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Vietnam is a country more scarred than most as the result of centuries of intermittent civil war and frequent foreign intervention. It has, therefore, many places that bear witness to past episodes of pain and injustice and that also reflect the ambivalence that present-day societies often feel towards these episodes. This paper deals with Hoa Lo, the former prison located in central Hanoi, the capital of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Here successive groups of prisoners experienced extremes of suffering but the pain felt gives way to other emotions over time, not excluding shameful regret on the part of some perpetrators of suffering. The fact that the punished and the punishers swapped roles at several points shows the complexity of dealing with places of pain and shame, both by societies in general and by heritage professionals in particular.

Constructed by the French colonial regime as its main security headquarters and jail — or Maison centrale — the jail took in its first prisoners in 1899. It passed into the hands of the communist regime installed in North Vietnam in 1955 and for a time held as prisoners of war a number of American pilots downed during the Vietnam War. At the Sixth Communist Party Congress in 1986, Vietnam decided to re-join the world economy with a set of economic liberalisation policies known collectively under the tag doi moi ('renovation') and economic development has been rapid thereafter. Indeed, by the early 2000s Vietnam's rate of growth was second only to China's, although admittedly starting from a lower base. By the early 1990s, therefore, the question inevitably arose of what to do with this old and out-moded prison, sitting as it did in the heart of Hanoi on land that was becoming a prime target for commercial redevelopment. Resisting calls to remove the prison totally, the Vietnamese turned this place of pain and shame into a new museum, which opened to visitors in 1997, alongside a high-rise business centre. I have told this story in detail elsewhere (see Logan 2003); here the focus is on what Hoa Lo represents and whose voices are being heard in the interpreting.

The chapter also focuses on the way that publicly funded museums, such as Hoa Lo, respond to changing attitudes towards the painful and shameful elements in the community's past. It particularly explores the way in which the perceived political and economic needs of the society and the status of host city, both desired and perceived, play a key role in this process, leading to shifts in museum
exhibition policy. In the case of Hoa Lo, the permanent exhibition was primarily conceived and designed in order to memorialise the incarceration of political leaders in the period of struggle for national independence, and in this way the exhibition policy reflected the ideological basis of national identity formation in Vietnam. But the Hoa Lo museum has also had to deal with the imprisonment of American POWs and, at a time when increasing numbers of Western tourists, including American, are visiting the museum, there has been a move towards telling this part of the story more fully. The chapter argues, however, that more than the tourism dollar is involved and that the museum continues to serve the political interests of the state, which are changing as Vietnam’s place in the world changes. Consequently Hoa Lo’s role becomes more complex as it tries to reflect the new political and economic needs of the Vietnamese state and yet maintain its role as a community memorial.

**Hoa Lo: place of pain and shame**

It is now commonplace in the heritage discourse to view museums, at least those supported by the public purse, as manifestations of the ideologies underlying national identity and state formation. In Vietnam, as elsewhere, this is true and
nowhere more clearly seen than in its numerous war museums (see Logan 2000; Schwenkel 2004; Bleakney 2006). The way in which the ideology is manifested, however, is variously interpreted. Sutherland, for instance, in her study of a selection of Hanoi museums, sees the colonial conflict as being ‘generally downplayed in favour of other periods, such as the Vietnam–American war and Vietnam’s successive attempts at repelling northern invaders’ (2005: 153). By contrast, the focus in Hoa Lo is mostly on the nationalist conflict, beginning with the early colonial resistance and uprisings and moving on to the open conflict with the French in the First Indochinese War of 1946–54. Certainly Hoa Lo deals with the Vietnam War (‘American War’ or Second Indochinese War) of circa 1964–73, but, as Bleakney and Sutherland concede, Hoa Lo has been maintained as a sacred site of memory principally for the Vietnamese rather than Americans.

Much of the writing about Hoa Lo and other Vietnamese war museums has been from an American standpoint. Bleakney (2006: 163–8) provides a picture of how US veterans remember and revisit Hoa Lo, highlighting the ‘distorted view of the treatment of POWs at this prison’. Her overall aim is to ‘examine the new meanings of the [Vietnam] war produced through American veterans’ memorializing practices at various sites of memory in the United States and Vietnam’; that is, she is essentially answering to American needs. However the voice of the Vietnamese authorities is also clearly heard at Hoa Lo, both representing the pain and shame of those nationalists who suffered under the French and giving a partial interpretation of the pain the Vietnamese meted out to the American prisoners of war. By contrast, the French voice is largely absent, the French colonial regime being painted in wholly negative terms as the perpetrators of injustice.

Hoa Lo was built in 1896–9 in the centre of the French quarter of Hanoi, rather than isolated as most other colonial prisons in Vietnam were. Sitting alongside the Court of Justice and the Intelligence Department, it completed a ‘triad of suppressing tools against the patriotic movement of the Vietnamese’ (Le Van Ba 2004: 6). Like much of the construction work done by the French, the prison broke with traditional Vietnamese custom. As Zinoman (2001: 27) observed, before the French conquered the Indochinese territories in the nineteenth century, incarceration was not a usual way of dealing with offenders. In a Confucian society such as Vietnam it was considered that it was best to leave punishment to the family and village. But the colonial authorities needed a prison to deal with those Vietnamese who refused to accept the forced military ‘pacification’, and the chief government architect of the time, Auguste-Henri Vildieu, was engaged to design the prison on the site of the razed Phu Khanh village – houses, dinh (communal house), pagodas and all. According to Vietnamese architectural historian Dang Thai Hoang (1985: vol. 2, 24), the prison’s architecture was especially formidable: with its walls of stone ‘making it look so strong, [and] by puncturing the surrounding ... walls with iron-barred portholes, the French must have sought to create, especially for those outside, a most terrifying impression of life within’.

The prison’s bland name of Maison centrale obscured the brutal reality. Originally designed for 450 prisoners, by 1954, when the French regime collapsed
with the rout at Dien Bien Phu, it held more than 2,000. Many early resisters and rebels were incarcerated in its dark cells. They called it Hoa Lo – literally meaning 'furnace with coal' (referring to the kilns of the original Phu Khanh village), but figuratively meaning 'Hell's Hole'. An upsurge of anti-colonial activity in the 1930s led to a rapid increase in the number of communists, nationalists, secret society members and radicalised workers and peasants held in Hoa Lo and other Vietnamese prisons (Zinoman 2001: 200). The roll call of revolutionary and later communist government figures incarcerated in Hoa Lo includes Nguyen Thai Hoc, leader of Yen Bay Mutiny 1930, who was imprisoned and executed in 1930, and Dang Thi Quang Thai, the first wife of North Vietnamese army leader, General Vo Nguyen Giap, who was tortured and died in Hoa Lo. Three luckier inmates survived and rose to become General-Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party: Truong Chinh (General-Secretary 1941–56), Le Duan (1960–9; later President), Nguyen Van Linh (1986), and Do Muoi (1991–97).

Thus, far from repressing the nationalist movement, the imprisonment of key leaders in Hoa Lo made it one of the main centres for revolutionary education and the instillation of nationalist fervour. Even a revolutionary newsletter, Lao tu tap chi ('Prison Review'), was published monthly without discovery. Many inmates were able to rise above their pain and suffering to engage in poetry and singing, political discussions and plays. Some of the memoirs used by Zinoman (2001: 131–5) refer to the liberation from the rigid feudal class divisions that was made possible by living at such close quarters and taking part in activities that

Figure 11.2 Contemporary bas relief depiction of heroic Vietnamese prisoners suffering under the colonial authorities. (Source: W. Logan)
under normal social circumstances would have been regarded as shameful, such as sharing the same prison food, experiencing the coarse informality of communal nudity, primitive and public toilets, and the inversion of the rigid Vietnamese pronominal system.

In 1945 and again in the mid-1960s the type of prisoner held in Hoa Lo changed dramatically. During the period of Japanese control (1940–5), the French colonial authorities had been left to run Vietnam’s civil administration under Japanese observation, including the prison system and Hoa Lo (Marr 1995: 66–7). Some nationalists were released, being replaced, after the coup de force in 1945. At the same time several hundred French civilians were rounded up by the Japanese Kenpeitai, on suspicion of aiding or being likely to aid the Allies. Then, in 1955, another reversal of incarcerator and incarcerator occurred when Hoa Lo passed into the hands of the communist regime then assuming power in North Vietnam. Subsequently, during the ‘American War’, Hoa Lo held American pilots shot down and taken prisoner in and around Hanoi. These men dubbed Hoa Lo the ‘Hanoi Hilton’, a name that has become part of the heritage of the place despite the fact that a real Hanoi Hilton opened to business in 1999 half a kilometre away. The most famous prisoners included Senator John McCain and Lt Everett Alvarez Jr of San Jose, California. The former, a Republican from Arizona and US presidential candidate in 2000 and 2008, was shot down over Hanoi’s West Lake and spent six years in captivity there. Alvarez was the first pilot shot down (in 1964); he was kept in Hoa Lo until the Paris Peace Agreement was signed eight years later (Karnow 1994: 389). Another noted prisoner, Pete Peterson, who had spent much of his six years as a POW in a dark, cramped cell in Hoa Lo, became US ambassador to Vietnam in the late 1990s. Much of the American press in the 1960s reflected the passions aroused in the United States by the humiliating imprisonment of their downed pilots in Hoa Lo.

**From prison to museum**

Places of pain and shame hold different values for the different sets of people involved. In the case of Hoa Lo, the Vietnamese are themselves divided. There are many older Vietnamese, notably in the South and in Viet kieu (overseas Vietnamese) communities, notably in the US, France and Australia, who have an ambivalent attitude towards the prison’s symbolism for this period in the 1960s and early 1970s, tied as it was to the communist regime installed in Hanoi. A few such people may even view negatively the prison’s role in incarcerating French officers after the 1954 Dien Bien Phu defeat. For most residents of Hanoi and former North Vietnam, however, the issues are more straightforward: while it might be argued that the French were doing no more than was expected of colonial powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this is no justification and colonial times are remembered with bitterness.

When the 1986 doi moi policies began to transform the urban landscape of Hanoi and other Vietnamese cities (Logan 1995, 2000), the question about what
to do with the prison, located in the French Quarter, which was becoming a prime target for redevelopment, brought the ambivalent attitudes on the Vietnamese side plainly into the open. There were, of course, some calls to expunge totally the prison’s physical presence from the city because it represented a bitter past that was now over and best forgotten. Against this pro-demolition and redevelopment attitude were ranged the pleas of war veterans, from both the Vietnamese and American sides, to keep the whole complex as a memorial. For the current Vietnamese government, the Hoa Lo prison stood out as one of the most obvious symbols of French oppression and because of the significant part it played in the revolutionary struggle. Since the Vietnamese ultimately won their battle for national sovereignty, for the victorious regime Hoa Lo has become the symbol of actions to be commemorated rather than erased or ignored. In this respect it is different from many other prisons where suffering has not been mitigated by better times. Hoa Lo is seen as a symbol of transcendence – both at the personal level for those political prisoners held there who now have heroic status, and at the national level.

Nevertheless the economic potential of the site could not be totally ignored. In the end, the controversy worked itself out in a way that demonstrates the distinctively pragmatic side of the Vietnamese character (Logan 2000: 9). The prison site was completely re-worked, turning this place of sorrows into a new museum for the citizenry and foreign tourists to visit, but opening the rest of the site up to commercial redevelopment. The public debate highlighted, however, a strength of emotion that was perhaps surprising in a society that had learned over the millennia to accept without question directions from above. The campaign to save the ‘Tree of Love’ – an almond tree whose nuts, leaves and bark were used by prisoners for medicinal purposes – particularly highlighted the emotional fervour. Located originally in a prison courtyard but falling in the 1990s on the boundary line of the proposed commercial redevelopment site, the support of hundreds of witnesses eventually forced the authorities to excise eight square metres from the commercial site in order to have the tree saved.

In September 1993, a prime ministerial decision awarded the contract to a Vietnamese–Singaporean joint venture company to build a US$60 million 24-storey complex comprising a luxury hotel, apartments, a conference centre and offices, known as Hanoi Towers (now Somerset Grand Hanoi). The same decision approved the conservation of part of the prison as a museum. In May 1994 the prison was transferred from the Hanoi Police Department to the Hanoi People’s Committee Cultural and Information Department. The detailed project ‘Investment, repair, conservation and effective improvement of the Vestige Hoa Lo Prison’ was approved in 1997 by the Hanoi People’s Committee. A few months later, the building was registered by the Ministry of Culture and Information as an historic vestige. From the Vietnamese government’s point of view, the total redevelopment of the site sought to make the most of both the past and the future. The Hanoi People’s Committee entrusted the restoration of the gaol and the creation of a historical museum to the Ministry of Culture and Information in January 1994 and work began in 1995.
At the ground-breaking ceremony in November 1994, Dinh Hanh, Vice-Chairman of the Hanoi People’s Committee, underlined the official interpretation of the place as having ‘a historical position in the struggle against foreign aggressors of the Vietnamese nation’. The dominance of this symbolism meant that the subsequent development of the museum focused on the French treatment of Vietnamese nationalists. By contrast, the high-rise hotel/business centre complex makes no concession to the existence of the prison; no attempt has been made to mark the former building’s footprint, nor display related artefacts or photographs. Hoa Lo has now been reduced to the main two-storey entrance block and opened to the public as a museum under Vietnamese government management. Phase 1 of the project, focusing on repair and conservation work, was completed in October 1997 and the prison museum was opened to the public, as were Hoa Lo’s research and educational facilities. Phase 2, leading to the creation of the precinct commemorating patriots and revolutionary soldiers, was completed in February 2000.

How successful is the Hoa Lo museum at capturing the meaning of the place? The initial observation is that most of the horror of the place has disappeared. The
museum is antiseptically clean; the smells and cries of prisoners are long gone. This muting of the historical reality is probably inevitable; although 'soundscapes' and other interpretative techniques can sometimes make past experiences and sensations 'come alive' to modern visitors, Hoa Lo, like most Vietnamese museums, is under-resourced and such high-tech approaches are currently out of the question. There is also little historical, political and cultural context-setting. For the Vietnamese visitor, of course, the background is often known through personal memories and family reminiscences or through the public education system. Whether the education system with its continuing highly ideological content attracts young Vietnamese to explore their recent past by visiting museums such as Hoa Lo or in fact turns them off is an issue worthy of further consideration. But most non-Vietnamese tourists seem at a loss when trying to understand the place. They observe the Vietnamese prisoners’ narrow cells, with black walls and tiny windows set too high for the prisoners to see anything but a patch of grey or blue sky according to the passing seasons. Two guillotines are on display. The area where the American airmen are said to have been kept is clean and bright. Interpretation panels provide little detail and the English—the only tourist language used—is often poorly written. Outside, the sense of colonial oppression has been totally swept away, to be replaced, perhaps, with a new kind of economic control represented by the new twin tower business complex. The creation of the Hoa Lo museum effectively turned history into heritage, serving contemporary needs rather than attempting to reflect the past in a more scholarly or objective way. There is enough to remind but not completely offend French tourists, and a deliberate effort is made to counter the expectations American tourists have that the harsh treatment meted out to their pilots should be at the forefront of the presentation.

Serving the people: memories and memorialisation

In recent years the museum has begun to attract larger numbers of visitors, reaching more than 20,000 domestic and international visitors in 2007. It has a staff of 20, including eight qualified curators and conservators and four guides. Its greatest strength lies in the rich combination of its status as a registered heritage building and its artefact collection. The building itself relates to what is being remembered and it serves both memorial and civic education functions as well as being a museum. In her 2004 doctoral dissertation on the politics of memory and representation in Vietnam, Christina Schwenkel considers how Vietnamese museums confront the need to cater for both domestic and international audiences. In fact, we need to go further and distinguish between the need to cater for both Hanoian and other Vietnamese visitors and for both those with direct family or other personal connections with the prison and those other Vietnamese for whom the prison is simply a generalised symbol of the nation’s past.

Like other nation states, Vietnam seeks to acknowledge the sacrifice made by its many citizens who laid down their lives to protect the state’s integrity or whose lives were drastically altered by physical injury or psychological trauma. In Hoa
Lo, a national memorial function is intentionally maintained as a 'memorial to the revolutionists who devoted their life for the Fatherland' (Le Van Ba 2004: 31). National leaders make an official visit on three occasions during the year: on 3 February to mark the formation of the Vietnamese Communist Party; on 27 July, the 'Day of Wounded Soldiers'; and on 12 March, commemorating a heroic attempt by prisoners on that day in 1945 to break out of the jail, an event which helped to trigger the August Revolution later that year. For those who personally experienced incarceration in Hoa Lo, and their immediate families, there is a natural desire that their personal sacrifice, experience and memories are recognised by younger generations. This is particularly urgent in countries where the population is rapidly growing, as in Vietnam where more than half the current citizens were born since the end of the Vietnam War and for whom the war is often relegated to the distant past of history books. According to the Hoa Lo Director, Dr Nguyen Thi Don, the families of internees now dead want to see their relatives' names on official lists displayed in the museum. Some families went further and requested that lifelike faces of their relatives be used on museum display models, a suggestion resisted by the museum in favour of using merely 'typical faces'.

In order to encourage local Hanoians to visit Hoa Lo they are not required to pay an entry fee. The state also funds visits by groups of schoolchildren with the aim of propagating and perpetuating its official version of national history, already well entrenched in school curriculum. Hoa Lo thus is seen as playing a major role as

a place to educate the young generation of Vietnam in the revolutionary tradition, the spirit of national pride and the responsibility to the Fatherland in the new era of peace and development toward a society of wealthiness [sic], fairness, democracy and civilization.

(Le Van Ba 2004: 31)

Researchers are encouraged to use the large collection of official records and personal dossiers of 'stronghearted and loyal communists ... struggling in prison to make the glory of Vietnamese heroism' (Le Van Ba 2004: 31). The Hoa Lo management makes an effort to give life to the museum by allowing ex-prisoners associations access to the building and about 15 currently hold meetings and run events there. The question arises, however, whether there will be a change in the nature of museum and exhibition policy after witnesses die out. The Director is conscious of imminent change but believes that Vietnamese people, by comparison with the more individualistic Westerners, are very strongly family- or clan-oriented, with respect for ancestors. Grandparents bring their children to tell them about their past and this passing on of the stories, it is thought, will minimise impact of the witnesses dying out. Then, after a witness dies, his/her family will come to the museum each year on the anniversary day of the death to remember. In short, while the living memories may disappear, the memorial role will continue, alongside the museum function.
Serving the state: shifting exhibition policy

As outlined, to the current Vietnamese government it is the incarceration of political prisoners during the colonial period that must be kept uppermost in the collective memory. Official project documents as well as tourist booklets such as the Hoa Lo Prison Historic Vestige (Le Van Ba 2004) focus on the period 1896–1954 and contain only very brief discussion of the US pilot prisoners held during the Vietnam War. This emphasis on French injustice, the determination to overcome pain and humiliation, and the transcendent message that out of sufferings great things can arise serves the modern Vietnamese state well. Since the museum was designed in the mid-1990s, however, there have been signs of a shift in the original interpretative emphasis. A new set of displays was installed in 2006, significantly giving greater importance to the Vietnam War but seeking to impress upon visitors that large proportions of the French and US population supported the Vietnamese nationalist struggle.
Why and how has this shift occurred? In one sense it represents a more complete picture of the Cold War period, challenging the simple East/West binary that is common in museum interpretations of that period. But does the shift reflect an increasing maturity of interpretative policy, perhaps in response to a liberalising of the political scene within Vietnam? Is the motivation a desire to ‘reframe, inform and enable society’s conversations about difference’ – as Sandell describes the new role for museums (2007:173) – or is it simply to reaffirm the Hanoi ideological position of victim turned victor? If museums are to take on Sandell’s new role and use their cultural authority, in their ‘capacity to determine and authoritatively communicate meaning’ to challenge stereotypes about cultures and help to produce new understandings of cultural differences, museum curators play a key role in developing new collections and revising displays. A key issue in understanding the evolution of Hoa Lo, and perhaps of governance in Vietnam more generally, is the extent to which the museum professionals were able to modify their practice free from political dictation by the Party or Hanoi People’s Committee.

The current Director, Dr Don, was responsible for the design of the new set of interpretative exhibits. Although a Scientific Board comprising the directors of other Hanoi museums – the Revolutionary Museum, Ho Chi Minh Museum and the National History Museum – must approve the general outline of all exhibition proposals, Dr Don claims that the Hoa Lo curators, like curators in other Vietnamese museums, have the power to make detailed decisions about exhibition design and content. In the Hoa Lo case, a primary intention was to correct some of the earlier restoration and interpretation errors made by the previous Project Management Board and to take advantage of this in order to extend the Vietnam War component. Planning is under way for further changes to the exhibitions over 2008–9, and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (formerly Ministry of Culture and Information) had already by early 2007 approved a proposal to show more of Hoa Lo’s collection relating to the US interventions. Dr Don’s aim has been to take into account the visitors’ reactions to the episodes of pain and shame represented by and in Hoa Lo, in particular to respond to the comments of French and US visitors and to take advice from former prisoners/witnesses. In her experience, foreign visitors are almost invariably respectful, many of the ex-military men coming with their wives with the hope that the experience will help their wives to understand them better and some volunteering information about the work they are doing for Vietnam back home in the US. This conforms with Bleakney’s generalisation (2006: 154) that

When veterans visit memorial sites on their return trips to Vietnam, … they visit their own heritage – memories from their previous time in Vietnam, or experiences shared with other veterans. Their goal is not to retreat into the past but to re-imagine it in the present and reconstruct it for the future; the healing and closure elements of veterans’ return journeys imply progression not regression.
It appears, nevertheless, that Vietnamese curators and their scientific committees also respond to the needs of the state as they understand it. This may not come as a set of publicly announced directives but is more likely to emerge from backroom consultations and corridor discussion (McCarty 2001; Logan 2002). Vietnam does not have a tradition of public debate on community issues. Consequently, as Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001: 9) notes,

Lacking a sanctioned outlet for debating political and cultural differences, Vietnamese public discourse often has an oblique quality; it is full of hidden meanings and allusions. Since substance so often must be presented in oblique fashion, the stylistics of commemoration are an important marker of meaning.

One such key need of the Vietnamese state that had been much discussed in the Vietnamese media was completion of the trade normalisation process with the US and membership of the World Trade Organisation, and there is no doubt that pressure comes from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as from the Vietnam–America Friendship Association, one of the largest friendship and cultural exchange programmes permitted by the Vietnamese government, for Vietnam to move on and become friends with its former enemies. Eventually US Congress authorised the granting of Permanent Normal Trade Relations with Vietnam in December 2006 and Vietnam became a member of WTO on 11 January 2007, its twelve-year campaign to gain entry fulfilled. Another major factor that cannot have escaped the Scientific Board is the growth of international tourism, especially from the United States. An aviation agreement between the US and Vietnam in December 2003 has allowed American carriers to fly directly between the two countries for the first time since the end of the Vietnam War (Hotel Online 2004). American Airlines opened daily flights from Los Angeles in April 2004 and United Airlines followed later in the year with a flight from San Francisco (Vietnam Economic Times 2005: 238). Out of the ten international tourism markets on which Vietnam is particularly focused, the US holds huge potential and has already become the second-largest market after Japan. The number of US tourists rose from 189,000 in 1995 to 272,000 in 2005, though the US market is dominated by Viet kieu and therefore more closely linked with Ho Chi Minh City than Hanoi. In terms of international visitor numbers at Hoa Lo museum, the management estimates that 40 per cent of visitors come from the US compared with 20 per cent from France and negligible numbers from Japan and China.

Another factor experienced in most nation states is the expectation placed on museums and other cultural institutions located in the capital city to provide a showcase for visiting dignitaries and a backdrop to major political ceremonies. Since Hanoi is the symbolic heart hub of the Vietnamese political territory and nation (Logan 2007b: 51), the government and the people generally expect the capital to represent them – that is, to reflect their achievements, not just to them-
selves but, on the international stage, to the governments and peoples of other countries. In particular, it is important that foreign diplomats, media representatives, donor organisations and tourists relay positive messages about the country and its people. The cultural role of the capital city is also essential in nation-forming, underlying the efforts by national governments to form and reinforce a national sense of identity and to use this to tie the citizenry together into a more cohesive and cooperative entity. Heritage, of course, performs a major part in this, with cultural elements from the past being selected by the government and the dominant or elite group in society, added to heritage registers of one kind or another, and held up as the ‘official’ heritage of the people’s achievements. Museums provide a venue to display national achievements and reinforce the status acquired by the government in hosting international meetings, such as the 2006 APEC meeting held in Hanoi, or other big events.

Thus, while the well-educated Western visitor might have wished for more incisive interpretation in the Hoa Lo museum, the focus on cleanliness – on ‘clean history’ – was and continues to be seen as meeting both Western and Vietnamese requirements. David Lowenthal’s admonition (1985: 346) that ‘The past’s worst horrors are beyond the power of replication’ also suggests the impossibility of providing anything but a cleaned-up version of places of pain and shame such as Hoa Lo. From the point of view of the current Vietnamese regime, the museum continues to provide a valuable opportunity to spread its message of endurance and survival against the greatest of odds, a message that remains relevant to today’s Vietnamese struggling still to achieve reasonable living standards. Increasingly, the museum seeks to tell the prison story in a way that does not offend tourists and in line with the ideological spin that the authorities demand.

In the nature of public museums worldwide

When I first began researching Hoa Lo in the late 1990s, I arrogantly thought that cultural heritage professionals working in public museums in the West, in contrast to their counterparts in Vietnam, were allowed considerable independence in the way that they mount exhibitions to interpret national stories. I believed that in Vietnam museum professionals were restricted by ideology and government requirements and unable to develop a more objective ‘warts and all’ interpretation approach. What has become clear over the past decade, however, is that public museums everywhere serve to some extent the ideological interests of the governments that fund them and curators everywhere can confront restrictions on their ability to interpret the national past freely, whether these restraints are imposed directly by governments in power or indirectly (and often sub-consciously) through self-censorship. Indeed, recent history has shown that such restrictions are not unusual, even in the Western democracies. The pressure always exists for museums to show visitors the nation at its best – especially for the ever-growing numbers of international tourists, as Davison points out (2006: 91), but also domestic visitors and perhaps especially schoolchildren whose minds
are particularly open to formation. Since governments support public museums through legislative provisions and funding, it follows that they will take an interest in what is shown – and often will want their ideological values reflected, rather than those of opposition parties and groups.

We are used to sneering at the manipulation of public opinion and exploitation of ‘history’ and heritage in totalitarian regimes, including the communist ones. Vietnam today is no longer a full-blown totalitarian state, nor is it a total democracy (Hue-Tam 2001: 9); it is experiencing ‘creeping pluralism’ (Logan 2000: ch. 8). Events over the decade have shown that even the ‘enlightened’ Western democracies can revert to political processes of censorship and media manipulation that are very little different from those we criticise elsewhere. In the United States, France and Australia, ‘culture wars’ have occurred in which governments have rejected critical interpretations of the nation’s past as demeaning and have sought to impose their own more ‘positive’ visions of the past onto school programmes and textbooks as well as public museums. Museums are not self-sufficient in any country. As Mayr (1998: 463) points out:

The efforts of museums are subject to certain basic limitations that lie in their very nature. For the most part, these limitations stem from the obligations of museums to society, their dependence upon financial supporters, and the sources of their intellectual authority. Museums are not financially self-sufficient; they survive only with the help of large, regular subsidies (often three-quarters or more of their annual budgets), usually from the public. In return the institutions are understood to serve the public. ... In return for indispensable financial support, museums give up some autonomy.

Museums in socialist countries, like Hoa Lo in Vietnam, are therefore less different from Western museums than we in the West have liked to think. The ability to act as social agencies helping, as Sandell advocates (2007: xi), to ‘negotiate, constitute and communicate’ social understandings of cultural difference is limited everywhere that governments are locked tightly into ideological positions. In this light, the managers of Hanoi’s Hoa Lo museum deserve respect and support for their efforts to tell the complex and still acutely sensitive story of pain and shame that is encapsulated in the building’s physical structures and its collections.

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Notes

1 Estimates of the numbers held in Hoa Lo are unclear. For the total number of US airmen captured during the entire Vietnam War, the number varies from nearly 600 (Karnow 1994: 389) to more than 700 (Maclear 1981: 361). Most of these were held in the 14 or so prisons in and around Hanoi.


References


