

“FANSIPAN LEGEND, INDOCHINA SUMMIT”: A SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPE IN THE MAKING”

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Since time immemorial, the forested mountains of Vietnam’s northern highlands have been roamed by female spirits associated with the Palace of Mountains and Forests (Nhạc Phủ), one of the four realms of the Mother Goddess Religion. In the Kinh lowlanders’ imagination they epitomize the lushness and abundance of the wilderness and the exoticism of the ethnic minority groups who live in the upland border region. They are impersonated during the ritual performances of Four Palace spirit mediums and enthrall their audience with colorful costumes and lively dances (Fig. 1; Endres 2011). Some have temples dedicated to them and are believed to be highly responsive to human attention and efficacious in bestowing divine favors and blessed gifts (*lộc*) upon their worshippers.



Female mountain spirit embodied during ritual possession

Three years ago, in November 2013, their lofty abodes must have been shaken to their very foundations. Material ropeways were installed on Vietnam’s highest mountain, the Fansipan.¹⁰ Construction machinery and material was hauled up to its wind-whipped summit. Cranes were erected and steel towers planted on its

¹⁰ <http://www.lcs-cablecranes.com/projects/fansipan-cable-car/>

rugged slopes. Rocks were blasted to pieces and pounded by jackhammers (Fig. 2).



Drilling into the rocks with a jackhammer on the peak of mount Fansipan (March 2016)

A mountain terminal and visitors’ platform was erected near its 3,143-meter-high peak. A lustrous entrance hall and base terminal were built on the fringe of Sapa town. Finally, a cable system was strung across the rice terraces of the Mường Hoa valley to span the 6,325-meter distance and 1,410-meter difference in elevation to the roof of “Indochina” (that is, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos). A legend was born: the “Fansipan Legend”, a 200-million-US-dollar project invested in by the Danang-based Sun Group Corporation, one of Vietnam’s leading theme park and real estate developers, and realized in partnership with the Austrian Doppelmayr/Garaventa Group, the world market leader in ropeway engineering and construction (Fig.3).



View from the Fansipan summit platform into the valley (March 2016)

In February 2016, the Guinness world-record-holding three-rope cable car was inaugurated.¹¹

¹¹ <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.de/world-records/404879-highest-ascent-by-a-three-rope-cable->

Gone were the days when it took two torturous days to reach the peak of Mount Fansipan. Within 15 minutes, each gondola cabin can carry up to 35 passengers to the summit (Fig.4). The whole system is able to transport up to 2,000 visitors per hour. The ticket price for the round trip is steep: 600,000 VND (23 EUR) per adult and 400,000 VND (15 EUR) for children between 100 and 130 cm in height. In spite of this, 13,000 visitors used the cable car during the early days of the lunar New Year.¹²

This is the time when Kinh lowlanders go on pilgrimages to famous temples and pagodas throughout the country to pray for good things to happen in the New Year. Some of these places are located on mountains, such as the famous Yên Tử pagoda complex on Yên Tử Mountain (Quảng Ninh Province), or the historic Perfume Pagoda, a large complex of temples and shrines located in the limestone terrain of Hương Sơn (Hanoi). For centuries, pilgrims had to climb thousands of steps to reach the summits of these sacred landscapes. At the beginning of the new millennium things became much easier. On Yên Tử Mountain, cable cars have been taking pilgrims to Hoa Yên pagoda since 2002, and further up to the pinnacle since 2008. In January 2006, a cable car system leading up to the Hương Tích cave in the Perfume Pagoda mountains was inaugurated.



Each gondola cabin of Fansipan Legend has a capacity of 30 to 35 passengers.

“Vietnam may be one of the most cable car crazed nation in the world and the country is in the midst of a massive ropeway construction boom,” Nick Chu wrote in a post on a website called *The Gondola Project*.¹³ But the developers of Fansipan Legend obviously had more in mind than “just” a cable car for people who want to enjoy a once-in-a-lifetime panoramic view from the highest summit of Vietnam. They wanted to create a recreational place that people want to return to again and again, spend time, and consume. Mount Fansipan may be the tallest mountain in the whole of “Indochina”, but it had hitherto not been a place of spiritual significance and pilgrimage filled with myths and legends. So why not turn it into a destination for spiritual tourism (*khu du lịch tâm linh*)?

The signpost that directs visitors out of the upper station arrival hall does not say “Viewing Platform”, it says “Spiritual Area” (*khu tâm linh*, see Fig. 5). A staircase leads to the entrance gate of the “highland sanctuary”, as it is called on the upper station map. In the future, visitors may navigate a whole circuit of Buddhist temples and shrines connected by concrete pathways and stairs (Fig.6, 7, 8).



Guidepost to the “spiritual area” in the upper station arrival hall (March 2016)

car; <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.de/world-records/404878-longest-non-stop-three-ropes-cable-car>
¹² <https://www.vietnam-travel.org/news/more-than-13000-visitors-using-fansipan-cable-car.html>.

¹³ <http://gondolaproject.com/2016/02/01/new-heavyweight-ropeway-champ-vietnam/>



Entrance gate to the highland sanctuary just below the summit (March 2016)



Upper station map listing all temples and shrines of the “highland sanctuary”

This temple II presumably also include adjacent shrines dedicated to the legendary general Trần Hưng Đạo (Nr. 3 on the upper station map, see Fig. 7) and to the Mother Goddesses (Nr. 5, incorrectly translated as “Marian Shrine”), which is common for northern Vietnamese Mahayana pagodas. It is at this shrine that visitors may pay respect to the female mountain spirits that dwell in the northern highlands. Their realm may have been taken over by ambitious private develop-

ers capitalizing on the recreational and spiritual demands created by Vietnam’s unprecedented economic growth in the past decades, but their reputation for “sacred efficacy” (*linh thiêng*) lingers on and continues to draw devotees to their shrines



The “Bottom Pagoda” (Chùa Hạ) on Mount Fansipan

References

Endres, K. W. 2011. *Performing the Divine. Mediums, Markets and Modernity in Urban Vietnam*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) Press.