

Sighting Saigon

LILY H. CHI
Cornell University

As the mediator between the traveler and an 'other' place, guidebooks to cities assume the role of two different 'insiders'. Written in the language of its readers, the guidebook is, in one sense, the traveler's accomplice. As an invitation to explore, however, it is also a persuasive medium, conjuring anticipated destinations and encounters. Guidebooks can thus be revealing both of the agenda and perception assumed for their readers, and as urban constructions in their own right. These traits are perhaps best observed in a comparative reading of guidebooks to a single city over time. Variations and divergences between them belie their assumed objectivity, giving visibility to what is suppressed or ignored, what continuities and coherences favored.

Questions of representation, identity, and the role of architecture are particularly loaded in the case of Ho Chi Minh City, a city that has submitted to more than one name change, undergone several momentous political transformations, and owes its physical form to an act of colonialist erasure. In just over a century, the city has played host to a veritable catalogue of modernity's defining ideological battles: French colonialism (c. 1867-1954), Japanese imperialism (c.1940-1945), Russian socialism (from c.1920), American cold war policy (1954-1975), and now, millennial global economics. This paper explores how this complex city was made coherent (and consumable) by guidebook writers throughout its difficult history. What follows is a sampling of such constructions: A tour of Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City as envisioned by diverse insiders throughout this century.

A FRENCH JEWEL

One does not simply arrive at the "Pearl of the East", one earns it through long voyage by sea and river. Saigon's exotic distance in the early decades of the century was measured in space and time. The writer of the 1930 *Tourists' Guide to Saigon Phnom-Penh and Angkor* takes pain to render the setting of this approach:

"Ocean going vessels are piloted up the estuary, formed by the Saigon River and the Dong Nai, along numerous bends through very flat country, passing Nha Be... a

depot for landing and storing petroleum products, and, after steaming slowly up the river for about four hours, reach the picturesque city of Saigon, called the Pearl of the East, with its steeples, lofty buildings and quais. Like an apparition in the verdant landscape, Saigon appears as 'a beautiful and well-laid-out town' with 'shops, buildings, Hotels and villas' that 'bear the distinct French hall-mark'."

The city's distance, geographical and cultural, dissipates in this unexpected cosmopolitanism. With a "bustling port" that has made her "the commercial capital of French Indochina" ("an important trade centre" to "rival that of Singapore, Hongkong"), a population that has grown "seven-fold" in fifty years (8,000 French civilians, over 300 "foreigners", a "Chinese element" numbering "over 30,000 souls, and the Annamese about 60,000"), Saigon's wordly status is plainly evident.

As in other guides at this time, "Saigon" refers spatially and conceptually to the "ville française", distinct both from the adjacent towns of "Cho Lon (Chinese)" and "Gia Dinh (Annamese)" and from the cities that had occupied this site until 1859. The *Tourists' Guide* establishes this temporal distinction with a brief history of the city. Saigon's environs, occupied since prehistoric times, was "under the domination" of Khmer rulers in the glory days of Angkor. Annamese settlers arrived from the north in the 17th century, establishing small colonies on the Dong Nai river and trade with local "aboriginal tribes." The settlement grew into a powerful force in the area, seizing territory from the Cambodians and eventually occupying the "fortress of Saigon" itself in 1674. By 1773, this fortress had grown into a township with a double wall fortification. Despite this provision, it "fell four times to rebel forces." After the last of these in 1788, the Annamese Emperor Nguyen Anh (Gia Long) turned to a French missionary named Pigneau de Bhaine and, with his aid, "received help" from a French naval expeditionary force.

The significance of Pigneau's import to this history is evident in the narrative detail surrounding his burial in the *Tourists' Guide*. Forty thousand grief-stricken faithful admir-

ers attended the funeral of his Most High and Powerful Lord and Prince Pigneau, First Lord of the State, Tutor of the Heir Apparent, Most Faithful and Excellent. The Emperor himself, his mother, his sister, his Queen and concubines, his children, all the ladies-in-waiting and Court Officials gave vent to their deep sorrow, shedding copious tears. This narrative of debt to the great prelate by the Annamese people occupies a full page of a two page history. The rest of the story follows quickly: From 1800 onwards the country prospered until later in 1833 a rebellion broke out when it was ravaged by conflicting forces. It was not until 1859 that the French, together with a handful of Spanish volunteers, had to intervene in order to restore peace under the French flag.²

Saigon's history thus begins with Pigneau de Bhaine. Evident in the triumph of peace and order over rebelliousness and instability, this history is only temporarily interrupted after his death. The French flag over Saigon, called upon to restore peace, is testament of its continuity. The Saigon that the visitor looks upon in the *Tourists' Guide* confirms this identity. Touring the city by rickshaw, the visitor traverses the Boulevards Charner, Bonnard, and Norodom, encountering the Halles Centrales, the Jardin de la Ville, the palaces of the Governor General and the Governor of Cochinchina, the Law Courts and Roman Catholic Cathedral, the beautiful gardens along the waterway called Avalanche with its Elephant's Park and Lotus Pond, the Muse Blanchard de la Brosse, the Messageries Fluviales, the Hotels Majestic and de la Rotonde with the delightful little open air restaurant and bar nearby, and, passing by the Bandstand and the Mairie, finishes with a stroll on the crowded avenue of the Rue Catinat, lined on both sides with art and curio, lace and silk shops.

Assurances of the familiar abound in these images, punctuated only by languid scenes of limpid heat and lush shade (From the middle of June to the end of October the rains cool the atmosphere and every tree, garden and lawn is green again...). As a French guide of 1934 put it: Saigon, capital of Cochinchina, justifies the surname Pearl of the Far Orient with its numerous edifices and beautiful order, with the neatness of its grand arterials and magnificent shades, and with the seductiveness and picturesqueness of the different quarters of the city. The city's appeal is rendered not in images of "local color" but with ornate Beaux Arts monuments and urbane boulevards. Saigon's exoticism lies not in its difference, but in its paradoxical familiarity: A recognizable sophistication achieved in remoteness. Architecture and urban design occupy centre stage as a prophylactic against tropical heat and otherness. Like the eerie photographs published by Photos Nadal of early Saigon, silent and starkly framed in the palpable light of midday, the *Tourists' Guide* city appears devoid of human habitation. Taking another tour from the Rue Catinat, this time by motor car, the visitor drives east through the Botanical and Zoological Gardens, and then north in the direction of Gia Dinh (Annamese).

Skirting the latter, the visitor makes stops at the tomb of Pigneau de Bhaine, Bishop of Adran; at a monument to Lareynire, a Wireless Station, and an Aviation Camp. Cross-

ing the Plaine des Tombeaux, a huge Annamese Necropolis, s/he comes to the neighboring city of Cho Lon (Chinese). Founded in 1778 by Chinese settlers who established themselves here as Rice Merchants, present day Cho Lon is a future rival to Saigon with its beautiful and modern buildings. Except for a faceless crowd on the Rue Catinat, some Hindu Temples and Buddhist Pagodas Worth Visiting, and canals and waterways literally crowded with steam launches, barges and sampans of all dimensions, there is no sight in the *Tourists' Guide* of those other 90,000 souls that populated pre World War II Saigon. The only sighting of local peoples occurs well beyond the city in the mountain forests of Dalat. A delightful hill station blessed with invigorating climate and four hotels, Dalat offers rest from the heat and trials of a journey through Indochina. A French new town built for this purpose, it is also the point of departure for big game hunting and issues permits for shooting parties in the surrounding highlands. On these same heights, the visitor may encounter a tribe of aborigines called "Moi" by the natives who live in the forests and travel or hunt in whole family groups attired in Nature's garb carrying with them their household chattels. Their "proximity" to nature is hard to miss: they are said to travel great distances in a single day's march, and negotiate precipitous slopes at an incredible pace. In contrast to the urban sights of Saigon, their little hamlets or clusters of huts and miniature villages are generally found on the highest peaks and resemble a mountain eagle's nest at a distance. Ville moderne, Port de Guerre Saigon, capital of a hundred faces is how a 1952 French guidebook, written in collaboration with Air France, introduces the city.³

Reflecting perhaps a new approach to the city, Saigon reveals itself not by degrees from the water, but all at once, kaleidoscopically. This new cosmopolitanism is visually manifest in the text itself, a patchwork of French and slightly edited English, Vietnamese, and Chinese versions. The waterfront, nonetheless, remains foundational to the definition of Saigon as the most important commercial port in Indochina ... and a port of war, with its Arsenal. The visitor turns quickly from the harbour, however, to a reassuring sight: 8 @ W

Coquettish and very much French, the city breathes easily under the great trees of her avenues and in the freshness of her numerous public gardens. The opulence of her monuments reflect the prosperity of the city. Saigon's continuous history as a French capital is confirmed in signs of ongoing refinement: All along the river, quais have replaced the mire of the banks, and the straw huts of the old Ben Nghe have become beautiful houses. The Rue Catinat, having taken over the path that linked that straggling Vietnamese village to the city above, now boasts 1500 meters of stores and delightful shop windows. Only Cho Lon presents an altogether asiatic cache [with] its curved bridges, long banners, innumerable stores lit profusely from twilight, and most of all, the colorful and noisy crowd that gives it an intense local color. A second, amplified edition of this guide appeared sometime before 1955, in collaboration this time with the National Tourism Office of Viet Nam.⁴

Saigon is now an administrative capital, as well as an important port of commerce, an economic center of considerable activity and a port of war endowed with a modern arsenal. Once again, however, the visitor is abruptly turned from this to a prosperous city defined in architectural refinement, generous boulevards and gardens, and shops on the rue Catinat. The picture of 1952 reappears in greatly sharpened detail, and with new nuance: Saigon is a large modern city of European aspect... The city acquires a new worldliness in this idea of the modern. Movement infects the stark, still light that lit the Tourists' Guide to Saigon. Tours to public monuments are relieved by listings of Distractions: theater, cinema, concerts, library, dancing, sports.. The visitor navigates the city on foot, enjoying the boulevards as unfolding perspectives perusing promenades through city gardens and river walks to the Pointe de Fleurs. It is, however, commerce that recommends the Rue Catinat the most animated commercial artery in the city and its counterparts in Cho Lon to the tourist en flagrant.

The visitor's gaze also ventures beyond the European aspect, lighting briefly upon the city's populous quarters, the buildings of asiatic cults, and the forests and rice fields around the city. An extended list of excursions beyond the city places it at the center of a new geography of tourism. Hardship Post The background/foreground relation of city and port in the *Guide de Saigon* splinters into split frames in John Henry Wilson's *Post Report* (1954) and in *Saigon: A Booklet of Helpful Information for Americans in Viet Nam* (1958 ed).⁵ On the one hand, the city remains the Paris of the Orient: an attractive city set in a beautiful landscape with numerous parks, French colonial... buildings and residences, and boulevards shaded by tall exotic trees: a paradise for the serious photographer. French, still an official language, remains essential in the city's shops, hotels, and restaurants. The Post Report's history of Saigon reaffirms the city's debt to the heroic actions of Pigneau de Bhaïne and the French military. On the other hand, almost every street on the Booklet's city map bears a new Vietnamese name: the boulevards Norodom, Bonnard, Charner are parenthesized by dai lo's Thong Nhut unite Le Loi and Nguyen Hue (two hero kings in of precolonialist history). Tu Do (freedom) Avenue connects the Catholic Cathedral, with its typical spacious French Square, to the unceasing activity of the waterfront, replacing Rue Catinat as the theater of the city. Saigon is, on the one hand, a spectacle of modern cosmopolitanism: a sidewalk cafe from which visitors enjoy the colorful native life. Bright lights, teeming activity, cinema, outstanding concert artists from the U.S. and Europe; fashionable shops and cafes line avenues a scant half block from fascinating street scenes of Oriental life. Native markets brimming with wealth of color and merchandise share space with Indian merchants from Bombay and Madras selling items of daily use and fabric. Asians, Europeans, and Americans commingle, observes the Booklet, giving the city a truly international air. Saigon is, on the other hand, an oblivious background to an important battle a strategic war against communist domination.⁶

This teaming Metropolitan Center, which shows so few signs of being involved in a deep struggle against the spread of communism, is also a nerve center in its southeast Asian neighborhood and, for the American patriot, a post of great importance. The opportunity to serve in this crucial area should far outweigh the inconveniences... characteristic of "hardship" posts.⁷ Saigon, in the Post Report at least, is a destination of extreme duty. More temporary resident more than willing tourist, the visitor gains sight of a whole other dimension of the city: scourge mildew that consumes metal, wool and leather; vegetables fertilized with human excrement; fruits edible only with potassium permanganate treatment; water that must be boiled for use. Tactile, oral, odorous the city breaches its visual limit, encroaching upon the body's space.

This proximity also brings a new scale of contact with the Asiatic population. The Post Report and the Booklet offer advice for negotiating this encounter at work (knowledge of the language will not be necessary... since all Vietnamese officials .. can speak French), at play ([a]lthough not particularly attractive to Americans. Chinese and Vietnamese theaters are well worth a visit, if only for educational reasons), and at home ([s]ervants are a necessity... to enable the individual to lead a normal life.⁸ Detailed, helpful tips on how to handle servants offer the closest sights yet on the natives of Saigon. Vietnamese servants, for example, despite their limitations are usually extremely loyal and... strive to please; Chinese servants, on the other hand, usually speak some English and are more efficient in their work but are more difficult to control. The encounter brings its own challenges: unreliable laundry service, dubious sanitary standards, complex rituals for getting X rays and emergency treatment for one's servants... Despite the effort required in this whole enterprise, however, the visitor is assured that patience, perseverance, understanding and humour... go a long way in surmounting the difficulties, and the reward can be eager to please, good, loyal servants. (Saigon, Capital of Vietnam.)

The readers of Saigon, Capital of Vietnam (1962-65), Saigon Roundup (1965), and Saigon (1967), published by South Vietnam's National Tourist Office, will find no section on history. Saigon is a modern town. The broad parallel avenues... lined with trees and the public squares open onto another form of worldliness. Saigon may compete with other big towns all over the world, with its sumptuous buildings, imposing palaces, and sky scrapers. Competitiveness in this realm is measured in speed. Saigon is growing everyday. The changes are so fast that even the Saigon people are surprised... With a population of two million, increasing everyday, the city grows in height as well as in width: large buildings are built on the broad avenues, and Saigon is spreading its quarters over the suburbs. The Pearl of the East, as it has been called by sea merchants from the Occident, is now growing and moving forward.

Progress extends to the city's moral fibre. Saigon is also improving itself on the spiritual point of view. Much emphasis has been laid on security and public order. All activities

tending to deprave public morals are forbidden. Although a big town Saigon, like every other city in Free Viet Nam, has today only theaters, movie pictures and stadiums as entertainment places for its inhabitants. The itinerary to this heady city begins and ends on its avenues. Tu Do avenue, lined with stores, restaurants, refreshment shops, movies is the rendezvous of Saigon fashionable people: [i]f you want to meet a friend whose address you have forgotten, stand at the corner of this avenue on a Sunday morning to be sure to see him. Le Loi, a market street lined with shops and hawkers is even more crowded and animated, more popular than Tu Do. Tran Hung Dao, a very picturesque sight in the evening, is an endless stream of cars, taxis, buses, bicycles... as if everybody has an appointment there at the end of working day. Cho Lon, the nocturnal entertainment district is flooded with light from the brilliant shop windows and the illuminated signs and advertisements, and streams of people constantly going up and down in its overcrowding streets, lined with restaurants and refreshment shops. Thong Nhat stands out in this breathless itinerary as the quietest and coolest place in the animated business quarter of the town. Everywhere the "excitement of life bustling along with innumerable bicycles...pedicabs...cars and buses of every size and description."

Saigon is a "city on wheels." The speed of movement is measured by the force of collisions. Saigon, on its course to progress is the place where the Occident meets the Orient, the modern aside vestiges of ancient times. [S]ky scrapers in the neighbourhood of curved roofed old pagodas, luxurious cars finding their way among simple horse carts, fashionable people walking between diligent laborers. The recommended sights of Saigon make a heterotopic list "of scales and species, rendering the city in color, animation, and detail. Canaries, pigeons, monkeys, parrots, squirrels, rabbits, partridges, dogs, and fish in the Bird Market share the scene with gladioli, roses, mimosas, orchids, lotuses, and lilies in the Flower Market and lacquer work on Tu Do street, completing a tour of the Botanical Gardens, National Museum, and the Tomb of Marshal Le Van Duet."

Saigon is cosmopolitanism and bustling commotion with an asiatic flavour a happy combination of old Oriental civilization and blooming modernism. Visitors to this enchanting city are always charmed by the friendliness and gaiety of the Vietnamese people, the overliness [sic] of the girls, the delicious and almost overabundant food, the fairytale atmosphere of the surrounding countryside, and bewildered by the masses of bicycles and scooter.⁹

Food and people are ubiquitous in these Vietnamese authored guides. In *Saigon, Capital of Vietnam*, the one invokes the other, and both are indispensable to the vision of urbanity. Descriptions of food at the market, on the street, in traditional festivals, at select restaurants testify to Saigon's diversity, worldliness, exoticism, and abundance. The Saigon guide not only lists extensive venues, but seduces with mouth watering description. Firecrackers, feasts, festivals, and tales and legends punctuate the visual tour, and the visitor is frequently struck by the warm hospitality of the Vietnamese

people, their charm, friendliness, and easy going manners. The character of the Saigonese themselves become a feature of the city's allure.

The only "history" in *Saigon: Capital of Vietnam* appears in the sections on Squares and Parks and Public Buildings; Temples; Histories; Markets; Museums... Dates; and historiographical information on the French-built edifices and parks so rare in earlier guidebooks (the 1930 *Tourists' Guide* simply lists them) are provided in instructive detail. In *Saigon, Capital of Vietnam*, the colonial past is neutralized and commodified as tourist objects. The sensual exuberance of these sixties "guides contrast sharply with the Saigon of 1971, an English/Vietnamese guide published in 1971 by Tong Phat Hanh. Saigon is a new, functional city with no relics of the past. Spare and restrained, Saigon opens onto a spartan, strained setting. The city appears not through scenographic images of urban life, but as an organizational map. The whole city is laid out on a grid iron pattern, with the main residential section in the North East.... Roughly speaking it is divided [at] the red brick Roman Catholic basilica [by] Thong Nhat boulevard from the Chinese quarter, through the center of which Tu Do street runs down to the river... Its centre is Vo di Nguy street, which has been fortified with barbed wire and red blocks since the American embassy [was located here]...The city's colonial sights appear as objects of connoisseurship illuminated by dates and stylistic commentary.

True to its word, however, Saigon makes no pretense of anachronistic reverence. The Basilica, Saigon's most prominent landmark holds no power over the viewer equal to that in the *Tourists' Guide*: As you come in by sea, steaming along a winding stream lined with mangrove, you see its twin spires from a considerable distance, but it is an unremarkable building... The city's street life remains prominent, but its crowded, teeming activity is cast in different light.

The scenic, energetic Cho Lon of old is noisier, more crowded and with less respect for appearances [than Saigon]. Its streets are narrower.... the shops more [numerous] than those of a bazaar more "Asian" than Saigon, but not in the least picturesque. The viewer of Saigon sees the city through weary eyes. The effervescence of early modern Saigon is replaced by a pall both dark and stark. At present Saigon is going through a bad period. The centre of the city is mortared on occasion and the outskirts are dangerous. Many of its inhabitants are devoted entirely to exploitation of the American armed forces. Tu Do and the adjacent streets have broken into a rash of cavernous bars, protected by wire netting and furnished with juke boxes in a manner that no city administration should have tolerated: the streets, once spic and span, are littered with rubbish; the difficulty of getting a taxi is a perpetual irritant, and over all hang the stagnant fumes of countless ill-maintained motor scooters, motor bicycles and other vehicles, which at rush hours turn the streets into an inferno.

In this context, practical, useful advice replace narrative persuasion: Independence Palace, having been bombed in 1962, has been subsequently rebuilt in a cheap, modern style;

Central Market is worth a visit as a good place to observe people, but unfortunately a favorite spot for acts of terrorism. Saigon may divest itself of the past, but history's effect intrudes finally upon the visitor's field of vision. Ho Chi Minh's City HCMC is a young city which came into being three centuries ago.¹⁰ Its story really begins in 1911, at the port of Saigon, from whence the young patriot Nguyen Tat Thanh departed on board a ship ... in search [of] national salvation. The story tells of Ton Duc Thang, who hoisted a red flag on a French warship in 1919; of the Nam Ky insurrection of 1940 when many eminent sons and daughters were imprisoned, tortured and killed barbarously; of August 15, 1945, when the people of Saigon seized power from the Japanese fascists; and September 23, 1945, when they rose up again with rudimentary weapons against the French colonialists. It celebrates the nine year war of resistance that ended in 1954, and North Vietnam liberated, but resumes when the people of Saigon rose up again to fight an... arduous and heroic war against American imperialists and their henchmen for twenty years. The story's main character is the people of Saigon, who enjoyed independence and freedom for only 29 days from the day the French first set foot [in] Saigon to the day when the city was liberated in 1975. Standing firm heroically in face of hardships and sacrifice, the first to fight but the last to enjoy the fruits of the revolution, the people are the historical embodiment of the city from which Nguyen Tat Thanh set out on his quest and to which he returned as Ho Chi Minh. The paradox of a city that was newly founded in the 17th century, and named in 1975 for a story that begins in 1911 has mythic logic. Ho Chi Minh City is the narrative resolution of the city of Saigon.

If Saigon is a cradle of the Vietnamese revolution, Ho Chi Minh City is the ideal socialist state. With a traditionally unyielding spirit, with assiduous labor and creativeness... [the] people have been striving energetically to change Ho Chi Minh City from a reactionary political center of the Imperialists... into a socialist political, economic and cultural center... from an economy catering for the war of aggression, totally dependent on foreign countries, into an independent economy serving the people's well being, national defense and socialist construction.¹² The city in Ho Chi Minh City in a Nutshell is defined by its institutions, hardwon fruits of the people's post war labours. Their triumph is measured by the magnitude of their struggle: industrial and agricultural ruin, 500,000 unemployed, 233,000 widows, 15,000 young hobos, 10,000 beggars.... a war of aggression and multifarious sabotage waged by the Peking expansionists in collusion with the US imperialists and their henchmen, the Pol Pot genocidal clique. Among its achievements, Ho Chi Minh City counts 35 hospitals; 2,500 doctors giving 11 to 12 million medical check ups and treatment operations a year; a system of socialist education featuring 600 day-nurseries, and 5,000 kindergarten teachers caring for more than 30,000 children; organized institutions for reeducating and reforming victims of the former regime such as hooligans, thieves, prostitutes, drug addicts; New Youth and New Women schools wherein

depraved youths are cured of social diseases and involved in educational, vocational and productive activities. A water, land, and air communication hub, a center of international relations and tourism for Vietnam, Saigon is capable of accommodating 50 to 60 thousand tourists yearly. The city's premier sight is the Nha Rong House on the Saigon River, built in 1863, but remembered for June 5, 1911. Architecture of note includes 180 temples and pagodas rich in diversity of architecture and ornaments, and the Thon Nhat Conference Hall, headquarters of the Saigon regime [before liberation, this building was the site on which the banner of victory was raised to announce the liberation of Saigon and the end of the rule of the US imperialists and their henchmen.

Beyond the city, there are tropical sceneries along the Saigon River, and mangrove forests which served as solid strongholds of the Revolution during the two Resistance Wars. Cu Chi, the heroic district known as the Land of Steel, is renowned for its secret network of underground tunnels capable of sheltering cadres and soldiers for months. [The] enemy called the latter the "Red Capital, the Communist "Sanctuary" for it was like a sharp knife pointed at their heart. Further from the city, the visitor can take in sight seeing tours and excursions to picturesque places like the sea resorts at Vung Tau and Nha Trang, the mountain resort of Da Lat, and the Ho Chi Minh trail that had gained worldwide fame during the resistance to American aggressions.

A Small Dragon Ho Chi Minh City (1990)¹³ depicts a city with beautiful tree lined boulevards and streets and many elegant buildings from the colonial period. A young city that came into existence in the 17th century, it has never ceased to grow. A charming metropolis of light and sound with revitalized youthful stamina, its streets are often jammed up with all sorts of vehicles and its shopping areas always crowded with foreign and local people roaming around, sometimes just for the sake of it. The city also proudly bears the name of a world famous leader, a national hero, a poet, a humanitarian. Ho Chi Minh City tells the tale of a lovely City that has bravely endured and survived most turbulent hardship and tremendous economic difficulties. The seat of successive regimes, and witness to many ups and downs of the nation's destiny, the city's story is the history of its struggles. Its path to the present began at Nha Rong quai, which in 1911 saw young Nguyen Tat Thanh... off to Paris, his first trip abroad in search of the way to national salvation. For more than three decades, Saigon, a tiny spot on the world map would attract much more than its share of international press as the site of one of the longest wars in the world's modern history."

Fifteen years after the ending of hostilities, Ho Chi Minh City is now drawing the big headlines from the press again, this time for the Vietnamese people's bold will to turn one of the most backward economies on this planet into a smaller dragon in this thriving Pacific and Southeast Asian region. "History is burdensome to memory as the city recalls these early days after reunification when the joy of victory was soon challenged by tremendous economic difficulties. The city

was fighting again, this time an uphill battle for economic dignity... [T]o the surprise of even the closest observers of the scene, however, HCMC is making a vigorous comeback to the Southeast Asian stage, despite seemingly unsurmountable problems yet to be solved. Its many shortcomings notwithstanding, Ho Chi Minh City remains friendly and hospitable to its foreign visitors. Come to Ho Chi Minh City, a town endeared to the search of its identity. We are under no illusion it will be a fantastic tourist boom or we can provide you with the nicest tourist place in the region. Just come to see the changes that you can be bringing about. Because this city, among a few other things, was a city of tourists and shall remain to be so. To make up for the lost time, we will spare no effort to give you a happy enjoyable and worthwhile stay in our beloved and beautiful city. Indeed we are currently in no position to compete w other countries about luxurious and first class facilities. But we also believe that visitors from the world over will remember us for our warm welcome, friendliness and hospitality.

The city's appeal speaks directly to the visitor. Ho Chi Minh City is, ultimately, a story of pathos whose main character is its people. [N]o matter where they come from, the city's people as a whole have lived up to the spirit of the "Saigonese" : enterprising, innovative, industrious, open, truthful, aboveboard, lavish, fiery tempered and carefree. The visitor will be amazed [by] the friendly and hospitable attitude extended to them by Saigon people; surprised by their impressive fluency [in] foreign languages, English in particular but also French and Russian; and touched by their keenness for catching up with the latest trends that are going on in the rest of the world. As hosts, their warmth and good humour prevail over the brand of history. The heroism of the people of Ho Chi Minh City lies in their ongoing survival of the struggles of time, destiny, and circumstance with indefatigable bravery, perseverance, and good humored humility. Welcome to HCMC, with love! Time can do so much, but it can never change this very nature of this City. In fact, however, time is the glass through which the visitor envisions Ho Chi Minh City. Rooted to the fabric of an imposed history, this city must be, on the one hand, perpetually young. The city's identity, as reflected in its name, lies with the character of its people. On the other hand, Ho Chi Minh City appears to the visitor in reflected light.

Many people still remember that this City was once famous as the Pearl of the Far East. Its youthful charms attracted a great number of western tourists... in French colonial times. When the Americans began to support openly the anti Communist regime in South Viet Nam with massive economic and military aid, Saigon... was swiftly transformed into a modern and densely populated city. In spite of the raging war, foreign tourists... [came to] Saigon, experiencing the most thrilling moments in an embattled capital... rue Catinat was always crowded with foreign correspondents... business men... American GI's.... The newly restored grand hotels built during the French period have been revived and poised to revive sweet memories of a "lost time" to many

Western visitors: Hotel Majestic with a corridor of comfortable armchairs facing the Saigon river across the street; and the Continental with an open lounge gleaming [sic] the life of the city.

Ho Chi Minh City does not shy from stoking the ambers of nostalgia a sign, perhaps, of successful rejuvenation. The sights of Ho Chi Minh City, by contrast, are not evocative, but informative. The tour of famous architectural and urban sites is an extensive itinerary that lists: the Reunification Conference Hall (formerly: Independence Palace, rebuilt Presidential palace, and Norrodom palace, the house of the French governor of Indochina); Ho Chi Minh Memorial Hall (formerly Messageries Maritimes building); the U.S. Embassy Building; the Office of the People's Committee of HCMC (former town hall); the Botanical and Zoological Garden; the Cathedral; the Historical Museum and the First District; an extensive list of pagodas by name; buildings occupied by Americans during the war that naturally became targets of mission impossible type commando attacks (the first U.S.embassy, USAID office, USIS office, Rex, Brink, Victoria buildings); the Cu Chi tunnel; the Iron Triangular; the mangrove forests of Duyen Hai district (that can revive some unpleasant memories of fatal supply missions along the Long Tau river); and [f]or visitors compassionate about the war effects on the Vietnamese society Dignity restoration schools (where erred young ladies are given an opportunity to turn their lives over to a new leaf), and orphanages. While there are brief provisions for pleasure seekers in the tour, sightseeing in Ho Chi Minh City is a lesson in history and a spectacle of temporal succession.

The visitor sees double in Ho Chi Minh City a guidebook published by the Saigon Tourist Association in Ho Chi Minh City. The specter of Saigon, Pearl of the East and metropolis of light and sound, shadows the Revolutionary City at every turn: As Saigon can reestablish its Westernized look almost overnight, Cholon remains the formidable Chinatown that never sleeps.... HCMC is almost the only " cosmopolitan " city of this country; [f]oreign people are never strangers to the people of this extrovert[ed] city! And neither Saigon and its people to its many lovers in the world; the city is ... able to provide tourists with pleasant experiences because the Saigonese themselves enjoy life as much as any other people on earth. HCMC is called a center of tourism. As a tourist destination, Ho Chi Minh City shimmers like a mirage between two states of being—Of Vision, History, and Architecture.

The sample of guidebooks perused here covered a range of the range of political identities to which Saigon had submitted throughout the 20th century. The urban visions they constructed did not always reflect the social and political context in which they were written. It is not possible to analyze these divergences here, but some brief comparative observations can be made of the constructions themselves. Three different visions of Saigon/HCMC emerge in these accounts: the Beaux Arts city of classical monuments, promenades, and squares; the modern cosmopolis of bustling commerce, rich

cultural collisions, and heady change; and the city as a community of its people. While these might seem to reflect three phases of change from 1930 to 1990, one can also see in them three contestatory aspects that reappear in different formulations after the 1930 *Tourists' Guide*. Much is revealed of the political stakes involved in the way the guidebooks flaunt, suppress, or formulate the physical traces of French colonial power, the dynamism and fluidity of material and cultural change, and the diverse social and ethnic makeup of this city. One prominent theme that bears mention here is the relationship, repeatedly asserted by the guides themselves, between cultural identity, history, and architecture.

History is, on the one hand, a narrative of patrimony asserted (*Tourists' Guide*, HCMC in a Nutshell); assumed, even when no longer substantiated politically (*Post Report*, Booklet); or denied (to the animal like aborigines of the *Tourists' Guide*, to the vexing native servants of the American guides). But history also appears as movement as passage from the past, as the capacity for action and hence change, or as fluidity in itself. The city on wheels embraced the leveling effect of modernity and internationalism on locality and heritage. In Saigon, Capital City, Beaux Arts monuments and squares were but one moment in a heady spectacle of simultaneous times and places. Ho Chi Minh City, born in revolutionary movement, thrives on a sense of imminent change. The contrast between this valuation of historical change in the Vietnamese guides and the sense of nostalgia and foreboding expressed by the Western guides about Ho Chi Minh City's unknown future is striking.¹⁴

Architecture, in turn, is the evidence on which the histories of Saigon/HCMC are written. Its role in defining Saigon's exoticism in the *Tourists' Guide* has already been noted: the Pearl of the Orient is a work of surprising beauty and refinement in the depths of raw, unformed nature. The Botanical Garden, one of the first projects completed in the city, exemplifies the value of nature remade in this context: the city is the physical counterpart of Pigneau de Bhaine's civilizing influence. Saigon's urbanity, against the image of the mountain tree-dwellers, confirms the progressive authority of her makers. Architecture no longer fills the visitor's vision after 1954 indeed, the focus of the guidebooks becomes progressively less visual as Saigon is defined more and more by the lives lived in it. And yet, from the bombed out remnants of vanquished regimes, to the pointedly nonurban Cu Chi tunnel and mangrove forests, architecture and urbanism remain relevant sites of cultural contestation.

The Ho Chi Minh City of 1990 offers an intriguing twist on the theme of reappropriation. If the grandeur and scale of Saigon's Beaux Arts colonial fabric gives expression to the magnitude and endurance of imperialist power, the succession of occupants in these same monuments by 1990 is equally significant for the city that defines its strength in the survival of its people. Ho Chi Minh City's ability to indulge the western visitor's nostalgia for sweet memories of lost times while proudly invoking the spirit of its namesake rests, it seems, on a poignant distinction between "form" and "function."

NOTES

- 1 Reprinted as *A 1930's Guide to Saigon, Phnom Penh, and Angkor* (Bangkok: Art East, 1992).
- 2 Pigneau de Bhaine is a ubiquitous figure in guidebooks to Saigon well into the fifties. The author of a 1943 guide, for instance, credits the Admiral Governors of 1859 to 1879 as the true founders of Saigon, but pays lengthy tribute to de Bhaine: Andr Baudrit, *Guide Historique des Rues de Saigon* (Saigon: S.I.L.I., 1943). See also John Henry Wilson, *Post Report (Laos and Vietnam: US Operations Mission to Cambodia, 1954)*. For a less sympathetic account of the relation between de Bhaine, Annam, and France, see Ennis, *French Policy and Developments, Indochina, 1*.
- 3 Peter Leonard, the American author of *Saigon: A Guidebook* (Vietnamese Trading Co., 1995), also renders the French conquest in more critical light. 3 Saigon, ed. L. Agence Havas in collaboration with Air France (Paul Hartmann Collection, Cornell University). Translated from the French by L. Chi.
- 4 *Guide de Saigon*, ed. Agence Havas Extrême Orient in collaboration with the National Tourism Office of Viet Nam, [pre-1955]. The war between France and the Viet Minh over the future of Vietnam ended in 1954 with the Geneva Armistice and the partitioning of the country.
- 5 *Post Report* (Saigon: US Operations Mission to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, 1954); American Women's Association of Viet Nam, *Saigon: a Booklet of Helpful Information for Americans in Viet Nam* (Saigon: 1958).
- 6 Booklet, 3. See, for comparison, Peter Leonard, *Saigon: A Guidebook* (1995). Leonard, an American stationed in Vietnam during the war, presents his extensive history of Vietnam as a long succession of foreign occupation and struggles for independence. Noting that Ho Chi Minh's 1945 declaration of Vietnamese independence from France borrowed some wording from that of the American Declaration, Leonard points out that Roosevelt, shortly before his death, had been inclined to support an independent Vietnam. No telling what might have happened, notes Leonard wryly, had the US, Britain, and France allowed the independence to stand. On the US's support of Ho Chi Minh resistance efforts against Japanese occupation, see David G. Marr, *Vietnam: 1945* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1995).
- 7 *Post Report*, Forward.
- 8 *Post Report*, 23-24; Booklet, 16-18.
- 9 *Saigon Roundup* No. 164 (Jan. 29, 1965) 38.
- 10 *Ho Chi Minh City in a Nutshell* (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, 1985).
- 11 *Ho Chi Minh City: 1990 Guide Book for Foreign Tourists and Business People* (Ho Chi Minh City: Saigon Tourist Association, 1990) 6.
- 12 *Ho Chi Minh City in a Nutshell*, 14.
- 13 *Ho Chi Minh City: 1990 Guide Book for Foreign Tourists and Business People* (HCMC: Saigon Tourist Association). See also, for example: *Discovering Saigon Downtown* (HCMC: Center for Information Development & Management Training of Tedco, 1992).
- 14 See Robert Storey, *Ho Chi Minh City* (Saigon) (Hawthorn, Oakland, London, Paris: Lonely Planet Publications, 1995); Richard Wely, et al., *Saigon Eternelle: Portrait d'une ville au pass toujours present* (Hong Kong: Editions d'Indochine, 1995); Peter Leonard, *Saigon: A Guidebook* (Vietnamese Trading co, 1995).