



Flattening the Highlands: Sa Pa and the Reconfiguration of Inter-regional Connectivity Patterns in Contemporary Vietnam



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[*Abstract*]

This study analyzes the spatial and socio-economic transformation of Sa Pa, evolving from an isolated colonial hill station into a key tourism growth pole in the Doi Moi era. Engaging with James C. Scott's concept of "Zomia," which views the highlands as a space of "state evasion" and isolation, this paper does not refute Zomia but examines its explanatory limits in the post-1990 context of Sa Pa, where deep integration into national and global flows has become the dominant condition. By examining the role of large-scale infrastructure and tourism projects (such as the Noi Bai-Lao Cai Expressway, the Fansipan cable car, and high-end hotels) alongside the surge of private investment, the study proposes the concept of the "Flat Plateau." This concept elucidates how technology and capital have "flattened" geographical barriers, transforming Sa Pa from a periphery into a strategic "node" within the Kunming (China)-Lao Cai-Hanoi (Vietnam) economic corridor. The findings not only reposition the role of highland urban areas within inter-regional networks but also highlight emerging challenges

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regarding social rupture, cultural commodification, and inequality in benefit distribution, thereby suggesting policy implications for sustainable development.

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I . Introduction

Sa Pa, originally a climatic hill station established by the French colonialists in the early twentieth century, once functioned as a “cool periphery” equipped with railway infrastructure and villas serving the ruling elite (Michaud 2010; Bui Thi Huong 2023). Undergoing historical fluctuations, particularly during the post-Doi Moi period since the 1990s, this town has executed a spectacular spatial transformation to become a key tourism growth pole (Cahill 2018; Srikham 2019). The presence of mega-infrastructure projects such as the Noi Bai-Lao Cai Expressway and the Fansipan cable car, alongside a massive influx of private investment, has repositioned Sa Pa, fundamentally altering the geographical and economic character of the region (Asian Development Bank 2018; Prime Minister 2018).

Despite this dynamic development reality, prevalent discourses on the Vietnamese highlands remain frequently framed within stereotypes of “isolation,” “backwardness,” and passive waiting for opening from the lowlands (Scott 2009; Van Schendel 2002). This mindset reinforces binary oppositions such as center- periphery or lowland-upland, where the highlands are viewed as objects requiring “civilizing,” administrative standardization, and sedentarization (Jonsson 2010; Lieberman 2010). This approach inadvertently overlooks the agency and intrinsic connectivity of these territories within the context of globalization (Wouters and Heneise 2022). The reality in contemporary Sa Pa presents a starkly different picture: it is no longer a geographically isolated “oasis,” but rather operates as a strategic “node” within inter-regional flows, representing a convergence of investment capital, migrant labor, international tourists, digital information, and central planning (Hoang et al. 2020; Prime Minister 2023; Tappe 2018).

Theoretically, James C. Scott's concept of Zomia (2009) once provided a critical lens, viewing the Southeast Asian highlands as a space of "state evasion," where residents maintained a distance from lowland power (Scott 2009; Michaud 2010). Recent scholarship, however, has interrogated the contemporary relevance of this framework (Jonsson 2010; Lieberman 2010; Leadbetter and Sastrawan 2024). Critiques indicate that the roles of the market, religion, and the post-colonial state have blurred the "non-state" nature of upland society; simultaneously, the penetration of modern infrastructure renders Zomia "porous" and permeable rather than isolated (Wouters and Heneise 2022; Van Schendel 2002). In Vietnam, reality demonstrates a strong "hybridity," where communities both rely on state-enterprise networks to generate profit and continuously renegotiate issues of identity and rights (Tappe 2018; Phan Duy Quang 2024).

Based on the above overview, this article identifies significant gaps that need to be filled. First, there is a lack of a framework analyzing Sa Pa as a strategic "node" within the cross-border economic corridor (Kunming-Lao Cai-Hanoi), a convergence point for expressways and international tourist flows (Asian Development Bank 2018). Second, there are few in-depth analyses of the benefit-risk sharing mechanism ("who gets what, where"), particularly regarding the proportion of value retained locally versus that leaking back to capital centers (Cahill 2018; Hoang et al. 2020). Finally, a direct dialogue is needed between the post-1990 reality of Sa Pa and the Zomia thesis: when the strategy of "state evasion" is no longer viable, what concepts need to be calibrated to explain the integration of the highlands into global flows?

The overarching objective of this study is therefore to reposition Sa Pa from an "isolated periphery" to a "Flat Plateau." This concept is proposed herein to elucidate the process by which highland spaces are "flattened" of topographical, institutional, and informational barriers through the penetration of hard infrastructure (expressways, cable cars), soft infrastructure (planning, incentives), and digital infrastructure (online travel agencies, social media). Through this lens, the research aims to decipher how a mountainous locality is deeply integrated and embedded into

national and regional socio-economic networks, rather than being marginalized from development (Ha Van Sieu 2023; Wouters and Heneise 2022). The article makes a critical dialogue with Scott's argument: rather than asserting that Zomia is "wrong," we argue that the framework has reached its explanatory limits in contexts where deep infrastructure and market penetration have rendered "state evasion" an increasingly costly and rarely chosen survival strategy (Leadbetter and Sastrawan 2024; Kakati 2025).

II . Theoretical Framework and Methodology

2.1. Theoretical Framework

2.1.1. Zomia and Debates on Highland "Isolation"

In academic discourse on mainland Southeast Asia, the concept of Zomia, proposed by Scott (2009), has become a crucial reference point (Scott 2009; Michaud 2010). Scott argues that this vast highland region, spanning multiple nations, is inhabited by communities practicing the art of "not being governed" (Scott 2009; Van Schendel 2002). Accordingly, the rugged terrain serves not only as a physical barrier but also as a political resource, enabling residents to maintain non-state social structures, swidden agriculture economies, and identity fluidity to evade control, taxation, and conscription from lowland power centers (Dove et al. 2011; Lieberman 2010).

Post-Zomia scholars such as Jean Michaud, Sarah Turner, and Tania Li have, however, offered sharp critiques of this perspective in the contemporary context (Michaud 2010; Li 2001; Hoang et al. 2020). First, the robust penetration of the modern state through sedentarization programs, national education, and administrative management has eroded traditional "evasion" capabilities (Jonsson 2010; Tappe 2018). Second, market dynamics and frontier capitalism have transformed the highlands from a refuge into a zone for resource extraction (timber, minerals, hydropower) and tourism (Wouters and Heneise 2022). Most recently, Leadbetter and Sastrawan (2024) have empirically tested the proposition that "mountains kill states" across Southeast Asian highland

communities, concluding that terrain alone is a weak predictor of state evasion once one accounts for infrastructure penetration, religion, and market dynamics. Their finding directly speaks to the Sa Pa case: where Hanoi - Lao Cai is now reachable in under four hours by expressway, the “mountain” as a political resource has largely lost its frictional power.

Consequently, recent studies suggest shifting the analytical focus: from viewing the highlands as a space of “resistance” to a space of “negotiation” (Herriman and Winarnita 2016; Phan Duy Quang 2024). Here, isolation is no longer a constant; instead, indigenous communities actively engage in external linkages to maximize benefits while simultaneously seeking to maintain a certain degree of autonomy within interdependence (Kakati 2025; Le, Cushman and Jonsson 2016). This is what we term the “post-Zomia condition”: a condition in which Zomia’s analytical purchase is not absent but has receded to specific micro-spaces of identity negotiation, while the dominant logic of the regional economy has become one of state-market integration.

2.1.2. Inter-regional and Transnational Connectivity Theory

To transcend “methodological nationalism,” which often limits the unit of analysis within national borders, this article adopts theories of inter-regional connectivity and the “space of flows” (Van Schendel 2002; Wouters and Heneise 2022). In the context of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), economic corridors (such as Kunming-Lao Cai-Hanoi-Hai Phong) are regarded as the backbone of development (Asian Development Bank 2018). These theories emphasize the role of transport infrastructure (expressways, railways) in “time-space compression,” transforming border buffer zones into vital links within global supply chains (Prime Minister 2018).

Under this approach, the highlands are no longer viewed as a “developmental backwater” or a geographical barrier but rather function as a “transit corridor” or an “interface node” (Le, Cushman and Jonsson 2016; Tappe 2018). This connectivity occurs not only at the physical level (goods, people) but also at the symbolic level (tourism imagery, digital information). The analysis of Sa Pa must be

situated within this framework: not as a town located at the “end of the road,” but as a transit hub within the flows of capital and tourists between China, Vietnam, and the international market (Asian Development Bank 2018; VnEconomy 2024).

2.1.3. The Flat Plateau Concept

Synthesizing critiques of Zomia and connectivity theory, this article proposes the analytical framework of the “Flat Plateau.” This concept appropriates Thomas Friedman’s idea of a “flat world” but applies it specifically to the socio-political terrain of the highlands (Scott 2009; Wouters and Heneise 2022).

The Flat Plateau is defined as a state in which the disadvantages of topography and distance inherent to the highlands are deliberately “flattened” through three layers of infrastructure: (i) hard infrastructure—expressways, cable cars, and airports serve to eliminate the “friction of terrain,” shortening access time from central hubs (Asian Development Bank 2018; Prime Minister 2018, 2021); (ii) soft infrastructure—policy mechanisms, specific planning, and investment incentives enable capital flows to easily penetrate and operate (Ministry of Construction 2023; Prime Minister 2023; Nguyen Thanh Minh 2019); and (iii) digital infrastructure—social networks and online travel agencies (OTAs) flatten information asymmetry, delivering indigenous imagery directly to the global market (Cahill 2018; Srikham 2019).

Unlike Zomia, where terrain is utilized to separate, the Flat Plateau is a space where terrain is modified to connect (Michaud 2010; Jonsson 2010). Within this space, the highlands become a “stage” or “platform” for modern economic activities. However, this “flattening” does not equate to equality; it creates a frictionless surface favorable for large capital flows (corporations, investors) to glide through rapidly, while vulnerable local communities risk sliding off this surface if they lack the necessary “traction” in terms of social capital and skills (Hoang et al. 2020; Phan Duy Quang 2024).

2.1.4. Research Overview on Sa Pa and Current Gaps

The extant body of research on Sa Pa has constructed a rich

academic archive, oscillating between analytical poles ranging from anthropology and economics to architecture. Prominent among these is the stream of anthropological and ethnographic research, notably Michaud and Turner (2000, 2017), which deeply deciphers micro-livelihood strategies and the identity transformation of H'mông and Dao communities under tourism pressure. Paralleling this approach are quantitative analyses of economic value chains and environmental carrying capacity, alongside inquiries into the construction of colonial heritage and the "reinvention" of tradition to cater to tourist tastes (Cahill 2018; Srikham 2019; Bui Thi Huong 2023).

Despite providing a robust system of empirical data, most of the aforementioned works tend to frame Sa Pa as a "container," that is, focusing on dissecting internal dynamics within the town's administrative boundaries (Lao Cai Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2023; Lao Cai Provincial People's Committee 2023). What remains absent is an open spatial perspective that views Sa Pa as a strategic "node" within a broader inter-regional structure. In particular, there is no analytical framework that directly links the physical transformation of hard infrastructure (expressways, cable cars) to the restructuring of socio-political power towards the proposed direction of "flattening" (Prime Minister 2018, 2023). This article aims to bridge this theoretical gap.

2.2. Research Methodology

To decode the process of spatial transformation and the repositioning of Sa Pa from an isolated periphery to a Flat Plateau within an inter-regional network, this study applies a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis with quantitative data synthesis (Cahill 2018; Hoang et al. 2020). The research strategy is designed on the principle of triangulation across three dimensions: historical depth, empirical data fluctuations, and an interdisciplinary lens.

First, the method of historical and policy document analysis plays a foundational role in reconstructing the process of Sa Pa's spatial production. The study examines colonial archives, including

reports, maps, and records from the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) and the French colonial administration in the early twentieth century (Bui Thi Huong 2023; To Ngoc Lien 2023). This aims to clarify Sa Pa's original objective as a hill station designed to control the highlands and serve the ruling class, creating an initial segregation from indigenous communities (Michaud 2010). In contrast to the current period, the article focuses on analyzing the system of contemporary policy documents, ranging from the Prime Minister's master plan decisions to Lao Cai province's infrastructure development resolutions (Prime Minister 2023; Lao Cai Provincial Party Committee 2025; Ministry of Construction 2023). This analytical step helps decode the role of "soft infrastructure" or institutional mechanisms that have paved the way for the penetration of mega-projects and private capital (Nguyen Thanh Minh 2019).

Paralleling the documentary analysis, the study employs statistical data synthesis to provide empirical evidence regarding the degree of "spatial compression" and the explosion of economic flows. Secondary data were collected from the Lao Cai Statistical Yearbook, the General Statistics Office (GSO), and specialized tourism reports during the 1995-2023 period (Lao Cai Provincial People's Committee 2023, 2024; Lao Cai Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2023). The analytical focus is placed on indicators of visitor growth, the structure of hard infrastructure investment capital (transport, cable cars), and mechanical population shifts (VnEconomy 2024). These figures not only quantify development but also serve as concrete evidence for the argument that Sa Pa is operating as a network node attracting and distributing resources (Asian Development Bank 2018).

To highlight structural changes, a historical-comparative analysis is utilized to contrast two key periods: pre- and post-Doi Moi (Renovation). By juxtaposing the Sa Pa of the subsidy period, where connections were administrative, military, and semi-isolated, against the Sa Pa of the integration era dominated by the market economy and cross-border infrastructure, the research clarifies the ruptures and continuities in the development paradigm (Tappe 2018; Phan Duy Quang 2024). This comparison serves as the primary tool

to critique stereotypes regarding highland “backwardness,” while simultaneously pointing out the shift from a state of “state evasion” (per Zomia theory) to a state of deep integration and interdependence (Scott 2009; Dove et al. 2011; Leadbetter and Sastrawan 2024).

Finally, to address the complexity of the research subject, the article employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating analytical tools from geography, anthropology, and development studies. Specifically, the theory of “space of flows” in geography is used to explain the impact of expressways and digital infrastructure; while anthropological perspectives on agency help analyze how indigenous communities negotiate and adapt to pressures from touristification (Herriman and Winarnita 2016; Kakati 2025). This combination allows Sa Pa to be viewed not only as a transforming physical space but also as a social space where power relations, economic interests, and cultural identities are continuously restructured.

Limitations of the methodology must be acknowledged. The study relies on secondary statistics from official Vietnamese sources, which may underrepresent informal economic activity and the “leakage” of tourism revenue back to investors based outside Lao Cai. The analysis of indigenous agency draws primarily on the existing ethnographic literature (Michaud and Turner 2000, 2017; Hoang et al. 2020) rather than fresh fieldwork; this is a deliberate trade-off given the article’s focus on macro-spatial restructuring, but it bounds the strength of micro-level inference. Future research could complement this article with longitudinal household surveys to test the “traction” hypothesis advanced in section 2.1.3.

III. Research Findings and Discussion

3.1. Historical and Social Background

To comprehend Sa Pa’s positioning as a Flat Plateau of connectivity in the contemporary era, its urban development must be situated within a volatile historical trajectory. The history of Sa Pa is not a linear progression of development, but rather a sequence of ruptures

and reconstructions, where physical and social spaces have been continuously reshaped by distinct political projects: from the colonial ambition of constructing an “island of civilization,” through the wartime phase of a “military buffer zone,” to the explosion of the market economy during the Doi Moi era (Bui Thi Huong 2023; To Ngoc Lien 2023).

3.1.1. Sa Pa under French Colonial Rule: Hill Station as an Instrument of Highland Control

The formation of the urban entity of Sa Pa stems from a quintessentially colonial project aimed at controlling and exploiting the highlands. In the winter of 1903, in an effort to map and expand territorial control, a geodetic survey team of the French army “discovered” the Lo Suoi Tung plateau at the foot of the Hoang Lien range (Bui Thi Huong 2023). Recognizing the unique potential of the temperate climate, the then-Résident of Lao Cai, Toures, submitted a report to the Governor-General of Indochina, proposing the establishment of a hill station. This proposal was strongly reinforced by the research article “The Convalescent Resort” (1910) in the Indochine journal, shaping the vision to transform this location into an ideal summer retreat for the ruling class in Tonkin starting from 1914 (To Ngoc Lien 2023; Jennings 2011).

This process of “forced urbanization” was accompanied by the establishment of modern technical infrastructure, the initial tools to “flatten” the remoteness of the highlands. In 1915, the Cat Cat power station (100 kW capacity) and the first military convalescent facility were completed (Bui Thi Huong 2023). Subsequently, under the expansion plan approved by Governor-General Albert Sarraut in 1919, the institutions of a modern city successively appeared: a post office and bus station (1920), a clean water supply system (1930), and a wired telephone network connecting directly to Hanoi (1931). Notably, the upgrade of the road connecting Lao Cai town to Sa Pa in 1924 reduced travel time to just three hours by automobile, marking a turning point in compressing the physical space between the mountains and the delta (Bui Thi Huong 2023; Michaud 2010).

Socially, Sa Pa during this period operated as a miniature “European enclave” with the presence of luxury hotels such as

Chapa, L'hôtel Métropole, and approximately 200 private villas (as of 1943), typified by the large-scale villa of Magne (Bui Thi Huong 2023). This spatial structure created a distinct stratification: a comfortable, “civilized” town center reserved for the French and the elite, relatively segregated from the surrounding H’mông and Dao villages, who played the role of food and labor providers but remained on the periphery of urban enjoyment (Michaud 2010; Tappe 2018).

3.1.2. The 1954-1986 Period: Sa Pa in Strategic Regional Planning and Semi-Isolation

Post-1945, Sa Pa’s function as a resort was disrupted and supplanted by a military-defense mandate, plunging the town into a prolonged period of “hibernation” and severe devastation (Michaud 2010). Immediately following the August Revolution, the Northwest region became a critical battlefield contested by the Viet Minh, French colonial troops, and local bandit forces. The destruction culminated in April 1951, when retreating French forces implemented a scorched-earth policy, bombing and destroying most of the infrastructure and villas constructed previously, thereby almost entirely erasing the colonial urban morphology (Bui Thi Huong 2023; To Ngoc Lien 2023).

Following the Dien Bien Phu victory (1954), as the North constructed socialism and concentrated resources on the resistance war against the United States, investment capital for the Northwest remained extremely limited. Sa Pa fell into a state of stagnation, with tourism activities rendered virtually paralyzed. This condition was further exacerbated during the Sino-Vietnamese Border War of 1979. Although not the primary front, Sa Pa endured fierce devastation when Chinese troops occupied the town from March 5 to March 16, 1979 (To Ngoc Lien 2023). Prior to withdrawal, the opposing forces destroyed much of the remaining infrastructure and housing (Bui Thi Huong 2023). Consequently, for over three decades (1954 - 1986), Sa Pa existed in a state of “semi-isolation.” Its geographical proximity to the border positioned it as a defensive “buffer zone” (or shield) rather than an economic growth pole (Tappe 2018). Infrastructural ruptures and investment deficits

disrupted the inter-regional connectivity model, reverting Sa Pa to a relatively closed state where a subsistence economy and forestry played the dominant roles (Michaud and Turner 2000).

3.1.3. Post-Doi Moi (1986-1990s): Open-Door Policy and Initial Investment in Tourism

The Sixth National Party Congress (1986), with its Doi Moi policy, created a significant institutional impetus, paving the way for Sa Pa's resurgence. Change did not commence immediately with physical structures, but rather with "soft infrastructure" in the form of new legal frameworks: the Law on Foreign Investment (1987), the Law on Private Enterprises (1990), and the Land Law (1993) (Michaud and Turner 2000). These policies dismantled the state monopoly, allowing the private sector and foreign capital flows to participate in the reconstruction of service infrastructure (To Ngoc Lien 2023).

The first signals of recovery appeared in the early 1990s. In 1991, domestic and foreign tourists began to return. By 1992, Sa Pa welcomed 34 international delegations seeking investment cooperation opportunities—nascent indicators of the globalization process (Bui Thi Huong 2023). Rapid growth was recorded when visitor numbers in 1994 increased 3.5 times compared to 1993. By 1995, the town's service supply capacity had surged, with over 30 accommodation facilities (including both state-owned and private entities), a 15-fold increase compared to 1992, serving over 10,000 visitors (Lao Cai Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2023; Lao Cai Provincial People's Committee 2023).

Since 2017, Sa Pa Tourism Area has been officially recognized as a National Tourism Zone under Prime Minister's Decision No. 1927/QĐ-TTg, issued on December 1, 2017. The designation of Sa Pa as a National Tourism Zone, coupled with its elevation to town status (thị xã), marked a significant milestone in the region's development. In 2019, Sa Pa welcomed an estimated 3.294 million visitors, representing a 29.4% increase compared to 2018. Revenue from tourism services reached VND 9.3 trillion, a 68% surge from the previous year. By 2020, Sa Pa had 690 tourism accommodation establishments, reflecting a 247% increase (393 additional facilities) since the beginning of the term. These included two five-star hotels,

two four-star hotels, and 30 hotels rated between one and three stars, offering a total of 9,000 rooms.

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) severely disrupted the tourism sector globally, with Lao Cai Province and Sa Pa experiencing particularly acute impacts. However, the local tourism industry demonstrated remarkable resilience, rebounding swiftly. By the end of 2022, Lao Cai had received 4.6 million visitors, generating VND 16.38 trillion in tourism revenue. In 2023, marking the 120th anniversary of Sa Pa's establishment, the province attracted 7 million visitors, with total tourism revenue reaching VND 22 trillion. Notably, Sa Pa Town alone accounted for approximately 3.5 million visitors, contributing over VND 12 trillion in revenue. This demonstrates the town's central role as a tourist destination and international hub (Lao Cai Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2023).

3.2. Investment Flows and Spatial Transformation

Sa Pa's metamorphosis over the past two decades transcends mere growth in visitor numbers; it represents the outcome of a vigorous process of spatial restructuring propelled by the convergence of massive capital flows. Evolving from a town reliant on extant natural endowments, Sa Pa has become a "landing zone" for mega-projects, where state and private resources collaborate in the endeavor of "spatial compression" and the commodification of the landscape (Michaud and Turner 2000).

3.2.1. Investment in Infrastructure

The primary impetus reshaping Sa Pa stems from the synergy between public investment capital (skeletal infrastructure) and capital from private economic corporations (service infrastructure). Regarding the State, its developmental role is manifested through breaking the transport isolation of the Northwest region. A historic milestone is the Noi Bai-Lao Cai Expressway, funded with USD 1.5 billion in ODA and opened to traffic in 2014 (Asian Development Bank 2018). This infrastructure reduced travel time from Hanoi to Lao Cai from 7-8 hours to under four hours, creating the most critical hard infrastructure impetus to "flatten" geographical distance

(Bui Thi Huong 2023). Continuing this momentum, the Sa Pa Airport project with a total investment of nearly VND 7,000 billion (commenced in 2022) and the plan to upgrade the Lao Cai-Hai Phong railway are completing a multimodal connectivity network (Prime Minister 2021, 2023).

Regarding the private sector, Sa Pa has witnessed the influx of “anchor investors” with mega-projects valued at trillions of VND. Exemplary is the Sun Group with the Fansipan Legend cable car project (investment capital of VND 4,400 billion), a structure that has completely altered the mode of access to the “Roof of Indochina,” transforming an arduous two-day trek into a 15-minute excursion (VnEconomy 2024). Alongside this are large-scale projects such as Muong Hoa Cultural Park (VND 4,700 billion), the high-rise service complex on Hoang Lien Street (over VND 1,000 billion), and the Lady Hill project (VND 700 billion) (Lao Cai Provincial People’s Committee 2023). The participation of major enterprises such as Saigontourist, Bitexco, and the Petroleum Group raised the total number of accommodation units to 690 by 2020, creating a vibrant and fiercely competitive service market right within the heritage core zone (Lao Cai Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2023).

3.2.2. International Investment: Hotels, Resorts, and Cross-border Tourism Linkages

While Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in hard infrastructure does not constitute as significant a proportion as domestic capital, the international element plays a pivotal role in defining the prestige and operational standards, the “software,” of Sa Pa. The presence of global management brands has repositioned Sa Pa on the map of high-end tourism. Exemplary is the collaboration between Sun Group and the Accor Group (France) to operate Hotel de la Coupole-MGGallery. Similarly, Topas Ecolodge, a project featuring Danish investment elements, has established benchmarks for sustainable eco-tourism. These projects not only generate revenue but also import international standard management protocols, facilitating Sa Pa’s attraction of high-spending tourist segments from Europe and North America. Furthermore, within the context of the Kunming-Lao Cai-Hanoi-Hai Phong Economic Corridor, Sa Pa is

benefiting from indirect investment flows that promote cross-border connectivity (Prime Minister 2023). Infrastructural completion enables Sa Pa to capture overland tourist flows from southwest China, while simultaneously becoming a strategic stopover in trans-Indochina tourism circuits, linking with Luang Prabang (Laos) and Chiang Mai (Thailand) (Asian Development Bank 2018; Leong et al. 2017).

3.2.3. Urban Spatial Transformation: Administrative Expansion, Architectural and Landscape Change

Under the pressure of capital flows, Sa Pa's spatial structure has undergone profound transformations, shifting from a "rural settlement" model to a "compact city." The establishment of the Sa Pa town-level municipality in 2019, coupled with the annexation of neighboring communes, significantly expanded administrative boundaries, creating space for new planning schemes. However, the immediate consequence has been a radical alteration of the architectural landscape. The town center has witnessed intense "concretization" with a high construction density of high-rise hotels, restaurants, and entertainment complexes. Vernacular architecture (earthen-walled houses, pơ-mu wood roofs) is gradually being supplanted by European neo-classical styles or hybrid modern architecture, catering to the visual consumption and "check-in" preferences of mass tourists (To Ngoc Lien 2023). This transformation is not limited to the core zone but has spilled over into buffer zones such as the Muong Hoa Valley, Ta Van, and Cat Cat. Agricultural and forestry land funds are gradually being converted into commercial and service land, leading to the fragmentation of the natural ecosystem and exerting immense pressure on environmental infrastructure (Hoang et al. 2020).

3.2.4. Repositioning Sa Pa: From "Highland Town" to "Regional-International Connectivity Hub"

All the capital and spatial dynamics mentioned above have led to a fundamental repositioning of Sa Pa's role. From a "town in the mist" characterized by a romanticized, isolated, and passive image awaiting visitors, Sa Pa is now planned and operated as a proactive "growth pole" (Prime Minister 2023). According to the General

Master Plan to 2040, Sa Pa is designated as a regional-international connectivity hub, targeting 8 million visitors by 2030 and 12 million by 2040 (Prime Minister 2023; Lao Cai Provincial People's Committee 2023). The concept of the Flat Plateau is most clearly manifested here: Sa Pa is no longer a dead end, but a vital intersection. It serves as a transit gateway between the Northern Highlands of Vietnam, the vast Chinese market, and the ASEAN tourism network (Asian Development Bank 2018).

3.3. Inter-regional and Transnational Connectivity Modalities

The ascendance of Sa Pa did not occur in isolation but is the result of the successful establishment of multi-dimensional connectivity channels. In the era of highland “flattening,” Sa Pa has transcended the confines of a singular mountainous locality to become a critical node in broader economic, cultural, and political networks (Michaud and Turner 2000). These connectivity modalities operate based on the continuous circulation of capital, commodities, people, and symbolic values.

In economic terms, Sa Pa functions as a “value transit hub” situated on the Kunming-Lao Cai-Hanoi-Hai Phong Economic Corridor (Prime Minister 2023). The Noi Bai-Lao Cai Expressway serves as the “main artery,” enabling Sa Pa to integrate deeply into the Northern Key Economic Region (Asian Development Bank 2018). Within the tourism supply chain, Sa Pa is not merely a destination for consumption but also a distribution node. Tour operators in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City act as aggregators, while Sa Pa provides the experiential infrastructure. This connectivity extends across the border via the Lao Cai-Hekou International Border Gate. Sa Pa has become a preferred destination for Chinese tourists (particularly from Yunnan province) on short-haul tours, while simultaneously serving as a crucial stopover for international travelers on trans-Indochina itineraries (Lao Cai Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2023; Leong et al. 2017).

Beyond tourism, the connectivity modality for temperate agricultural trade is also being reconfigured. Thanks to its distinctive climate and improved logistics infrastructure, Sa Pa has become a

specialized zone for high-tech agriculture (salmon, sturgeon, temperate vegetables, medicinal herbs), supplying major consumption markets such as Hanoi and the delta provinces. This two-way circulation—tourists ascending and agricultural products descending—has dismantled the traditional subsistence economic model, transforming Sa Pa into a dynamic “economic satellite” of the Capital Region (Hoang et al. 2020).

Geopolitically, Sa Pa’s status has undergone a strategic shift: from a defensive “frontier bulwark” to a “bridge” for cooperation and development. In the domestic context, Sa Pa is designated as a counterbalancing growth pole in the North, playing a role in diffusing development momentum throughout the Northwest region and maintaining close linkages with the Red River Delta (Prime Minister 2023). At the international level, Sa Pa is situated within the connectivity vision of the Greater Mekong Subregion (Asian Development Bank 2018). With its gateway position, Sa Pa serves as a point of soft connectivity in people-to-people diplomacy and economic cooperation between Vietnam and China. Furthermore, through road and air tourism routes (including the future Sa Pa Airport project), the town is gradually establishing direct linkages with other regional heritage hubs such as Luang Prabang (Laos) and Siem Reap (Cambodia) (Prime Minister 2021; Suntikul and Jachna 2013).

3.4. Challenges

The transformation of Sa Pa from a tranquil periphery into a vibrant “connectivity plateau” has not only yielded impressive growth metrics but has also confronted this urban area with existential challenges. Time-space compression, while catalyzing economic flows, simultaneously exerts unprecedented pressures on social structures, the environment, and indigenous culture, generating “bottlenecks” that threaten sustainable development.

The most conspicuous challenge facing Sa Pa is the overload of carrying capacity driven by rapid urbanization. With targets to welcome 8 million visitor arrivals by 2030 and 12 million by 2040, the town’s technical infrastructure is straining under immense

pressure (Prime Minister 2023). Localized traffic congestion during peak periods, a shortage of parking facilities, and strain on water supply and drainage systems serve as distinct indicators of an “overheated” urban development trajectory.

Tourism-driven economic development in Sa Pa is being realized at a steep environmental cost (Cahill 2018). The process of rampant concretization for the construction of hotels and restaurants has diminished the area of protection forests and natural vegetation cover, leading to an increasingly imminent risk of landslides and flash floods. Waste and wastewater management issues are evolving into environmental hotspots. The colossal volume of waste generated by millions of tourist arrivals annually is exceeding local processing capacity. More critically, micro-climatic change is occurring silently yet dangerously: the “city in the mist” is gradually warming due to the urban heat island effect, eroding Sa Pa’s core competitive advantage of a cool temperate climate (Hoang et al. 2020). Biodiversity degradation in the buffer zone of Hoang Lien National Park, caused by encroaching tourism activities, also serves as a warning signal regarding severe ecological imbalance.

In the context of mass tourism, the cultures of ethnic minority groups face the risk of commodification. Rituals, costumes, and daily customs of the H’mông, Dao, and Tay peoples tend to be staged, simplified, or distorted to cater to the superficial tastes of tourists. If Sa Pa forfeits its pristine nature and unique cultural identity to be replaced by modern entertainment complexes, the destination’s appeal will severely diminish (Ha Van Sieu 2023; Walter 2016).

3.5. Discussion

From the analyses of formation history, capital flows, and existing challenges, the case of Sa Pa does not stop at being a mere example of local tourism development but opens profound dialogues on the nature of highland urbanization in the era of globalization. This study proposes redefining Sa Pa’s position through new theoretical lenses, placing this urban area within an inter-regional comparative network to derive interdisciplinary lessons.

3.5.1. Sa Pa and the Explanatory Limits of the Zomia Framework

The rise of Sa Pa does not refute Scott's Zomia thesis (2009) but exposes its explanatory limits in a post-1990 condition. Zomia describes the Southeast Asian highlands as a "non-state" space, where communities reside at high altitudes to evade control and obligations to lowland authorities. The history of Sa Pa, however, demonstrates a sequence in which terrain's political function has been progressively dismantled. From the French military geodetic map of 1903, through the wartime "semi-isolation" of 1954-1986, to the Vietnamese government's 2017 decision recognizing Sa Pa as a National Tourism Area (Prime Minister 2017), Sa Pa has always been shaped by administrative interventions and systematic planning from the central level. Even in its most isolated phase, the town was never "anarchic"; it was governed under a different logic, that of military buffer rather than tourism node. Recent comparative work by Leadbetter and Sastrawan (2024) supports this reading: across Southeast Asian highland communities, terrain alone is a poor predictor of state evasion once infrastructure penetration and market exposure are controlled for. Ethnic minority people in Sa Pa today do not retreat into the deep forest but actively participate in the market economy, becoming links in the national tourism supply chain (Hoang et al. 2020). What Zomia retains, in our reading, is analytical purchase over micro-spaces of identity negotiation rather than over the dominant logic of regional political economy.

3.5.2. The "Flat Plateau" as Complementary Concept

Where Zomia describes a topographic logic of separation, the Flat Plateau describes a logic of selective connection. Under the impact of breakthrough transport infrastructure—the Noi Bai-Lao Cai Expressway, the Fansipan cable car, and the planned Sa Pa Airport; the physical slope; and the ruggedness of the terrain have been socio-economically "flattened," echoing Friedman's "flat world" in global economic flows. In this model, Sa Pa is no longer a periphery but a strategic intermediate space. It operates as a flow "regulator": vertically connecting indigenous raw materials and cultural resources to the capital market and horizontally connecting along the Kunming-Lao Cai-Hanoi-Hai Phong cross-border corridor (Asian Development Bank 2018). It is this flattening that has minimized

transaction costs, turning Sa Pa into an investment basin that has attracted, by 2024, more than VND 55,000 billion in registered tourism projects (VnEconomy 2024). Crucially, flattening is not equalization: the smooth surface favors large capital flows while local communities risk sliding off if they lack social capital, language skills, or land tenure security (Hoang et al. 2020; Phan Duy Quang 2024).

3.5.3. Sa Pa in Comparative Regional Perspective

Placed alongside other highland and heritage destinations in Southeast Asia, Sa Pa's trajectory reveals both shared regional patterns and distinctive features. Four comparisons are particularly instructive.

First, the comparison with Da Lat, a Vietnamese hill station that, like Sa Pa, originated as a French colonial sanitarium (Jennings 2011), and a recent comparative analysis of Tam Đảo (Tran Xuan Hiep 2024), shows that Sa Pa shares the colonial inheritance of imposed urbanism but diverges in its present commodification path. Da Lat's tourism is increasingly mediated by agricultural greenhouses and a flower-and-coffee economy, while Sa Pa's pressure point is the commodification of ethnic identity (H'mông, Dao) for tourist consumption. Both, however, illustrate how former French hill stations have been reabsorbed into national developmental ambitions rather than preserved as colonial relics.

Second, the comparison with Luang Prabang (Laos), a UNESCO World Heritage City, highlights a sharp contrast in governance model. Suntikul and Jachna (2013) document the contestation between heritage conservation and tourism-driven development in Luang Prabang, where UNESCO oversight imposes a binding restraint on building heights, architectural styles, and the use of public space. Leong et al. (2017) further demonstrate, through GIS-based landscape analysis, how tourism growth has nonetheless reshaped the spatial structure of the protected core. Phengphouvanh, Nguyen, and Huynh (2025) extend this analysis by examining how local Buddhist heritage has been actively "restored" as a living culture in the face of touristification. Sa Pa lacks any comparable supra-national instrument and consequently leans more

sharply toward the mass-tourism end of the spectrum, with high-density entertainment complexes and few enforceable height limits.

Third, the comparison with northern Thailand's "hill tribe" tourism (Walter 2016; Mangkhang et al. 2025) clarifies the politics of authenticity. Walter shows that what tourists experience as "authentic" in Akha, Lahu, and Karen villages is in fact a co-produced and partly staged performance shaped by tour operators, NGOs, and the villages themselves. Mangkhang et al. (2025) extend this to a broader analysis of cultural heritage transmission in Lanna communities. Sa Pa's H'mông and Dao villages exhibit a similar dynamic but operate under a different state-market matrix: where Thai hill tribe villages negotiate primarily with private operators and citizenship politics, Sa Pa villages negotiate within a strongly state-led tourism planning framework (Prime Minister 2023).

Fourth, the comparison with Yunnan (China), particularly its ethnic theme parks and minority tourism zones (Yang 2010, 2011; Xie 2010; Chio 2014), is the most direct due to geographic proximity along the Kunming-Lao Cai corridor. Yang (2010, 2011) and Xie (2010) document how Yunnan's state-orchestrated "ethnic theme park" model produces a highly choreographed encounter between Han tourists and minority performers, while Chio's ethnography of rural ethnic tourism in Guizhou and Guangxi shows the everyday labor of villagers under these tourism regimes. Sa Pa is increasingly drifting toward elements of this model—packaged village tours, scheduled performances, branded cable-car experiences—but retains a more decentralized commercial structure (many small home-stays and trekking guides) than the Yunnan parks. Whether this decentralization can be preserved under the 2040 master plan's 12-million-visitor target is, as we argue below, the central policy question facing Sa Pa.

3.5.4. Interdisciplinary Implications

The transformation of Sa Pa carries implications across several disciplines. For anthropology, it challenges the view of indigenous people as passive victims of development: as the literature on Sa Pa

livelihoods consistently shows (Michaud and Turner 2000, 2017; Hoang et al. 2020; Le, Cushman and Jonsson 2016), upland communities exercise considerable “agency” in negotiating tourism, even if the playing field is unequal. For history, Sa Pa is a mirror reflecting the fractured and reconstructed trajectory of Vietnam through colonial, war, and Doi Moi periods (Michaud and Turner 2017; Jennings 2011). For urban governance and development studies, the Sa Pa case suggests a new mode of thinking: highland governance is no longer the management of land within administrative boundaries, but the governance of flows of capital, people, and culture. The success of Sa Pa in the future will depend on the ability to regulate these flows so as to ensure inclusive and sustainable development. For geography, the Flat Plateau concept supplies a complementary frame to the more familiar core-periphery and “space of flows” models, foregrounding how terrain itself becomes a variable to be politically engineered.

IV. Conclusion

4.1. Summary of Findings

The study of Sa Pa’s historical and economic journey has provided a vivid demonstration of the reconfiguration of connectivity patterns in the contemporary Vietnamese highlands (Hoang et al. 2020). From an isolated colonial hill station undergoing the fractures of war and the stagnation of the subsidy period, Sa Pa has risen strongly to become a super-connected “network node” in the Doi Moi era (Michaud and Turner 2000). This process affirms that the highlands today are no longer isolated oases or passive buffer zones but have been deeply integrated into national and cross-border socio-economic flows. The presence of massive infrastructure projects and private investment flows has flattened geographical obstacles, turning Sa Pa into a dynamic growth pole in the North, where global and local values collide, negotiate, and coexist in symbiosis.

4.2. Theoretical Contribution: Sa Pa and the Explanatory Limits of Zomia

Academically, the case of Sa Pa contributes important empirical arguments to the ongoing dialogue on borderland and highland theory. Rather than constituting a “counter-thesis” to Zomia, the trajectory of Sa Pa exposes the framework’s explanatory limits: Scott’s (2009) “state evasion” model retains analytical purchase over the precolonial and early colonial highland condition, but loses traction once expressway infrastructure, mass tourism, and digital platforms collapse the cost of “legibility” (Michaud 2010; Leadbetter and Sastrawan 2024). Simultaneously, the study reinforces the validity of the Flat Plateau approach, affirming the highland as an open intermediate space, where ethnic and administrative boundaries become flexible to serve inter-regional connections. This approach opens a new analytical direction for anthropology and economic geography, shifting the focus from studying isolation to studying connectivity, interdependence, and the politics of who gets to traverse the flattened surface.

4.3. Policy Implications: Five Concrete Instruments

From the above analyses, the study proposes five urgent and concrete policy instruments aimed at safeguarding sustainable development in Sa Pa. These instruments translate the diagnostic of the Flat Plateau (the smooth surface advantages large capital but disadvantages local communities) into actionable governance levers.

First, a Community Equity Floor of 5-10% should be embedded in the licensing of any new tourism mega-project (hotels above 100 rooms, cable cars, theme parks) operating in the Sa Pa National Tourist Area, with the equity allocated to H’mông and Dao commune-level cooperatives. This addresses the “traction” gap identified in section 2.1.3 and answers the “leakage” concern raised in the existing Sa Pa literature (Cahill 2018; Phan Duy Quang 2024).

Second, a Geographical Indication (GI) Craft Scheme should be established for distinctive H’mông indigo textiles, Dao herbal medicine, and Sa Pa temperate agricultural products, with mandatory royalty sharing when these are commercially reproduced.

This instrument addresses the cultural commodification risk and creates a defensible revenue stream that flows back to community rights-holders.

Third, a statutory Heritage Protection Zone should be designated by provincial regulation around the colonial-era core and the Muong Hoa valley terraces, with binding height limits (no more than four storeys in the core, no more than two in the Muong Hoa buffer) and architectural-style controls. This is the Sa Pa equivalent of the UNESCO buffer that has constrained, however imperfectly, the touristification of Luang Prabang (Suntikul and Jachna 2013; Leong et al. 2017).

Fourth, a Carrying-Capacity Cap with Dynamic Pricing should be introduced for the Fansipan cable car, Cat Cat village, and the Muong Hoa trekking corridor, indexed to ecological monitoring data from Hoang Lien National Park. Pricing premiums during peak periods would fund waste-water and trail-maintenance infrastructure and dampen the overload dynamic described in section 3.4.

Fifth, a Provincial Tourism Revenue-Sharing Fund should be created, capitalized by a 1-2% levy on the gross tourism revenue of accommodation enterprises operating in the National Tourist Area, with proceeds ring-fenced for commune-level infrastructure, education in tourism-related skills, and emergency landslide mitigation. The combination of these five instruments would not reverse the Flat Plateau dynamic—infrastructure cannot be uninvented—but would introduce calibrated friction at the points where the smooth surface most damages local livelihoods and ecological integrity.

4.4. Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations that bound its conclusions and point to future research directions. The empirical base relies on official Vietnamese statistics and the existing English-language ethnographic literature; primary fieldwork at the household level would strengthen the analysis of the “traction” hypothesis. Comparative claims about Luang Prabang, northern Thailand, and Yunnan are drawn from the secondary literature rather than parallel field studies and would

benefit from coordinated multi-site research. Finally, the climate-vulnerability dimension of the Flat Plateau, the silent warming of the “city in the mist,” deserves a dedicated study integrating regional climate modelling, micro-meteorological observation, and labor-market data on the temperate agriculture sector. These topics, together with longitudinal comparison between Sa Pa and other Vietnamese hill stations such as Tam Đảo (Tran Xuan Hiep 2024) and Da Lat (Jennings 2011), constitute the next research agenda for understanding how highland Vietnam is being reconfigured in the twenty-first century.

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