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Introduction

Marie Gibert-Flutre and Clément Musil

- 1 Dedicating an issue to a city in particular can be a challenge but, at a time when metropolization is emerging as a key process on the global scale, studies rooted in the specificity of a particular urban field, with its own chronology and trajectories, appear more relevant than ever to develop a fine understanding of local variations and assemblages (Roy and Ong, 2011).
- 2 From this perspective, Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), the southern Vietnam metropolis with its 12 million inhabitants, provides a particularly fertile analytical laboratory for rethinking the mechanisms and effects of this multifaceted process. Its contemporary political context is that of an authoritarian Party-State that carries a triple legacy: Vietnam's close – but still ambiguous – relationship with China and its diaspora, its colonial past (1858-1954) and its period of socialist planned economy (1975-1986). With the Renovation Reforms (Đổi Mới) initiated in 1986, Vietnam has since adopted a 'socialist-oriented' market economy model that has gradually opened up to the globalized economy.
- 3 The subtitle, 'A Metropolitan Playing Field', is an allusion to the new interactions between diverse players provoked by the metropolization of Ho Chi Minh City in recent years, but also to the collective return of researchers to this field since the late 1990s, after decades of war and relative lockdown. Ho Chi Minh City offers an opportunity to question the specificities of metropolitan production – as well as that of scientific production – in an authoritarian context.

Revisiting interpretative frameworks on metropolization from the case of a so-called 'metropolis of the south'

- 4 This issue dedicated to the contemporary mutations undergone by Ho Chi Minh City is fully in line with the scientific project of the 'Southern Turn', aimed at revisiting the interpretative frameworks of metropolization by working from fields that have long remained at the margins of urban studies (Connell, 2007; Edensor and Jayne, 2012; Parnell and Robinson, 2012; Perera and Tang, 2012, Sheppard *et al.*, 2013; Parnell and Oldfield, 2014). As an Asian colonial city (and as such, associated with a number of clichés), Ho Chi Minh City has long been regarded as no more than a field of study, rather than as a field of research with the potential to rethink the interpretative frameworks applied to metropolization and build new conceptual tools. Nevertheless, Nihal Perera and Wing-Shing Tang note that 'seeing and understanding [Asian] urbanisms, especially emerging spaces and transformative practices, are dramatically different exercises than collecting new data within existing intellectual and theoretical paradigm' (Perera and Tang, 2013, p. 4). This issue's opening paper by Charles Goldblum explains that Vietnamese metropolises can no longer be understood as just a receptacle for globalized models: metropolization processes necessarily interfere with a complex local political interplay, made up of compromises and arrangements between the State and society (Duchère, 2019). Goldblum explains how the specific urban field of Ho Chi Minh City can help build an understanding of the 'making of the comparable', thus shedding light on the diverse forms of urban internationalization in an Asian context.
- 5 The growing importance of Vietnamese studies in the field of urban geography is currently augmented by the return of many researchers, after decades of wars and geopolitical constraints. This issue also ambitions to document the current renewal of the academic output on Ho Chi Minh Ville, with ever-growing numbers of long-term studies rooted in the complexity of the field, spanning across increasingly diverse domains in urban studies. This issue's bilingualism, with the participation of French but also Vietnamese, Canadian and US contributors, reflects the strong internationalization of research on this metropolis, although strong constraints continue to restrict the conditions of production of research.

Conducting metropolitan studies in an authoritarian context

- 6 Today, access to the metropolitan field of Ho Chi Minh City remains under strict control and requires adapted research methodologies. First of all, access to data and figures continues to pose difficulties as these elements carry high political and economic stakes in the eyes of the State-Party that produces and keeps them. This is evident in the field of demography: quantifying the metropolitan population and its growth remains a delicate exercise (Gubry, 2019). The official population census, for example, excludes the so-called 'floating' population of rural migrants, which is regarded as temporary, even though it is now the main driver of population growth in a metropolis that has become a major centre of attraction for domestic migration. Foreigners are also excluded from the census. The population of nine million officially

registered in the city-province should in fact be augmented by more than three million, with an annual growth rate of more than 3% (Gubry, 2019).

- 7 Working on urban material also involves considering high-added-value real estate operations, whether investigating more discrete forms of metropolization in old neighbourhoods (Gibert-Flutre, 2019) or large-scale developments (Musil and Labbé, 2017; Musil *et al.*, 2019). Land acquisition and planning permission mechanisms remain opaque, as does urban planning project sign-off and even the interpretation of urban planning regulations that change as quickly as the city itself (Quertamp, 2017). In addition, the data associated with such projects is characterized by its very fragmented nature and its lack of follow-up: retracing the genealogy and stakeholders of metropolitan projects can be particularly difficult.
- 8 At the heart of all tensions, the Gordian knot of Ho Chi Minh City's metropolitan changes is land, and in particular its legal status, its value and the modalities of its market. In a country where only 30% of the population has a bank account, land – particularly in a metropolitan context – is used as an investment and a financial product, at the risk of contributing to the creation of ‘ghost neighbourhoods’ and speculative bubbles (Musil *et al.*, 2019). Today more than ever before, land is the key to wealth in Ho Chi Minh City. Documenting the logic behind it remains a challenge for researchers, especially since some key players, such as the Ministry of Defence, remain totally inaccessible despite it being a major landowner in Ho Chi Minh City. The recent destruction of the former colonial port area of Ba Son, strategically located in the peri-central district of Bình Thạnh by the Saigon River, which was sold off by the Ministry of Defence to large private investors to create large-scale luxury developments, is the most visible sign of this trend. The Vinhomes Central Park complex, made of 18 high-rise buildings dominated by the iconic Landmark 81 – Vietnam’s highest tower to date –, is a perfect symbol of the radical changes affecting contemporary Vietnam in terms of land, architecture and society.

Illustration 1 - Official billboard displayed by the Vietnamese State-Party in front of the towers of the Vinhomes Central Park complex



The slogan reads: 'Warm greetings from the 11th Congress of the Communist Party of Ho Chi Minh City'. This photograph was taken in July 2020, a few months before the 11th plenary of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party (Ho Chi Minh City section). It captures the contrast between on the one hand the towers of the Vinhomes Central Park project (a large-scale development that was inaugurated in 2018), a symbol of the province-city's metropolitan modernity, and on the other hand a state propaganda billboard staging the Communist Party (symbolized by the hammer and sickle at the top of the poster) and the key forces of the country's development: an engineer, a soldier, a white-collar worker and an agricultural worker. This billboard, using the official colour scheme of red and yellow, reflects the Vietnamese State-Party's intention to control the forms and modalities of the country's globalization, and in particular the metropolization of Ho Chi Minh City, symbolized here by the shift from an horizontal to a vertical city.

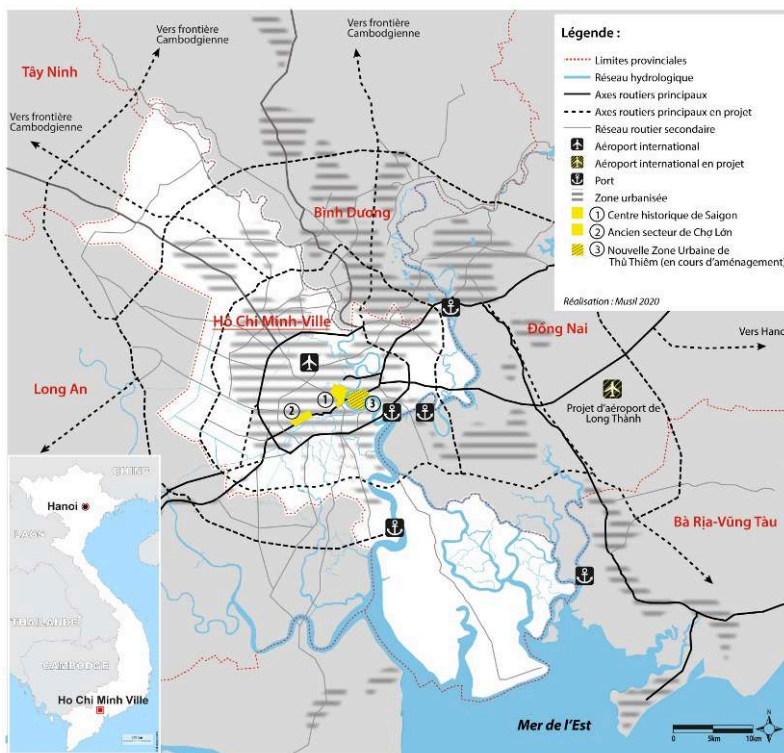
Photography by C. Musil, 2020.

- 9 Similar observations could be made on the redevelopment of the Thủ Thiêm peninsula in District 2. This titanic long-term project reflects the complexity and excesses of the city's metropolitan mutations in the context of the 'real-estate turn' (Shatkin, 2017): this case is examined by Clément Musil, Daniel Labbé and Vu Ngoc Khanh in their contribution to this issue. The real estate market in Ho Chi Minh City, in particular its residential segment, is among the most attractive on the regional scale because of the speed of its development and potential profit ratios (PwC and Urban Land Institute, 2020). The authors of this paper show the crucial part played by private property developers in the implementation of public urban planning policies. When analyzing metropolitan mutations and their implications in terms of land ownership – in particular the transfer of so-called public land to private players –, in a system where "land belongs to the People, and the State is responsible for managing it", one also often crosses paths with the Vietnamese Communist Party's anti-corruption investigation commissions, but without being able to access the primary resources required.
- 10 This context makes research a complex exercise and gives the premium to long-term studies, field work and qualitative surveys, as reflected by the contributions to this issue. It should also be noted that conducting research in this authoritarian environment is most challenging for Vietnamese researchers, who regularly face difficult choices that jeopardize their own security and the possibility of pursuing their

careers in public research. In this context, the practice of co-writing articles between local and international researchers – which is the case for several articles in this issue – testifies to the importance of establishing new international research partnerships to better understand the subtleties of a field that often eludes immediate sight and understanding.

Ho Chi Minh City, or the metropolitan ambitions of an emerging country

Illustration 2 – The metropolitan region of Ho Chi Minh City



Photograph by C. Musil, 2020.

- 11 In comparison with Hanoi's thousand-year history, Saigon/Ho Chin Minh City is a relatively 'recent' city whose official foundation is commonly dated 1698. This urban ensemble was from very early on characterized by its openness to foreigners, as shown by the historical presence of Chinese populations that participated in its formation in the neighbourhood of Chợ Lớn (Gibert-Flutre, 2017). The history of the city was later influenced by its colonial refoundation between 1859 and 1954, and then by its status as the perilous capital of South Vietnam during the war, until its 'liberation' or 'fall' (depending on one's ideological perspective) brought it into the sphere of socialist countries after 1975 (Drummond and Young, 2020).
- 12 Ho Chi Minh City retains the traces of this eventful history, often invisibilized under many layers. Reclaiming the heritage of this controversial history is still not on the agenda: the city remains confined to the status of an economic metropolis by the local authorities, in contrast with Hanoi which is located in the civilizational cradle of Vietnam, in the Red River delta. The very history of the city still remains to be written,

and to find its place in the national narrative. However, the city's longstanding openness to diverse foreign influences – subtly apparent in architecture, gastronomy, fashion or even certain forms of administrative management – explains why it spearheaded the country's opening up to globalization in the post-reform years of the Renewal. At the time, the city was the only one in the country to benefit from adequate infrastructure, but above all from valuable access to foreign investor networks, in particular through the Vietnamese diaspora abroad (*Việt kiều*).

The great metropolitan mutation

- 13 At the turn of the nineties, the Vietnamese economy opened up under the impulse of the Prime Minister, Võ Văn Kiệt, a native of the Mekong delta, who promoted a gradual – and controlled – influx of foreign direct investment (FDI). Thanks to the infrastructure network and economic fabric 'inherited' from US military presence and previously from French colonial rule, the country's economic take-off, now celebrated as an 'economic miracle' (Vanham, 2018), contributed to the emergence of the 'growth triangle' from the early nineties, including the city-province of Ho Chi Minh City and the neighbouring provinces of Binh Duong, Dong Nai and Ba Ria Vung Tau (Luong, 2003: 17-19). The first manifestation of this phenomenon was the creation of industrial estates connected to road-port infrastructure built during the years preceding the reunification of the country. Overall, the Ho Chi Minh City metropolitan region served as a stepping stone for the country's economic take-off, in particular by attracting FDI. In 2019, this metropolitan region contributed more than 40% of the national GDP and 60% of the State budget (Tractus, 2020). Due to a regulatory environment conducive to investment, to the presence of infrastructure and to its skilled workforce, this area is also attracting 60% of investment projects and 50% of FDI nationally (*ibid.*). However, it would be misleading to consider Ho Chi Minh City and its peripheral metropolitan region as an economic engine serving the interests of national development. As shown by Tran Khach Minh's article, there is strong competition – and even tensions – between the provinces making up this industrial region to attract FDI, transport infrastructure and logistics hubs to their territory. These rivalries between territories, as well as the economic and industrial ambitions of Ho Chi Minh City and its region, go beyond these figures. More challenges are still to come.
- 14 The metropolis is fully projecting itself into the future of global production, first of all by seeking to benefit from the relocation of production sites initially set up in China and whose operation is now being thwarted by the economic war between the United States and China (Lam Thanh Ha and Nguyen Duc Phuc, 2019). Ho Chi Minh City's ambition is also to join the global movement of Industry 4.0 (an industry at the convergence of the virtual world – digital design, operations management, finance and marketing – with real-world products and objects) by positioning itself in the sector of 'smart production'. The Politburo of the Vietnamese Communist Party has already adopted a resolution to this effect (Kieu Phong and Thu Huong, 2019) and Vingroup, a national private conglomerate whose development started with real estate activities, is now moving into the artificial intelligence and 5G markets (Jennings, 2020).
- 15 However, in order to improve its economic and industrial performance and attract new FDI and 'new talent', both essential for start-ups involved in the Industry 4.0, the metropolis needs to upgrade its economic infrastructure. A proactive equipment policy

was approved by the State-Party at the turn of the 2000s. Its aim is to oversee the construction of logistics centres (port and airport platforms) to facilitate the import-export of products assembled or manufactured on the territory. In addition to the development of deep-water ports, located at the estuary of the Saigon River, the government has recently launched a new mega-project: the construction of the Long Thành metropolitan airport. The first phase of this project should be completed by the end of 2025, with nearly US\$5 billions worth of investment and further development phases running until 2050 for a total investment of US\$16 billion (Hoang Phong, 2020). There is also talk of upgrading road and highway connections.

- 16 Ho Chi Minh City's transport sector plan, voted in 2013, sets out road projects (bridges, tunnels, parking lots, ring roads, elevated roads, etc.) with an investment volume of around US\$40 billion by 2030 (Huu Cong, 2020). According to the authorities, these investments in road transport, which are essential for the economic development of the metropolis, reveal changes in travel practices and daily mobility. This issue is addressed by Hue-Tâm Jammé's article: using a social geography approach, the author shows that city dwellers, regardless of their socio-professional category, are waiting for the transition from the 'city of the motorcycle', a prominent feature of Vietnamese cities and Ho Chi Minh City in particular, to the 'city of the automobile', a symbol of modernity (which is perhaps already outdated). The automobile is now a strong symbol of economic success for the middle and upper social classes.
- 17 Despite this strong trend, the development of public transport is not lagging behind. A vast underground network is planned, with more than 200 km and nearly 8 lines. Again, the expected investment is colossal: US\$18 billion by 2030 (Musil and Simon, 2015). Nevertheless, budgetary resources for these investments are limited and Vietnam is still dependent on foreign financial aid from international development organizations. In addition to the question of financing this equipment, other issues include the recurrent question of expropriation, which inevitably arises, for the Long Thành airport, a ring road and an underground line (as access to the stations, ventilation and fire safety devices require access to the ground). These problems of access to land delay projects and substantially increase their costs over time.
- 18 The last aspect worth mentioning is the launch of new types of planning and urbanization projects. In addition to the issues of verticalization, densification, expansion and urban sprawl, which now pose major problems for the adaptation of technical networks and urban services (Musil and Labbé, 2018), the city-province of Ho Chi Minh City is planning to implement a vast project known as the Innovation District. This project demonstrates the ambition to concretize the development of Ho Chi Minh City as a smart city. Designed in collaboration with global architecture firm Sasaki, the project plans to transform 22,000 hectares spread over three urban districts to the east of the metropolis. In short, the aim is to mark Ho Chi Minh City's entry into Industry 4.0 with an architectural and urban development, and to provide the city with dedicated areas hosting this industry, using new information and communication technologies to develop a Fin Tech Hub (supporting financial services) or an IT & Edu Tech Hub (for training and research and development). In short, the project aims to create new spaces that are both focused on technology development and resilient to the effects of climate change. Surprisingly, this project will encompass the new urban area of Thủ Thiêm, documented by anthropologist Erik Harms' in this issue's 'On Image' before the beginning of its transformation: this contribution recalls that until recently,

the area was only composed of agricultural spaces and marshes, on the banks of the Saigon River.

Hanoi versus Ho Chi Minh City: an unspoken rivalry

- 19 Ho Chi Minh City's metropolitan ambitions and its desire to position itself as a future economic and financial hub on a regional scale also raise the question of the relationship between the southern metropolis and the country's capital, Hanoi. While it is not acceptable to state that a rivalry exists between these two cities – as the national good must take precedence over competition between territories – some signals of this competition can indeed be detected. Ho Chi Minh City is now officially regarded as the future smart city of Vietnam. Hanoi is already the seat of political power, and presented as the depository of Vietnamese culture, and the government wants to turn the capital into a major regional metropolis in Asia. To do so, Hanoi must dominate the Vietnamese urban hierarchy and be identified as the gateway to Vietnam (Logan, 2009). Recently, the government restated its intention to promote the capital's rise to prominence, making Hanoi a major centre in East and Southeast Asia by 2045 (Việt Hùng and Văn Hưng, 2020).
- 20 This ambition is not without consequence for the country's other urban centres. Clearly, the priority is to channel both public and private investment towards Hanoi, potentially to the detriment of the country's other metropolises. However, Ho Chi Minh City is already struggling to raise enough funds to deliver out the ambitious projects mentioned above. For example, in order to complete and put into service its first underground line, Ho Chi Minh City needs budget extensions from the government, which are slow in coming. But the Southern metropolis can hardly finance its infrastructure projects on its own, since the national tax system imposes the strict smoothing of revenue between the provinces: Ho Chi Minh City retains no more than 23% of its tax revenue, particularly from locally generated economic activity (Nguyen Hoai, 2016). Against a backdrop of unspoken rivalry between Hanoi and the southern metropolis, a growing gap is developing between Ho Chi Minh City's metropolitan ambitions and its actual capacity to finance the upgrading of its infrastructure.
- 21 These difficulties are now having political and even judicial implications. Since the start of the Vietnamese Communist Party's anti-corruption campaign in 2016, the number of cases detected by the investigation commission in Ho Chi Minh City has boomed, revealing dysfunctions in the allocation of public land (or land belonging to State-owned companies) to private developers (Le Hong Hiep, 2019). Several senior officials have since been arrested, most notably former Politburo member and Ho Chi Minh City Party secretary Dinh La Thang. It would be difficult not to interpret this as a symptom of Hanoi's ambition to control the development of the Southern metropolis. However, in spite of these political and economic aspirations, Ho Chi Minh City remains to this day the most attractive economic metropolis in the country, both nationally and internationally.

What About the Urban Population?

- 22 The residents of Ho Chi Minh City occupy a paradoxical place in this major metropolitan transformation and associated power games. Very largely excluded from

official decision-making processes, citizens nonetheless continue to participate in the making of the city by resorting to diverse tactics, treading the thin line between the formal and the informal sectors, or between legality and illegality (de Certeau, 1980; Gibert and Segard, 2015). Moreover, the diversity of the inhabitants' socioeconomic profiles continues to grow, as do the inequalities between them.

- 23 The 'middle class', which is particularly difficult to define in the Vietnamese context, is undeniably at the heart of metropolitan change. The city can boast an increasingly educated and wealthy population: GDP per capita is three to four times higher than the national average and remains higher than that of Hanoi (Nguyễn Vũ, 2018; Tá Lâm, 2019). This enrichment goes hand in hand with new aspirations in terms of lifestyle and consumption, to which the new market responds. These include housing – in the increasingly widespread form of condominiums, even though small single-family houses remain predominant in the city –, the multiplication of malls and private sports and leisure facilities, and the new products of the digital platform economy with the very rapid growth of globalized tourist rental sites like Airbnb and its national variants like Luxstay, or new modes of mobility via the Grab platform, for example. Due to an increasingly connected population, e-commerce is emerging as a new mass consumption practice, even though only 10% of payments are made online (Pimhidzai et al., 2019, p. 65). Despite fast changes in consumption patterns, the use of cash transactions remains the norm. Metropolitan practices continue to diversify, sometimes revealing tensions and adaptations between globalized models and local habits. The growing middle class, which is particularly targeted by metropolitan marketing, is a key driver of national economic growth, providing consumers with the capacity to absorb the country's manufacturing production and real estate developments. Other categories of consumers are also emerging. Foreign consumers (and particularly South Koreans, Hong-Kongers and Southeast Asians) are also being targeted by local real estate developers.
- 24 In addition to its middle class and new economic elite, the city is also home to a remarkably diverse working class and economically vulnerable population. The most visible figure of this segment of the population is undoubtedly that of street vendors, whose working conditions rely on countless and highly precarious arrangements with the police and the residents of the neighbourhoods where they work. Rural immigrants, many of whom work as laborers on construction sites or in factories, are the other visible face of vulnerable living: they are relegated to very low wages, difficult working conditions and an equally insecure administrative status. Socio-spatial inequalities thus continue to widen, and are consubstantial with the process of metropolitanization of the city, even if they do not always translate into spatial segregation. Some neighbourhoods – especially the new urbanized areas created by development projects – are very exclusive in terms of land and property prices, but the city's overall urban fabric mostly presents interstices of poverty, especially along the canals or in the heart of poorly serviced alleyway neighbourhoods, in close proximity to middle-class areas. This dual reality is coupled with deep connections between the formal and informal economy, as the opposition of these two spheres makes no sense in the Vietnamese context. The informal sector, characterized by insecure income sources and the difficulty of stabilizing them over time, is constantly being reshaped, particularly in the era of the digital platform economy: the hypothesis could be made that a new form of 'digital informality' is emerging in the metropolis. For instance,

street vendors or small shops in poor neighbourhoods sell their services online, offering meal or service delivery. The great metropolitan transformation thus goes along with major changes in urban practices, often with paradoxical effects.

The test of the century: mitigating the effects of climate change

- 25 To understand Ho Chi Minh City's contemporary metropolitan dynamics, it is important to consider the singularities of this territory and its physical geography. Located north of the Mekong Delta, 70 km upstream from the East Sea on the banks of the Saigon River, Ho Chi Minh City's hydrographic network has been anthropized since the eighteenth century (Vu Hong Lien, 2013) but was still barely urbanized at the time of its invasion by the French army in 1859. A naval officer wrote that '[...] at the beginning of our occupation, the lower part of Saigon was little more than a swampy plain, flooded with every spring tide' (extract quoted in Bouchot, 1927, p. 73).
- 26 The urbanization of the old Saigon began with road works and the construction of emblematic buildings (some of which are now part of the city's architectural heritage, such as the post office or the cathedral), but more importantly with major hydraulic works that included filling up canals and building new ones (Gibert-Flutre, 2019, pp. 63-70). The Ho Chi Minh City region has not, however, experienced extensive river dyking, unlike Hanoi and the Red River delta region, whose territory has been shaped by centuries of dyke construction (Ha Phong Le, 2016) and the development of seedbeds for rice farming (Fanchette et al., 2015). At the beginning of the 21st century, in the global context of climate change, the omnipresence of water is a significant and distinctive feature of Ho Chi Minh City, but also a hazard.
- 27 In recent years, the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has indicated that the effects of climate change are increasing the destructive impact of floods caused by extreme rainfall and rising sea and river levels (IPCC, 2018). In the mid-2000s, Ho Chi Minh City was identified as one of the world's 10 most vulnerable cities to the effects of climate change (Stern et al., 2006; Hanson et al., 2011). This vulnerability is all the greater as the risk of extreme flooding could increase by 5 to 10 times by 2050 (Woetzel et al., 2020). In addition, nearly 60% of the built-up area is located on land with an altitude of less than 2 meters above sea level. At the end of the 2000s, about 26% of the population of Ho Chi Minh City was already affected by flooding during severe storms, or about 2.5 million people (ADB, 2010, p. 11). Foresight studies in this field are far from optimistic: by 2050 extreme weather events are forecasted to affect between 6 and 9 million inhabitants depending on the protection and development measures that could be put in place by then (Woetzel et al., 2010, p. 11). In their contribution to this issue, Georges Vachaud, Nicolas Gratiot and Tien Dung Tranh Ngoc review the multiple issues associated with floods and discuss possible risk management strategies in the context of Ho Chi Minh City.
- 28 The current urban development model, based on the construction of new urban areas, industrial estates and transport infrastructure, is only increasing the metropolis' vulnerability. The metropolis is faced on the one hand with a phenomenon of subsidence (Dinh et al., 2015) and, on the other hand, with an acceleration of land artificialisation which reduces the drainage of water in the event of river and canal floods caused by heavy rainfall and high tidal coefficients. Between 1990 and 2012,

nearly 3,000 hectares of land were urbanized annually (Kontgis et al., 2014). In addition to the human losses, the most extreme weather events risk damaging infrastructure networks (transport, communication, energy, water). By 2050, one of the scenarios would involve the damage (or destruction) of more than US\$ 8 billion worth of real estate assets, about US\$ 1 billion of infrastructure (including ports and water treatment plants), and nearly US\$ 8 billion of urban services (including the immobilization of the future underground network). Scenarios are even more alarming if the sea level rise exceeds 180 cm after 2050. Overall, the products of the current urbanization process – i.e. real estate and industrial projects and the city’s very costly transport infrastructure – are, even before their completion, already regarded as exposed and vulnerable to the effects of climate change (Woetzel et al., 2020).

- 29 However, the ambition of the metropolitan project, combined with the optimism of the public administrations, political authorities and population, may enable the adoption and implementation of risk mitigation plans. With the support of foreign partners, including the Asian Development Bank and the City of Rotterdam, Ho Chi Minh City’s technical services have conducted studies and driven political leaders to adopt an action plan for climate change adaptation and mitigation in 2013. This plan includes the commissioning of additional studies, but also more importantly technical projects to build further dams protecting the most exposed sectors of the metropolis and develop urban parks that will serve as retention ponds. Current political commitment is also reflected by institutional adjustments – and even innovations – in the field of urban governance, to redesign institutional de-centralization process that characterizes the functioning of local government.
- 30 The environmental threat is unquestionably the main challenge of the century facing Ho Chi Minh City’s metropolitan ambitions, and it is already threatening its medium-term economic growth prospects. The ability to respond to this multifaceted threat is a test for the Party-State, in a country where harmony and stability are cardinal values. The recent struggle against Covid-19, evoked in Christophe Robert’s article in the ‘On Image’ section, brought to light some potential new directions, combining health and social control methods inherited from the socialist era and new technologies. While at the time of publishing this issue, the country appears to be successful in containing the pandemic, its associated economic and social crises are a source of uncertainty that is likely to impact future relations between metropolitan actors.

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