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Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam:
Managing a Battle Site, Metaphoric and Actual

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Descending into Dien Bien Phu, a 40-minute flight from the Vietnamese capital, Hanoi, is like, I imagine, coming across the mythical Shangri-la. The plane cuts sharply to the right around some mountain tops and a broad, flat valley opens up – 100 square kilometres of bright green padi fields watered by the Muong Thanh River. Ahead, along the jagged crest of an even higher range of mountains, is the Lao border. At the foot of these mountains, amid forest and creeping out onto the edge of the padi fields, are the small settlements of the local ethnic groups, the so-called montagnards or hill tribe people. Officially Vietnam has 54 ethnic groups, of which 21 live in Dien Bien Phu and the surrounding province, the Thai and Hmong being the most numerous.

The plane comes to rest on a runway that marks the boundary of the flat-bottomed valley to the west and a series of hills to the east. This is a cultural landscape of stunning beauty – but a beauty that masks a recent history of war. It is the place in which historically significant events occurred relatively recently, related to the First Indochina War (1946-1954) and the collapse of European imperialism in Asia, and there exists an ensemble of man-made war-related sites within the landscape that are an integral part of the landscape’s recent evolution and contemporary meaning. Furthermore, it is the site of a battle of a different kind continuing today – a battle that is both a metaphor for the wide and extremely difficult transformation of Vietnamese society and an actuality for the local community in the town and district of Dien Bien Phu itself.

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Fig. 1. - Mountains, hills and paddy fields: the 'Land of Heaven' (c) W Logan.

Fig. 2. - Vietnamese troops storm hill C1, 13 March 1954 (c) Billy Penfold.
Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam

Heritage significance: place, memory and identity

Dien Bien Phu is one of the most significant cultural landscapes in Vietnam. According to local myths, the Muong Then (the ‘Land of Heaven’) was formed at the time earth and heaven were created 2. Surrounded as it is by high mountains, the valley is like the earth’s navel. In the eighteenth century it was renamed Ninh Bien and then changed to Dien Bien (‘stable land in the border’) in 1841 under the Nguyen dynasty. Indigenous values are strong, but today its cultural heritage significance also lies in the way it represents the intersection of different cultural identities – the Vietnamese and the French – coming together 50 years ago in military conflict. Then, as mentioned, the ensuing half century has also added a layer that says much about modern Vietnam and in particular the role of the state in economic, social and cultural development.

The heritage values of Dien Bien Phu’s cultural landscape as perceived by the victorious Vietnamese and the defeated French, of course, vary sharply. For the Vietnamese soldiers involved in the 56 days and nights from 13 March to 7 May 1954, it was the site of the stunning Viet Minh military victory over the colonial French forces. Around 8,000 Viet Minh soldiers were killed and 15,000 wounded 3, yet Dien Bien Phu has a key place as a glorious milestone on the path to national independence alongside the Bach Dang River battle in 938AD that turned the Chinese invaders on their heels and led to the creation of the warrior Ngo Quyen as first Vietnamese king 4. Moreover it has become crucial to the constructed identity of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, a selective use of memories to form a national narrative that supports the state ideology – a task that becomes easier as memories fade and disappear along with the generation who experienced the battle of Dien Bien Phu first-hand.

For the 11,000 French soldiers garrisoned at Dien Bien Phu – 36 % Vietnamese, 19 % African, 26 % Foreign Legion, 19 % French metropolitan troops 5 – memories of the fear of annihilation were not assuaged by victory. Some 2,000–3,000 French military personnel were killed in the fighting and 6,500 wounded 6. About 11,000 were captured of whom perhaps more than 4,000 died in captivity. Over all, the death

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FIG. 3. – Capitulation of French troops (Source: 50 Nam Chien Thang Lich Su Dien Bien Phu, p. 122).
ratio was around 60 per cent, 'a statistic to rival the very worst battles of
the twentieth century'. 7 Sixty-two French planes were destroyed, and
30 cannon, six tanks and 60,000 parachutes taken 8.

The 'Navarre Plan', named after its architect, General Henri-Eugène
Navarre, had been to lure the Viet Minh troops into the northwest of
Vietnam where they would be decimated by the superior tech-
nology and firepower of the French. Dien Bien Phu valley had been
converted to nine fortified strongholds on the rounded hills running
along the eastern edge of the valley: Gabrielle in the north, Anne-Marie
in the northwest, Béatrice in the northeast, Isabelle in the south,
and an inner ring of Huguette, Claudine, Dominique, Élaine and
François. But Navarre had not anticipated the Vietnamese tactics
– the use of massive numbers of troops 9 and their determination to
drag howitzers and mortars, anti-aircraft guns and Katyusha six-tube
rocket launchers onto the ridges overlooking the valley. In addition, the
mobilisation of farmers by the introduction of land reform policies
beneficial to them meant continuous delivery of supplies to the battle-
field.

Although Viet Minh troop fatalities were high, the losses were quickly
overlaid by official messages of dedication and heroism. As Winphret
Lulei, a Vietnamese historian based in Berlin, noted recently, 'The image
of thousands of non-combatants pushing bicycles laden with food and
ammunition to the front is a lasting symbol of the conflict' 10. Against
the Viet Minh manœuvres, General Henri Navarre’s decision to make a
stand at Dien Bien Phu is commonly seen as the critical error, and, for
the French, the battle remains a picture of defeat and humiliation. For
the captured French troops, therefore, it was a march of a totally
different kind as, divided into groups of 50, they were marched away to
jungle prison camps in Thanh-Hoa Province 11. For France as a nation,
the capitulation of the forces under Brigadier-General Christian de la
Croix de Castries was another symbol of acute soul-searching following
on from the 1940 fall to Nazi Germany, the establishment of the Vichy
puppet government and the collaboration with the Japanese in Indo-
china. It foreshadowed the loss of Algeria, the Suez debacle and the
rapid decline of French imperial power in the world in the middle of the
twentieth century.

Of course, as the term soul-searching indicates, the French in 1954
were not a monolithic group, as they are not now, and tensions ran high
following the defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Support at home for holding
on to the French colonies had been declining since the first decades of

7. Windrow, pp. 646-647.
9. According to D.J. Sagar, Major Political Events in Indo-China 1945-1990 (Facts on File
Inc., New York, 1991, p. 25), around 49,000 troops were used.

the century, especially for those French on the Left of the political spectrum. An anti-war sentiment had grown among the French general public and in the National Assembly, sickened by the eight years of inconclusive effort in Indochina since 1946. These tensions eventually contributed significantly to the downfall of the French government and the Fourth Republic.

In February 1993 socialist President François Mitterrand toured Dien Bien Phu, the first official visit by a French president to Vietnam since the collapse of their colonial enterprise in 1954. He was accompanied by Pierre Schoendoerffer, the film director whose ‘Dien Bien Phu’ had been released the previous year. According to H.R. Simpson, the two men ‘stood together at sunset at Dominique 2 while Schoendoerffer pointed out features of the now-peaceful terrain that had once been furrowed by shellfire’. In May 2004, with more than a touch of irony, the French language daily Le Courrier du Vietnam, published by the Vietnamese Information Agency, heralded the 50th anniversary of the battle under the banner ‘The spirit of Dien Bien Phu will live forever’, with a handwritten note from the Dien Bien Phu military leader, General Vo Nguyen Giap: ‘All my best wishes to the French men and women readers of the Courrier du Vietnam’.

Few people in the non-francophone West had heard much about Indochina before Dien Bien Phu. But the battle prompted people to discuss Vietnam. They learned there was ‘a full-scale war going on, not just a small conflict that a few French gendarmes could quash, as France had led them to believe’. Today, in retrospect, the battle is seen as one of the turning points not only in Vietnamese history but also in the broader history of Western intervention in Asia through colonisation and Cold War interference. The noted Vietnam scholar Stanley Karnow ranks it as ‘one of the great military engagements of history’ along with Agincourt, Waterloo and Gettysburg. The battle and the ground on which it occurred have trans-national regional significance as the major turning point in the French endeavour in Southeast Asia and the emergence of the modern states of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Withdrawal of the French led the United States into direct

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13. Sagar, p. 26; Stanley Karnow, quoted in Simpson, p. 81.
engagement in what became variously known as the Second Indochina War, the Vietnam War or the American War.

But beyond this, the battleground has world heritage significance as a key place in the history of decolonisation. General Giap's well known description of the victory at Dien Bien Phu sums it up: “the battle ‘shook the globe, resounding even in remote areas where people still lived in slavery, waking them up and giving them confidence to rise up’” 20. If places are ever added to the World Heritage List under the theme of world colonisation and decolonisation, Dien Bien Phu must be a leading candidate for inscription. World Heritage listing, which would give international recognition to the place and lead to economic benefits through cultural tourism, may, however, be jeopardised by the modernisation and urbanisation policies that are rapidly changing the character of Dien Bien Phu and threatening its heritage values.

Evolution: conflicting uses of the cultural landscape

In 1954, both France and the Viet Minh were racing against a deadline set by the timetable for the international conference at Geneva where the Indochina issue was to be discussed on 7 May. By the time the battle was over, Dien Bien Phu was ‘little more than rubble, corpses and freezing mountain winds’. But it was at this point that the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi made the decision that some troops would stay on, essentially for border security reasons. They lived ‘huddled in tattered thatched huts scattered across the valley’, mixing with the local indigenous peoples and surviving on sticky rice and wild vegetables collected deep in the forests 21.

Development in the area was slow until 1986 when the new doi moi (economic renovation) policy position breathed new life into Vietnam’s economy and local officials began to encourage residents to open private businesses. Dien Bien Phu was still a settlement of thatched huts, but to the town’s narrow traditional role in border security was added the objective of broader economic development. That is not to say that Dien Bien Phu’s strategic role declined; indeed, proximity to Lao border lands and the huge market of China help make it a strategic area for modern-day economic development.

In 2005 Dien Bien Phu city has a population of about 70,000, and this is projected to grow to 100,000 by the year 2010 and 150,000 by 2020. Located 600 km from Hanoi, distance and isolation have been retarding factors, and Dien Bien Phu Province is still one of the poorest regions of Vietnam. It is estimated that about 30 per cent of the provincial population live in poverty, while government subsidies represent more than

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90% of the provincial budget. But the number of flights from Hanoi to the city of Dien Bien Phu has increased to six a day in 2005, a new highway provides improved access to the north, and Dien Bien Phu is planned to become the economic hub of Vietnam's northwest.

Very few Vietnamese, even veterans, visited Dien Bien Phu before the 1990s, but more than 100,000 visitors came in 2003 (up approximately 25% on the previous year), contributing USD1.75M to the local economy. A massive leap in numbers – 'touristes de souvenirs' – occurred in 2004, the fiftieth anniversary of the battle. While Hoang Van Be, Deputy Chairman of the Dien Bien People's Committee, might argue that 'We don't want people to think Dien Bien is still the war-ravaged site of a battle that survives on charity', economic growth is being spearheaded through the development of leisure, ecological and cultural (including heritage) tourism.

The majority of tourists are Vietnamese, with French visitors a smaller although still significant group. There is some overlap in interests between the two national groups but also some divergences. Both groups take in the sites of fierce fighting in Dien Bien Phu, such as the hills A1 (Éliane), C1, D1 and E1, the French command centre focused on the de Castries tunnel, the nearby areas of Him Lam (Béatrice), Doc Lap (Gabrielle) and Hong Cum (Isabelle), the bridge of Muong Thanh, and the Dien Bien Phu Museum. The Vietnamese visit General Giap's campaign command headquarters at Muong Phang 40 kilometres away and the war graves and commemorative complexes in and around the town. The French, on the other hand, invariably make a special visit to the French memorial and to de Castries' bunker.

I have observed previously the powerful response of French tourists to Indochina nostalgia. 'French bonds with Vietnam are like those with Algeria and Tunisia, built on the memories of those still-living colons, who had been forced to return to France with the collapse of imperial power in 1954, or administrative and military personnel stationed in the colonies.' Other have made similar points, L.B. Kennedy and M.R. Williams, for example, remarking that

For those who once served in Vietnam or their families, travel to Vietnam may be about a pilgrimage, but into the past. Not unlike the pilgrimages undertaken after World War I to the battlefields at Flanders and the Menin Gate of Ypres, such journeys are centred on healing and renewal.

22. 'War on Poverty...', Outlook, pp. 8, 10.
23. 'War on Poverty...', Outlook, p. 9; Le Courrier du Vietnam, p. 9.
24. 'War on Poverty...', Outlook, p. 9.
DIEN BIEN PHU, VIETNAM

Fig. 4. – French memorial at Dien Bien Phu, maintained by local Vietnamese (c) W Logan.

Fig. 5. – Memorial to the 444 ethnic minority people killed during the aerial bombardment of Noong Nhai village, 25 April 1954 (c) W Logan.

Management: balancing urbanisation and heritage protection

For the Vietnamese officialdom today, the battle sites are not just considered a valuable resource for the province but also for the nation as a whole. As such, huge amounts of capital from the state budget have been invested to upgrade the complex with the aim of attracting tourists. In organising the anniversary celebrations in 2004, the People’s Committee asked the central government to open major border gates along the frontiers with Laos and China to help it attract tourists and it refurbished eight important historical sites, including the French blockhouses and bunkers, the Dien Bien Phu Museum and cemeteries. However, unlike the Western Front model for battle commemoration in Europe, where sites of memory are carefully and passionately protected, the integrity of the heritage site of Dien Bien Phu is in danger of being lost under the impact of rapid and insensitive economic and urban development. Because the rice fields are highly valued (for the best rice in Vietnam), they cannot be converted to other uses, and the town is developing as a series of fingers running into and around the hills that were the main sites of fighting during 1954. The principal axis, Boulevard 7 May, is a chief offender in this regard.

Vietnamese political, administrative and legal structures exacerbate the problem. In 1962 the Dien Bien Phu district was created within Lai Chau Province, but in 1994 a new province of Dien Bien was severed from Lai Chau, with Dien Bien Phu as the provincial capital. In what remains essentially a centralised socialist political system, the central Vietnamese government sets the strategic directions for economic and urban development throughout the country in its five-year plans. In the major growth areas of Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, experimentation with more decentralised and capitalistic forms of development have been occurring since 1986, but Dien Bien Phu is still regarded as a pioneer settlement and both political intervention in planning and the levels of subsidies for new growth are high. While Dien Bien Phu may have been raised in 1992 from the status of Commune to Town and in 2003 to City and have its own city administration responsible, the city planners are required to conform to the planning goals for urban growth in the 5,600 hectares of provincial territory that it administers that are imposed from Hanoi.

The urban population consists predominantly of immigrant Kinh Viet, especially coming from Thai Binh Province, and local ethnic minority people. Neither group projects its views strongly on how it wants Dien Bien Phu to develop. Public participation is limited in the

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28. ‘War on Poverty…’, Outlook, p. 9.

Fig. 6. – Fingers of urban development penetrate Dien Bien Phu's hills (c) W. Logan.

Fig. 7. – New major road grinds to halt at the boundary of the protected central heritage zone (c) W. Logan.

Vietnamese context. Never in history has there been a sustained practice of bottom-up decision-making involving the common people, although the current regime argues that its articulated hierarchy of political structures ensure the representation of popular views. A challenge of the future in Vietnam will be to broaden the understanding of citizenship to include taking greater control over one’s own life and local environment. There are signs of change, and conflicts over heritage protection, as against environmentally insensitive development projects, have been important in forging an early path towards such a wider conception of citizenship.

In assessing the likely success of management strategies, Vietnamese popular attitudes towards heritage and commemoration need to be taken into account. They differ significantly from their Western counterparts. Vietnamese people respect and commemorate heroes, ancestors and important historical incidents, including victories over enemies, and there is a strong feeling of obligation towards the fatherland. But the object of commemoration is often not the historical facts of people and events from the past but popular belief and mythical constructions of spiritual importance to current communities.

In terms of heritage conservation practice, the Western concept of ‘heritage’, as encapsulated in the Venice Charter for instance, has parallels to an extent in traditional Vietnamese thinking. It works well in relation to natural objects traditionally held sacred, like a tree or stone, in which case there should be no human intervention to change the object’s condition or location. However the traditional Vietnamese attitude towards ‘heritage’ items such as temples or pagodas is that they should be beautiful, grand and made from high quality materials, and consequently intervention to improve the condition of the pagoda is appropriate, even encouraged. It shows disrespect to the gods, heroes and ancestors to allow shrines to remain unimproved.

Battlefields, such as Dien Bien Phu, fall outside the traditional range of ‘heritage’ items. There were no great monuments to commemorate wars in Vietnam before the French colonial authorities erected memorials to the First World War, although the socialist regime picked up the practice in the 1970s as well as naming streets after important military leaders and decisive battles. Nevertheless, the memorialisation of Dien Bien Phu does not appear to be of great importance or interest to the general population of the town. In the tussle between further economic


and urban development and the protection of battle sites, the popular vote is likely to run strongly in favour of development.

On the other hand Western approaches to heritage are well understood and supported by Vietnamese scholars in Hanoi, Hue and other major cultural centres, and they are now being more widely diffused among the general population through the media, particularly in connection with the highly publicised national anniversary celebrations, such as the 50th anniversary of Dien Bien Phu in 2004. That so many Vietnamese domestic tourists visited the battle sites reflects the growing appreciation of places as heritage objects, at least among those strata of society with the discretionary spending power and leisure time to travel. In other words, it may be expected that over time a pro-heritage conservation stance directed at a broader range of heritage items will gradually become normal in Dien Bien Phu and elsewhere. In the meantime the main concern of the general Vietnamese population is to modernise the country quickly. They prefer to forget the conflict and pain of the past and focus more on current problems.

The most popular form of war-related monument from the Vietnam War is the Martyrs’ Cemeteries, which are built in almost all villages in rural areas or wards in cities, and there are a number of Unknown Martyrs’ Cemeteries around former battlefields. The Revolutionary Museums in the various provinces and major cities also perform a role in the official memorialisation of the nation’s loss during that conflict. Within Vietnamese families, the war dead are commemorated in much the same way as other dead family members, with no special shrines or memorials. All families have the deepest wish, however, to find the remains of their relatives and to bury them within the community. There are 300,000 Vietnamese still missing from the Vietnam War. There is little obvious anger directed at a personal level towards the country’s previous Western invaders. This partly explains the relaxed Vietnamese attitude towards commemorating the losses suffered by the aggressors, which is worthy of comment. The French at Dien Bien Phu and the Australians at Long Tan have been permitted to erect memorials, although so far this tolerance has not been extended to the Americans. In addition, though, the Vietnamese recognise that Dien Bien Phu is a place of pain for both Vietnam and France and therefore see it as appropriate for the French memorial to be permitted 33. The memorial was built by French veterans, with donations from the French public, on a site that was a gift from the Vietnamese Government and with assistance in the physical construction process from the local government. It is located in the middle of the conservation zone, and open to the general public.

From the conservationist’s point view, it is fortunate that Western attitudes to heritage place protection have become accepted in official


planning policy frameworks and, with decision making still being top-
down, the general public’s apathy towards heritage protection has
reduced practical implications. Nevertheless this divergence of attitu-
des produces a tension that is impossible to resolve to everyone’s
satisfaction, although in cultural tourism there is at least a strong
argument about the economic return that comes to the community
through the maintenance of heritage sites. But this merely shifts the
tension away from strategic planning arena and focusing it onto the
management practices at the sites themselves. As Hue-Tam Ho Tai
commented:

Commemorative sites such as these play a double function: as building
blocks in the state’s narrative of glorious war and triumphant revolution, and
as fodder for entertainment. In an uneasy combination of the epic and the
ironic, they are expected to sustain memory and generate money all at
once. 34

In general terms, the Dien Bien Phu People’s Committee is aware
that it must offer more services to attract tourists, and that greater
attention needs to be paid to satisfying people who want to learn about
Vietnam’s history through the provision of information desks at histori-
cal sites and brochures in English and Vietnamese. More interesting
interpretation techniques, such as including communication and other
military equipment in the currently empty tunnels, have also been
advocated 35. Site security is carried out by voluntary guards and has
been insufficient to prevent looting and graffiti (as on the French
memorial). Some modification has already been allowed to enable site
visits by Western tourists, such as widening the entrance of the Giap
command bunker from 80 cm to 1.2 metres in order to accommodate
the larger size of Western bodies. The People’s Committee is also
encouraging ethnic groups in 15 villages around Dien Bien Phu to allow
tourists to stay in their homes so that they can explore the culture and
lifestyles 36. Vietnamese governments were once afraid of contact
between tourists and local people but are now more relaxed and able to
exploit economic possibilities.

The Ministry of Culture and Information (MOCI), the central
authority responsible for heritage sites, sees the expansion of Dien Bien
Phu town as the most direct and greatest danger to the integrity of the
complex 37. In 2000, it commissioned Professor Hoang Dao Kinh to
consider and advise on the situation. His report – MOCI 2000 –
recognised the ‘great exploitative potential of the historic vestiges in
Dien Bien Phu enhanced and improved by suitable urban planning’.

35. ‘War on Poverty...’ and ‘Thai Man Dedicates Life to Preserving Legendary Out-
post After Battle’, Outlook, pp. 10, 11.
36. ‘War on Poverty...’, Outlook, p. 9.
37. MOCI, unpagedinated.
and confirmed the urgent need for an urban conservation plan for the 
whole complex, and for other socioeconomic and development plans to 
be adjusted to fit the conservation objectives.

The ‘basic orientation’ of the MOCI response to the Kinh’s 2000 
report includes investment to:

- Record fully the places
- Restore and preserve significant sites such as hill A1 (enemy trenches and 
  blockhouses, Viet Minh trenches, etc.), the de Castries vault and commu-
  nication trenches, Muong Phang headquarters complex (vaults, houses, 
  pathways, observatory, the meeting place where the victory was celebrated, 
  native forest preservation), Him Lam Hill, Doc Lap hill, and places used to 
  serve the Viet Minh campaign (Pha Din Pass, Than Oua cave, tracks used 
  to drag artillery through the mountains)
- Increase the number of objects on display at these sites to recreate the 
  battle context more convincingly
- Install monuments (such as the Victory Monument) and plaques to memo-
  rialise and commemorate the most significant places
- Extend the Dien Bien Phu Museum and enhance its displays
- Protect the historical landscape and its heritage places while ensuring the 
  upgrading of technical infrastructure (drainage, electricity supply, communica-
  tions between sites)
- Restore the Tii village
- Integrate the conservation, repair and enhancement of heritage features 
  with other economic activities such as tourism, crafts and fine arts, building 
  construction, transportation, irrigation and forestry
- Train professionals and administrators to conserve, interpret and manage 
  sites.

By 2005, much destruction of war-related heritage values of the 
cultural landscape has occurred: roads now cut into the hills, most 
trenches in the Nuong Thanh field are gone; many historical objects 
have been incorrectly reconstructed; new monuments erected in the 
site; rapid expansion of the city changes the shape of the battlefield; the 
cultural landscape is being radically re-configured. However some vic-
tories have also been won. The government authorities in Dien Bien 
Phu, if not the general public, are now aware of the significance of the 
battle sites and recognise that their implementation plans need to take 
heritage protection into account. The most dramatic example of this 
has been the decision to halt the construction of a major road that was 
originally designed to cut through a key battlefield precinct near the de 
Castries vault and Muong Thanh Bridge.

The wider implications: a battle site, metaphoric and actual

Not only is Dien Bien Phu a key place in terms of the formation of 
independent Vietnam, but it is also the site of a broader battle continu-
ing into the twenty-first century – a battle between tradition and

national identity formation on the one hand, and modernity and urbanisation on the other – that is both an actuality for the local community in the town and district of Dien Bien Phu and a metaphor for the difficult transformation of post-dai moi Vietnamese society generally. ‘Let today’s generations bring into play Dien Bien Phu’s spirit’ cried General Vo Nguyen Giap, teacher-soldier who led the Vietnamese to victory, in an address in Hanoi at anniversary celebrations of the 5 May 1954 victory, ‘to resolutely be active and creative [sic] in the acceleration of the modernisation and industrialisation of Vietnam, in building and protecting the motherland, to put a strong end to the current backward situation, so as to foster our country’s development’ 38.

At a rally in Dien Bien Phu to mark the 50th anniversary, General Pham Van Tra, Vietnam’s Defence Minister and member of the Vietnamese Communist Party’s Politburo, called on members of all ethnic groups living in the northwest to maintain their ‘long tradition of national unity, heroic struggle and creative labour’ to boost socio-economic development 39. The presence of Lao delegations from Phongsaly, Luang Prabang and Oudomsay, and a delegation from Yunnan, China, marked not only Dien Bien Phu’s crossroads character but also Vietnam’s ambition to maintain influence over neighbouring Laos.

General Tra identified the key elements that had allowed the anti-colonial resistance to succeed in 1954 – dedication of the Vietnamese working class to the ideals of independence and liberty, and absolute confidence in the revolutionary direction provided by president Ho Chi Minh and the Party. According to Le Bich Ha’s press report of the speech, the Defence Minister was convinced that, despite being ‘faced with sabotage plots by hostile forces’, with the spirit of Dien Bien Phu, the traditions of the nation, the highly experienced direction of the Party, firmly consolidated power, national solidarity and friendly relations extended with all countries around the world, Vietnam will succeed in its nation building program to become a prosperous country, endowed with stable policies and sense of security 40.

The hostile forces to which Tra referred are one of the three major threats facing Vietnam that were identified in a resolution adopted by the ninth plenum of the VCP’s Central Committee, the others being economic underdevelopment and social problems arising from corruption 41. According to a leading expert on the post-Cold War Vietnamese political transition, Carlyle Thayer, the scenario feared by the VCP and

Fig. 8. – Victory Memorial at Dien Bien Phu, constructed in time for the 50th anniversary celebrations (c) W. Logan.

Fig. 9. – Vietnamese veterans at 50th anniversary celebrations in Dien Bien Phu (c) Billy Penfold.

security officials is that hostile external forces will combine with internal dissidents and exploit such issues as human rights and religious freedom to undermine Vietnam’s one-party state.42

Dien Bien Phu can thus be seen as a metaphor for Vietnamese identity under challenge – or at least the identity promoted by the political regime currently in power. As Hue-Tam Ho Tai notes, commemorative fever is running high in ‘late Socialist Vietnam’ and ‘threatening to blanket the Vietnamese landscape with monuments to the worship of the past’. This fever, he adds, is ‘not just a salvage operation designed to preserve traces of a fast-vanishing past before they obliterated by the forces of relentless capitalist-style modernization’; the real answer lies in the need felt by the Vietnamese leadership to promote ‘a version of the past that inscribes it as the legitimate inheritor of the Vietnamese patriotic tradition and the dominant force in the recent history of the country’.43 The national and provincial authorities will continue to try to contain the metaphoric battle between heritage, socialist development and creeping capitalism.

The official effort of the local authorities to both protect the heritage values of the Dien Bien Phu cultural landscape and, concurrently, encourage urban development represents a microcosmic and actual version of the larger ideological struggle. To balance the two objectives is clearly difficult and the case study suggests that the heritage may lose out. Unlike the French who have decided not to proceed with the construction of a third Paris airport on the Somme battlefields at Chaumines,44 Dien Bien Phu’s provincial and municipal governments are likely to put development first. The local authorities are pushed in this direction by the national government in Hanoi, which seems not to see – or at least fails to articulate – the contradiction between such development goals and maintaining the heroic narrative that has served the regime so well. No doubt there will continue to be some packaging of selected historical features – Dien Bien Phu’s ‘heritage’ conserved for domestic and international tourist consumption – but the distortion that this entails means that the authenticity of the historic battlefield as a ‘site de mémoire’ will have been lost. The next 20 years will tell whether this actual struggle portends the resolution of the wider metaphoric battle, the eclipse of current ideological representations of the Vietnamese state and its people, and the emergence of a society that is less trammeled by official conceptions of heritage but impoverished in an increasing detachment from its historical roots and memories.

42. Thayer, p. 12.