: Interview in Hồ Chí Minh City, 03/05/21

Despite the hardships he encountered as a collector, he has since become an inspiration for more consensual work by tourism entrepreneurs such as Noëlle Carr-Ellison, but also Audrey Trần, whose Saigon Kistch store was initially located on the first floor of his office.

From Red to sepia: Communism as an “imagined nostalgia” (A. Appadurai)

With the outstanding exception of Dominic Scriven, all of these sites therefore have in common the intention of turning Bao Cấp into a tourist resource, cultivating not its history, or even its memory, but rather its nostalgia. More precisely, all of these places play on the same consumerist appeal that Arjun Appadurai called “imagined nostalgia.” This is a central feature of contemporary commercial techniques, harnessing past lifestyles, or stages of life such as childhood. This kind of nostalgia does not refer to what the consumer may actually have lost, but

rather, these forms of mass advertising teach consumers to miss things they have never lost. That is, they create experiences of duration, passage, and loss that rewrite the lived histories of individuals, families, ethnic groups, and classes. In thus creating experiences of losses that never took place, these advertisements create what might be called “imagined nostalgia”, nostalgia for things that never were. This imagined nostalgia thus inverts the temporal logic of fantasy (which tutors the subject to imagine what could or might happen) and creates much deeper wants than simple envy, imitation, or greed could by themselves invite.

(Appadurai, 1996: 77)

Field observations and interviews show that the majority of Vietnamese clients have not experienced Bao Cấp first hand, or did so only as a child. For them, the memory burden is weaker and it is therefore possible to approach this period in a more relaxed way. Their main concern is to enjoy the offerings of these establishments:

- Me: *“Isn’t it weird to come and have fun in a place reminiscent of the Bao Cấp, such a hard time?”*

- Minh,
25 years old: *It was a long time ago, I wasn’t even born. Maybe it wasn’t as difficult as they say. It’s just a nice atmosphere, an original decoration, it’s not Starbucks here, and I love the drinks.*

- Me: *Still, the name clearly references communism.*

- Me: *It’s just a name, it doesn’t bother me personally.”*

Interview in Cộng Cà Phê, Đồng Khởi Street,
Hồ Chí Minh City, 05/09/17

- Me: *“Why do you come here?”*

- Duy Anh,
19 years old: *We’re skipping school, so we have to find somewhere! [all laughing]. We come here because it’s near the school, we like the style, the drinks are good, we get served quickly, there’s a nice roof top, and the waiters are nice.*

- Me: *Have you noticed that the café was referring to the Bao Cấp, which is a very rough time. Isn’t it a bit paradoxical to come here and have fun?*

- Lan,
19 years old: *Is it? Ah yes, it’s vintage, I don’t know much about 1970, 1980 [she laughs, her other friends disagree], however I do know the State provided everything, you had to stand in line, we saw that at school.*

- Khánh Linh,
19 years old: *It’s an original place, there’s a good atmosphere, it’s attractive, there’s no paradox.”*

Interview in Cộng Cà Phê, Quán Sứ Street, Hà Nội, 05/19/17

In fact, today’s students have little knowledge of this period: teaching and researching on the country’s history is still heavily monitored by an authoritarian State that has an ability to censor and rewrite the past. Dai Jinhua and Harriet Evans’ work on nostalgia conveyed by Mao’s posters in China reach a similar conclusion:

Today, the posters present another paradox, one overlooked by the argument that the nostalgia behind the celebration of Mao-era films in the 1990’s served consumerism by blanking out the ruptures of the recent past (. . .) Members of a younger generation, unacquainted with the moment or object of catastrophe and denied access to information about it or memories of it, can experience the sense of loss felt by their parents only at an evident remove.

(p. 89, emphasis added).

These recreational establishments stage imagined nostalgia on social networks displaying highly recognizable graphics and scenery completed with black and white or sepia filters. Targeting young couples, romantic melancholy is a recurring visual theme in the promotional visuals of Công Ca Phe: a young girl waiting for a man pictured in the background under the rain, shadow plays showing a couple drinking fruit juice. The fact that some married couples now choose Công Ca Phe as a location for wedding photos further indicates how effective the reception of these visuals can be. Another recurring subject of these posts is artistic contemplation, as if time had stopped: a young woman reading a book in the backlight of a window, a young boy sitting in a coffee shop scribbling on a sketchbook, two students playing acoustic guitar sitting side by side on a bench, etc. Using Bao Cấp as a setting, these establishments advertise the universality of feelings associated to the youth (love, friendship, innocence), sublimating the passing of time through slightly blurred shots, faded contours, and subdued lighting.

Red is the new black: Communism as a source of distinction

Young Vietnamese with little or no experience of this period are not the only clients of these establishments. According to the survey conducted as part of this research, the ordinary material culture of this period is also a source of otherness for tourists, especially Westerners. Since they have not experienced this period, recreational venues and souvenirs bear no painful memories. Foreign customers may also be attracted to this imagined nostalgia that provides a distinctive customer experience guaranteed by the vintage quality of the decoration. These elements nourish an insider's experience, conveying a sense of authenticity (MacCannell, 1976). Additionally, it is a risk-free experience, as those places usually guarantee international standards (air conditioning, hygiene, etc.) and products that are easily consumable and recognizable, whether they are foods (local beers, spring rolls, and French fries) or decorations (posters, pouches, magnets, etc.). In this sense, going to a communist café may appear as going "off the beaten track" (Gravari-Barbas and Delaplace, 2015). Imagined nostalgia is thus an original scenery for the international clientele. That attendance contributes to the success and reputation of establishments struggling with a highly competitive local economy.

-Blandine,

23 years old: *"The decoration is nice here, it's original, this chandelier made of a strainer, it's unusual. Then, it's invisible from the street: you have to know the entrance of the building, on the side, go up, push this door which doesn't look like much and there, there is this terrace which allows you to see without being seen, to appreciate the show without being in the exhaust pipes and the noise. I like the roof tops; I used to love going there in New York.*

- Me: *How did you get to know the place?*

- Blandine: *Through German expatriates who live here. I came to have a beer with them. It's a confidential address.*

- Me: *Can you identify the style or period of this decoration?*

- Blandine: *It's vintage, I'd say 1950's, but I don't know enough to put a name on it. It's both kitsch and Asian. You know, it reminds me of the Antoine &*

Lili brand in Paris, have you heard of them? Like these flowery thermos flasks, for example.

Interview in Cộng Cà Phê, Đồng Khởi Street,
Hồ Chí Minh City, 05/09/17

As a French tourist, Blandine's comments show how she connects this place and its products to other centers of tourist globalization: Paris and New York. Roof tops, emanations of vertical city centers, and symbols of power, are used to gain height, observe without being seen, inherently constituting a spatial practice of social distinction (Bourdieu, 1979). This type of discourse is also expressed in the distinctive use of souvenirs, as shown in this excerpt from an interview with Sofia, a 32-year-old British tourist, about Saigon Kitsch:

The fake lacquers, the Chinese hats that we'll never wear, the ugly key chains, the t-shirts with the country's flag on them, all this doesn't suit me. You don't even know where it comes from, you can find them everywhere in the country, in those huge roadside shops where the guides always make you get off and then the sellers chase you. Here, I find there are small things that are original and creative, it's not dusty, I know my friends will like them, will use them, like this tote bag (. . .) And then postcards, it's outdated, who still sends postcards. . . But me, I love it!

Interview in Hồ Chí Minh City, 03/23/16

The distinctive quality of these places lies also in their urban location. Indeed, recreational communism is a localized comeback. If these bars, restaurants, shops, and art galleries are preferentially located in highly globalized cities (Figure 6), it is because these cities have spearheaded economic reforms, and are therefore ideal places for establishing a conversation with communism. In a context that greatly benefits from a globalized capitalism, it is all the more easy to maintain a critical distance with communism. At the local level, it is also important to point out that these recreational establishments, regardless of their size, are mostly located in the hyper-center (Figure 6), that is, the business and tourist district, where land prices are the highest and where globalized services are the most concentrated, giving access to a relatively well-off clientele having a distinctive socialization. This includes young and affluent Vietnamese graduates, foreign tourists, and expatriates.

The prices charged in these venues clearly reflect this social positioning. In a Cộng Cà Phê, current drink prices range from 25,000VND (\$US1.10) to 65,000VND (\$US2.86), almost twice the price of a more popular venue. For the Propaganda Café, the target is clearly high-end; according to Noëlle Carr-Ellison, "The tourist groups that arrive by bus, I find them ugly. We hide them upstairs, so that they don't ruin the mood": she is indeed more interested in addressing the city's expatriates, their visiting friends and family, and Saigon's trendy clientele such as the young female hip-hop artist Suboi.

Redwashing: Recreational communism as a political transgression

We have shown that making communism a recreational resource is a long and involved process. We can thus ask what motivated the pioneers of this business. Beyond its current

profitability, what was their initial purpose? Did it include a political component? It is a legitimate question, especially in a post-socialist context, since despite its trivial appearances, entertainment can be thought of as eminently political. Lefebvre (1968) advocated for the right to celebrate as a means of conquering a daily life otherwise ordered by bureaucratic societies of consumption. Partying then becomes a way to disrupt governmental strategies of individual control. Indeed, playing with Bao Cấp is potentially subversive, carrying a political critique of either the past or present regime. The survey has highlighted the political load is mainly driven by the social position of the person concerned during Bao Cấp.

Phạm Quang Minh was born in 1962 from a military family living in the reserved area of Nam Đông, Hà Nội. His family had a rather high social standing at the time and he explained to me how this inspired him to reconstruct the interiors he had known from senior officers, with living room furniture, household equipment, and military decorations. According to him, it is important to keep material traces of a past that is still relevant, namely the positive moral values such as solidarity and humility. Thus, it is in relation to Đổi Mới that Phạm Quang Minh positions his project.

That period also had its good sides. Of course, it was difficult with the embargo, but the moral aspect was good, we had a sense of community and solidarity. Parents used to be involved in the education of other people's children. The children were well educated, hard-working, they did their daily chores. Now they are spoiled, less resourceful. That's why some clients come with their children, to show how poor they were back then: it's instructive.

Interview in Hà Nội, 04/03/16

The owner's view on the Bao Cấp period is in line with the establishment's attendance: civil servants and former soldiers can come here to bring their past back to life. The clientele is generally older than in Cộng Cà Phê and less inclined to the detached outlook on this past. This is a specificity of the establishments owned by Phạm Quang Minh: they are the only ones in which people who have experienced this period first hand constitute a recognized clientele, alongside young Vietnamese and foreign tourists. According to the interviews conducted, such customers are often those who suffered the least from this period and who find there a representation of the period that is in line with their own memories.

Former soldiers who have become generals come here to have their memorial dinner. Their conversations are all about 'when I was young. . .'. They have nostalgic, family and friendly conversations here: yesterday I had more than a hundred people for a wedding, tomorrow night I have a birthday. Everything is coherent with the objects, the decoration, the kitchen. It's a whole atmosphere, and it's authentic.

Interview in Hà Nội, 04/03/16

Linh Dung's perspective is totally different. Born in 1975 in Sơn Tây, a military camp town about 40 km West of Hà Nội, she is the last of a family of ten children. Her mother ran a café frequented by soldiers, and her father made musical instruments. She started singing at the age of six. During the interview, she insisted on the fact that although her family was making a small living, music, and cinema already occupied a large place in

her life. The first business she opened in 2007 was located near the Hồ Chí Minh mausoleum in Hà Nội, a provocative choice that pleased the cultural circles that used to frequent the place. Police raids occurred because the menus were printed on Marxist-Leninist manuals, and a portrait of Hồ Chí Minh had been hung under a staircase, all of which were considered disrespectful. She was able to convert these raids into huge publicity stunts, leading to a second café opening in 2013, on Điện Biên Phủ Street. The clientele then began to diversify. Today, she is at the head of 70 establishments, mainly located in Hà Nội and Sài Gòn, but also in the country's major tourist sites (Figure 6), in Korea and Malaysia.

The way Linh Dung was able to negotiate with the authorities to build her commercial success demonstrates political skills that are typical of post-socialism. Indeed, she makes an ambiguous use of socialist propaganda and its esthetics. Kitsch makes it possible to subvert and deny this subversion at the same time, a very convenient ambivalence in the context of an authoritarian regime. She sometimes shelters behind a naïve reading of the propaganda, and at times condemns their content and mock its adherents. This is illustrated for example in her use of slogans as wall decoration, such as “We are determined to compete. By competing, you are determined to be first. Once you're first, you don't know where to go, but because you're first, you keep going.” When I asked her to recollect the 2013/14 police raids, she never attacked the regime head-on, but rather justified herself by calling it a misunderstanding of what was intended as a pragmatic eco-friendly effort:

Yes, it's true, we had problems with the police at first. As I was explaining, I was making do with very little at the time, I was recycling things. Three, six months after the opening, a journalist friend of mine gave me a huge bag of old books written by Marx or Lenin, and I used them as menus so as not to waste them. Some people consider it an insult, a blasphemy, but look at the sticky rice vendors on the street: they use them as well. In the countryside, they have been seen used as toilet paper! So in the end, using them as menus wasn't so bad, it could even make people read them! But the authorities didn't agree. I'm a small business, I couldn't argue, so I looked for other solutions.

Interview in Hà Nội, 04/11/16,

Kitsch therefore makes it possible to criticize without getting into real trouble. The critique is ultimately low-risk, even though the kitsch esthetic it borrows is a powerful vector of integration into globalization through the recognizable provocation it constitutes in the eyes of foreign tourists. Indeed, these recreational establishments take advantage of the powerful socialist visual culture of communism. When I asked her if she had a political agenda, she answered:

People can make their own understanding of the message. This is not propaganda. If people come, that's the main thing, I prefer to keep a low profile, not to push my ideas. I do not replicate an era, I am more creative, there is distance, sometimes humor; for example this pantry is now used as a bar.

Interview in Hà Nội, 04/11/16

However, using communism to make a relaxed recreational setting contributes to ridiculing and disarming it. For example, the use of pink is a mockery in itself, as it appears to profanely wash-out the emblematic red. During a visit to a *Cộng Cà Phê*, a friend made the following remark seeing his coffee served:

- Tuấn: *Hồ Chí Minh in a café, his smile seems even more artificial, and the star on the coffee cream [he laughs] it's just ridiculous!*
- Me: *Are you making fun of uncle Hồ?!*
- Tuấn: *Not at all, I'm a patriot [in a falsely serious tone, bulging his chest], I defend Hồ Chí Minh, well, especially the one on the banknotes! [He bursts out laughing]*

Interview in Nha Trang, 05/02/2017

Ultimately, kitsch offers a flexible political critique, mocking both communism and consumerism. In both cases, it is the shams and complacency that are exposed. Thus, the way these products are used becomes a gentle provocation against glitzy [*sang chảnh*] capitalism:

I love going to fancy places with my tire shoes on, where everyone dresses with I don't know how much on their backs. When I go to the Sofitel or the Hilton, the doorman is always startled, it makes me laugh. And I have a real pride in speaking with a Northern accent. You see, there are two sides to everything: I would never want to go through that period again, but it's shaped me morally, there's too much money now.

Interview with Hanoian in Hồ Chí Minh City who did not want to disclose his identity, 03/24/16

Linh Dung has now become a respected businesswoman, deceiving in a way the initial customers. In their perspective, the success of *Cộng Cà Phê* made them lose their original subversion, the diversification of the clientele leading to a more mainstream production. This idea was expressed by T., a Hanoian artist:

It's business now. It has nothing to do with the early days. We were art students, writers, artists and architects. Also the music was different, more radical. There was no promotion on social networks. Now these cafés are all over the place, it has been trivialized. They're just another trendy place for young people. Not long ago I met a musician, he was sad to see Linh Dung remixing the past for money. I'm not following her anymore. Before, when she was a singer, her lyrics were more political, she did some controversial songs about sexuality for example.

Interview over Skype, 07/03/2018

Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of the commodification of communism through recreational establishments that use *Bao Cấp* as a touristic asset in Vietnam. This article aimed to go beyond the apparent paradox of finding pleasure by remaking the

painful daily life that was the Bao Cấp, focusing on the value that is given to it today, whether economical, material, but also emotional, memorial, and political.

This leads us to reflect on the research questions I raised earlier in the paper. Firstly, I asked; How can we explain that such a difficult period can now serve the thematization of places devoted to tourism and leisure? Who are the stakeholders that have contributed to this renewed value? I have demonstrated that the production of recreational communism is primarily driven by entrepreneurs seeking profit. However, making the communist everyday life a tourist product in Vietnam is a tour de force. Indeed, the creation of this asset required the depoliticization of the Bao Cấp era, which was first an effort of the authorities to rewrite the national story. This then allowed an array of urban actors to utilize Bao Cấp for the production of globalized tourism places. The pioneering entrepreneurs of this trend all share a certain international capital that allowed them to learn from other post-socialist contexts such as Russia. In that sense, the renewed dialogue with the country's past occurs on a transnational level (Schwenkel, 2006). The clientele is essentially composed of young Vietnamese and foreign tourists, none of who have a direct experience of the period. This results in an "imagined nostalgia" that not only sets these establishments apart in a highly competitive market, but also provides a distinctive customer experience. Therefore, Red Culture's comeback is both spatially and socially situated in the sense that it primarily involves cities and upper classes, that is to say the places and populations that not only most benefited from Đổi Mới policies but also possess the cultural and economic capital required to maintain a critical distance with the regime.

The second question I raised asked how these venues can be invested with political messages beyond their recreational purpose, both in the way their owners conceived them (production) and in the way customers experience them (reception)? In that sense, how are they representative of the changing notions and practices of socialism after nearly four decades of market reform and social transformation? It is clear that these places engage in a painful dialogue with the Bao Cấp: following the exhibition at the Museum of Ethnology, they have continued to bring this period to life, and in so doing, to talk about it, digest it, and even make fun of it. I demonstrated that those establishments nourish a concealed political discourse that is key to their success. Indeed, either they mock the superficiality of consumerism, or they demean Bao Cấp through the tactical use of kitsch. The political load depends mainly on the social profile of the interviewees and their relatives during the Bao Cấp: those who suffered most are also the most vocal against that period. Recreational communism therefore creates a space for subtle political stances and discussion with the past in a regime that remains authoritarian.

In this regard, the Vietnamese case is typical of post-socialism and warrants a broader comparison with countries such as China. This article adds to the scientific literature on Red Tourism which has been mainly preoccupied with the relationship between ideology and official tourism sites. Indeed, a broader geography of communist tourism needs to be considered in order to capture more finely the conversations taking place between a population and its political system. Cafés, restaurants, souvenir stores, etc. demonstrate the fundamental role played by tourism in the construction of memory, the rewriting of the past and the critical expression of political skills within authoritarian contexts.

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