MAKING ORDINARY PEOPLE ACTORS IN NATIONAL HISTORY
'HANOI LIFE UNDER THE SUBSIDY ECONOMY' IN THE VIETNAM MUSEUM OF ETHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes a recent exhibit in Vietnam's national ethnology museum which depicted ordinary people's everyday experiences during the postwar, pre-reform era in Hanoi, an era which was full of hardship and had rarely been discussed publicly prior to this. The exhibit narrated a critical yet nostalgic representation which favored the experiences of 'ordinary citizens" above official discourses about this period. I argue that the exhibit designers aimed to pose ordinary citizens as significant actors in national history, thereby narrating Vietnam's modern history in a new way. In the course of critically examining the past and the present, the exhibit pushed the boundaries of social criticism and public discourse, and showed that museum exhibits are not neutral spaces for the production of knowledge but, rather, can become sites which mediate indirect negotiation between people and the state and re-interpret the past for the present and the future.

Keywords: museums, politics of memory, personal narratives, subsidy system, Vietnam

Telling new stories about the national past

On June 16, 2006, the exhibit 'Hanoi Life under the Subsidy Economy' opened at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME) in Hanoi, the country's premier educational and research venue for presenting the results of Vietnamese anthropology.[1] The attention given to postwar, pre-reform urban conditions was somewhat of a departure for the ethnology museum, which is primarily associated with the cultural heritage of the 54 ethnic groups who are recognized as comprising the nation of Vietnam.

The exhibit depicted the strategies that Hanoi residents used in their everyday lives under the subsidy system from 1975 to 1986 (a period known as *bao cấp* in Vietnamese). The exhibit team pushed the boundaries of censorship, social criticism and public discourse in stressing the agency of 'ordinary people' as an important driving force behind reforms. The usual narrative of Vietnamese history frames the Communist Party and the State as the agents of reform, focusing on the inevitable victory of the Vietnamese Revolution which vanquished the invaders and carries on the tradition of resistance against foreign aggression (see Pelley 2002). Whereas this is the dominant narrative in most Vietnamese museums (e.g. the Museum of Vietnamese History, the Vietnamese Revolutionary

Museum)—and in textbooks and histories—by positioning ordinary people as active in reforms the VME exhibit was able to tell new stories about the national past.

This paper discusses the subsidy era exhibit and is part of my larger project to contextualize the work of anthropologists and museologists in Vietnam.[2] In 2007 I spent twelve months doing ethnographic research at the museum, and the exhibit was on display for ten of those months. During that time I interviewed the six members of the exhibit team, museum leaders and members of the 'front end' museum staff. I also participated in a review of the exhibit and helped conduct some visitor studies organized by the museum. I was allowed to access the exhibit's guest books and I spent countless hours in the exhibit itself observing and participating. In 2007 there were approximately 95 staff members at the VME, not accounting for volunteers, temporary staff or retired personnel.

In any nation, the production of history takes on tremendous significance yet, according to Communist ideology, state socialism is the inevitable outcome of historical forces. Thus, representing the past has primarily been the prerogative of the Communist Party and the government in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Many social scientists stress that the most useful conceptualization of 'the state' sees it not as a single, unified actor but rather as a complex, multi-voiced system (Kerkvliet 2001: 182). My case study supports the argument that negotiating the state in contemporary Vietnam happens everyday, through what people do or do not do, typically in indirect and hidden ways (Kerkvliet 2001). In this exhibit, the designers and participants expressed their ideas, while visitors responded both by writing in the guest books provided and through special public events held at the VME where concerns, critiques and alternative explanations were offered. These included the museum's public meeting to review one year of the subsidy exhibit, held in July 2007, and a competition among college students to write papers about the subsidy era which resulted in a public presentation of the top three papers, held in April 2007. Therefore, the exhibit is not simply neutral ground but presents additional narratives in new voices to create plural histories and to acknowledge the active participation of citizens in an authoritarian political system. With regard to memory, this study supports the idea that under state socialism 'official histories, while plentiful, never precluded the active construction and transmission of unofficial pasts' particularly those 'enshrined in living memory' such as the subsidy era (Watson 1994: 19).

Political and economic contexts of postwar Vietnam

An analysis of the exhibit requires a contextualization of the subsidy period itself. In September 1945, between the Japanese military withdrawal and French attempts to reinstall colonial power, Hồ Chí Minh declared an independent Vietnam.[3] A nine-year war erupted between the French and Vietnamese in the north, ending with France's defeat in 1954 and a diplomatic stalemate with what was meant to be a temporary division of the country.[4] In the 1960s, military conflict broke out between the US-supported Republic of Vietnam in the south, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) under Hồ Chí Minh in the north. This struggle lasted until the withdrawal of American forces in 1973 and the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975.

In 1976, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) was established, and the government and the Vietnamese Communist Party set out to consolidate the entire country under the banner of socialism. Although the Vietnamese state had attempted to build industry and agriculture since 1954, three decades of war had stymied development. The postwar economy remained stagnant. The government formulated a subsidy system in order to meet the basic needs of the population and, from 1975–1986, provided civil servants in urban areas allotments of foods and goods.[5] This period was a time of hardship and isolation when people who had sacrificed their homes and families faced a seemingly endless deprivation of basic necessities. People commonly remember this era as 'the dark night before reforms'. The general malaise of this period was further strained by government programs and policies which were unsuccessful, such as agricultural collectivization in the south which essentially created a landless class of farmers (Lockhart and Duiker 2006). During the subsidy era, a common joke stated that the acronym for socialism in Vietnamese really stood for 'stand in line all day', referencing the distribution system.[6] Equating the political ideology of the new nation-state with standing in line all day to receive food is at once a powerful indicator of dissatisfaction with the system and an observation of the postwar disillusionment which characterized the era.

Reforms came in the mid 1980s, with changes in Party leadership and a gradual shift from many policies, including the subsidy system. These reforms culminated at the 1986 Party Congress in Hanoi when economic reforms known as Renovation (*đổi mới*) were approved. Since then, economic policies have shifted from a centrally-planned economy toward a 'market economy with socialist characteristics'. The pre-reform and reform eras impacted on people's lives to such an extent that people often reference events by saying something happened 'during the subsidy era' or 'after the reforms'.

'Everyone must re-discover the past'

In 2005, the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences initiated a research project to review the twenty years since Renovation. The director of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, Professor Nguyễn Văn Huy, was among the social scientists who participated in the project. He and others sensed that something was missing: the question of what had necessitated reforms and, more interestingly from their perspectives as anthropologists, people's everyday coping strategies in the pre-reform era. They argued: 'Everyone must re-discover the past', and they proposed an exhibit which would focus on the 'average citizens" stories during the subsidy era. They wanted to show not only how the policymakers changed history, but also how ordinary people—usually phrased as 'the people' (*nhân dân*)—had participated. Although Vietnam is theoretically a 'classless society', the exhibit made it subtly evident that even during the subsidy era, those who were government employees or civil servants were the ones who benefited. The system did not seem to reach the countryside or the south very successfully, and civil servants would have been most affected by its removal.

The younger generation, those born after 1986, have been called the post-*đổi mới* generation. During the retrospective project to review the 20 years of reform since

Renovation, Director Huy and others articulated a growing disconnection: the younger generations knew little about their parents' and grandparents' struggles and hardships after the war. Although reforms had greatly improved peoples' living standards, many feared that rapid change and globalization were diminishing the opportunities for the *bao cấp* generation to tell their stories. Museum leaders sensed the time was right for an exhibit on the subsidy economy era.

Collecting objects and stories

In January 2006, the VME made its first public announcement about the subsidy era project which stated the rationale for the exhibit as follows:

> Over the past twenty years, with the implementation of [reforms], memory of the *bao cấp* era is becoming unclear; the generations born since 1986 lack a clear understanding about those difficult times and the special value of the task of renovation. In order to take part in the education of all citizens, especially the youth, the VME is conducting research and collecting objects to make an exhibit about the *bao cấp* time. The exhibit will raise public awareness about the value of the huge achievements of the Party and our people over the past twenty years of our country's renovation (…).[7]

The museum called on people across the country to contribute objects, photos and stories. A team of researchers sought out 'subsidy-era objects' which they often found in their own homes and neighborhoods. The team also began to interview residents in different Hanoi neighborhoods, and gathered their stories about the period. Eventually, out of these interviews, the exhibit team also created four ethnographic films. These were produced in the 'community filmmaking' style, in which selected interviewees participated in the editing and the final film product, a method which the VME was learning in coordination with Wendy Erd, a specialist from the Homer Alaska Museum. A fifth film was composed of archival film clips from the subsidy era, overlaid with music from the time.

By the time the exhibit opened in June 2006, more than 500 objects had been gathered.[8] Objects were grouped into four categories: those related to the system of distribution (such as ration books or coupons), household goods (such as clothing, cooking tools and luxury goods brought back from abroad: electric fans, a plastic doll from Russia or a German fur coat) and means of transportation (bicycle, see Figure 1). The fourth category was 'things for extra-work' (such as a typewriter, sewing machine, cigarette rollers). Objects chosen for the exhibit were everyday objects, which often were still being used, or which were present in mundane environments. One researcher told me that ration coupons were the most common objects that they found in collecting. Many people had kept their coupons, some even claiming that they never knew whether they might need them again in the future. Another researcher told me how his favorite among the objects that he had collected was a rock which was used by its owner during the subsidy era to hold his place in line. The owner of the rock was the proprietor of a Hanoi café which the researcher frequented though until the exhibit the researcher, 30 years old, had had no idea of its previous use. The rock was displayed at eye level so that visitors could see that the owner had marked his name and rice coupon number on it. The owner agreed to lend the rock

Figure 1: Bicycle with registration papers on display (Photo: M. Bodemer, courtesy of the VME)

but requested vehemently that it be returned as he valued it as a souvenir (*kỷ niệm*) of those times (see Figure 2).

The exhibit was divided into five sections: Distribution System, Social Management and Culture, Apartment Living, Activeness and Creativity, and Dreams (see Figure 3), and included objects, recreated scenes and the ethnographic films. Since the exhibit was intended to evoke people's feelings and memories, even the music and the colors of the walls a yellowish-brown which replicated the wall-color used in the collective housing of the time were meant to be reminiscent of the subsidy era. (THDBT, Quy III 2006: 1).[9]

Telling new stories about the national past: ordinary people as actors in national history

In Vietnam's national history 'the people' are represented collectively as contributing to resistance against foreign aggression. In this way, the past, even individual lives, becomes intermingled with, and sometimes rewritten within, the history of the state and the Party. However, the 1986 reforms brought an increase in 'other actors' and 'other stories' in what some have called the 'changing landscapes of memory' (Tai 2001). In the subsidy era exhibit, I found the story was less about challenging official history and more about contributing to its diversification, where the other actors are 'ordinary people' who are posed as agents of reform, in addition to the Party and the state.

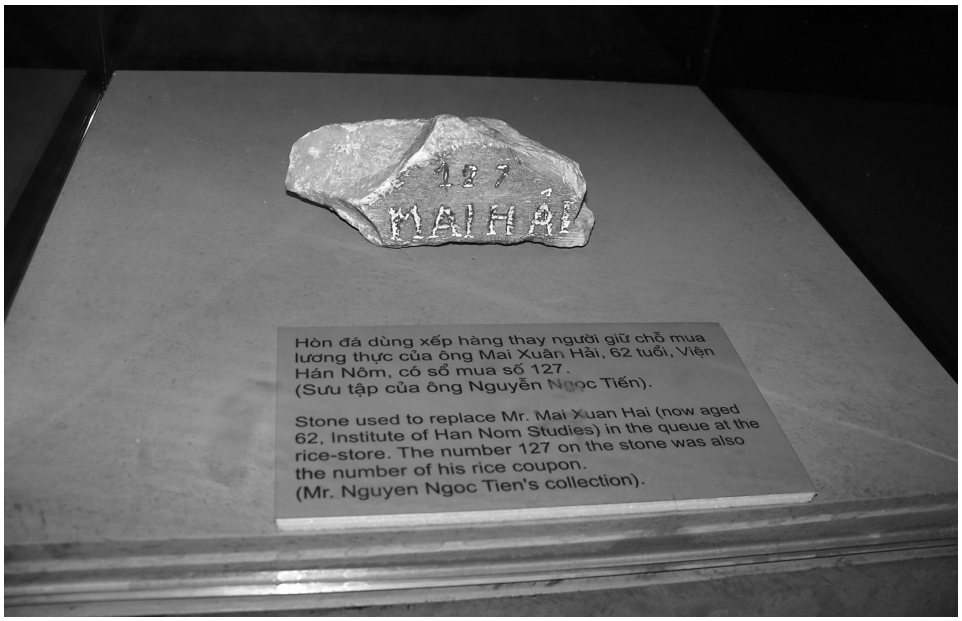

Figure 2: Placeholder rock loaned for the subsidy exhibit (Photo: M. Bodemer, courtesy of the VME)

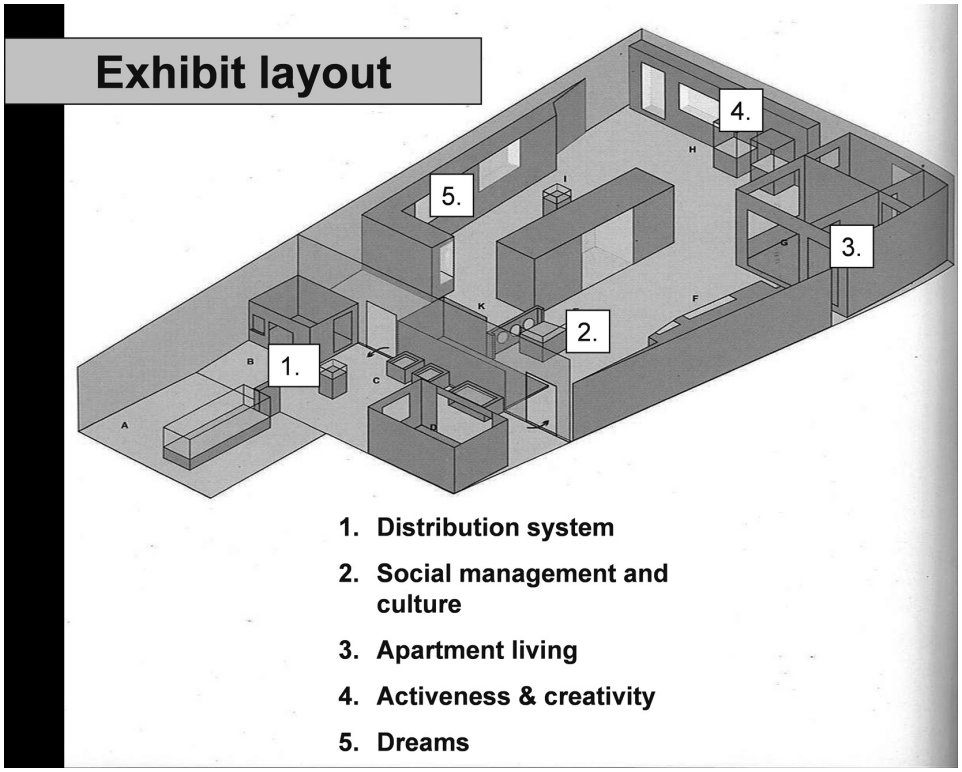

Figure 3: Layout of the exhibit (adapted from Nguyễn et al. 2007)

Exhibit designers clearly articulated the actions of people and linked them with the success of reforms, as in this text excerpt that appeared in the exhibit's introductory panel:

> The subsidy era was a period during which the courage and the intelligence of millions of people were suppressed and they were therefore anxious to be freed. For these reasons, when renovation policy was finally introduced, the energy of the people virtually exploded, creating a boom in social and economic development. (Nguyễn, Văn Huy et al. 2007: 13)

In this quote, development resulting from successful policy is also successful because of the active 'energy' of the people, not only the Party and the state. Showing the active contributions of ordinary people was further accomplished by the exhibit panels, which provided quoted statements in English and Vietnamese, alongside the person's name and photo. Visitors responded to this first-person voice technique because it seemed to allow these individuals, rather than merely the exhibit designers, to speak directly to them. The exhibit team consciously avoided using quotes or texts from official speeches or resolutions, because they wanted to emphasize peoples' individual voices.

Touching on sensitive issues: corruption, profiteering and the (unequal) distribution system

The first portion of the exhibit explained the coupon distribution system, demonstrating how ordinary people had dealt with the state bureaucracy. In this section the team walked a fine line when they touched on sensitive issues, such as corruption, profiteering and the opinion that the subsidy system was ineffective and unequal. For example, in an exhibit panel one man recalled that 'during the subsidy period, people who worked for the Provisions department had incredible power', thereby suggesting but not overtly declaring corruption at a higher level. Although the exhibit team avoided using negative terms to describe the subsidy era in the texts or panels, in some cases they quoted people who used these terms. For example, in another exhibit panel, a woman recalled 'black marketeers', saying:

> Many sales clerks did illegal dealings on the side, especially young ones without a firm character. They often sold goods to black marketeers to get extra money. But they were also often threatened by the black marketeers, who were usually jobless individuals so they considered buying and selling as their job.

In both examples, the ones at fault are the officials and those 'individuals lacking strong character' and not the 'ordinary people'. This sent the message that while most people avoided the black market they were sometimes forced by circumstances to purchase goods on the side. The implied sympathy for their need underlines another technique utilized by the designers, that of emphasizing positive and negative aspects of the era. The exhibit highlighted people's strategies for coping with the subsidy era hardships. Many people made their income from small extra jobs or work on the side, like sewing or creating products, while others bartered with their neighbors for services or goods. One man recalled how he negotiated an extra rice ration from the rice store clerk in exchange for his labor, saying: 'During the subsidy era, I fixed radios in exchange for an extra rice

ration.' Inclusion of this kind of remark further demonstrates the exhibit designers' goal of focusing on the strategies and experiences of average citizens.

The issue of how the subsidy system worked and whether it was effective or equitable was addressed in the section on Distribution. One of the museum researchers had a major coup when the former head of the Hanoi office for coupon management loaned the museum a copy of the distribution chart for the subsidy system. The chart was enlarged to giant size and hung in the exhibit where it created much excitement because it was the first time such information had been publicly displayed. Although it had been common knowledge that coupons for foods and goods were allocated to civil servants based on their salary rank and family size, it was never publicly known what these exact quotas were. This chart, however, clearly showed that the highest rank in the distribution system included members of the Political Bureau, the Central Party Committee and Heads of Government Ministries; while the lower categories included laborers, policemen and low-level clerks. Each level had several sub-categories (A1, A2, and so on). These ranks also included state office employees, laborers, soldiers, policemen, certain people living in cities and members of cooperatives (Nguyễn et al, 2007: 15). Under the subsidy system, members of the top A category were allocated 4.2 kilograms of meat (approx. 9 pounds) whereas those at E level were allocated .4 kilograms of meat (less than one pound). This was belated proof of just how little 'ordinary people' received in comparison with high-ranking officials and Party members, and the chart became a focal point for visitors. The display and the attention it received constituted a vivid critique of knowledge practices and of the subsidy system itself.

Waiting in line for rice

Rice was (and still is) the most important food staple in Vietnamese people's lives and during the subsidy era it had to be purchased using the allotted coupons at a specific store. The exhibit included a re-creation of a rice store, with four figures waiting in line. It was the most photographed object in the exhibit, partly because many visitors jumped in line behind the mannequins and asked to have their photo taken. Intended to replicate the look and feel of a subsidy era rice store, written on the wall inside the store were the words: 'This stall follows the words of Uncle Hồ'—which meant that it followed the rules (see Figure 4).

Standing in line to buy rice was one of the most remembered hardships of the subsidy era, and nearly every person I interviewed who had lived through this time recalled standing in rice lines. People often went at midnight to get a place in line for the next day. Losing one's rice coupons meant not eating, as reflected in a popular saying: 'The face is as sad as though the rice coupon was lost'. Besides having to wait in line, people worried about the poor quality of the rice; worse still, sometimes stores ran out of rice altogether and one waited all day to receive nothing at all. As I mentioned earlier, there was a common joke which stated that the acronym for socialism in Vietnamese really stood for 'stand in line all day'. This joking indicator of public dissatisfaction shows how people used humor to cope with the hardships and frustration of those times. Similarly, I think the inclusion of the sign 'This stall follows the words of Uncle Hồ' in the rice-

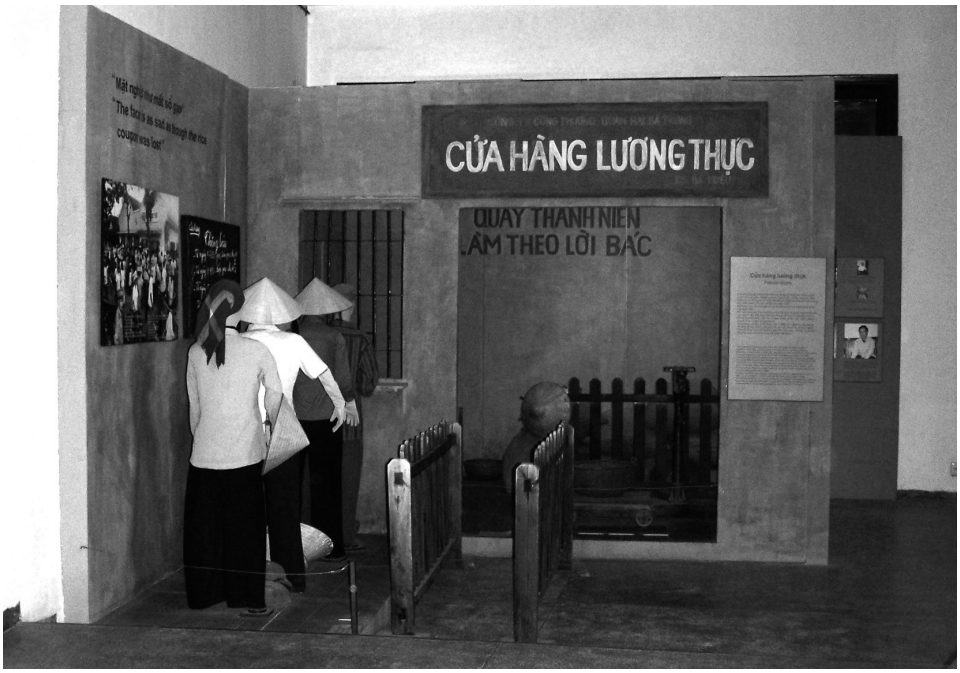

Figure 4: Food store recreation (Photo: M. Bodemer, courtesy of the VME)

store re-creation is meant somewhat ironically, as if to subtly remind people that, in fact, the authorities controlling the subsidy system were to blame, although they may have tried to pose as the voice of Hồ Chí Minh. These are examples which suggest how people viewed their positions *vis-a-vis* the state and its idols.

Conclusion

After the first three months of the exhibit (June—September 2006), the museum reported that daily visitors to the museum had reached a record high of up to 1,400 visitors in a single day (up from the past record high of 1,000 visitors) and in that time there had been a total of 54,718 visitors to the museum, an increase of over 19,000 visitors from the previous year (THDBT, Quy IV 2006: 2). Visitor responses to the exhibit were phenomenal in number and wide-ranging in sentiment. Over the year, foreign and Vietnamese visitors filled more than one dozen comment books—over 2,400 pages—with their impressions, and the museum carried out over 500 visitor surveys during the summers of 2006 and 2007.

Although the exhibit had originally been intended to last for only six months, it was eventually shown for eighteen. Citing 'public appreciation and the exhibit's educational value', the museum announced in February 2007 that it would be extending it to run for a full year,[10] and then in June 2007, after the full year, the museum announced that it would further extend the exhibit, because it had attracted 'record audience numbers'[11]

and 'the greatest public' support of any exhibit at the VME. The museum announcement claimed that it had been successful in the goal of teaching Hanoi residents and the younger generation about the 'value of reforms'.[12] Finally, with little warning or fanfare, the exhibit was dismantled in October 2007, announced in the museum's newsletter after the fact.

I have discussed how this particular museum exhibit focused on people's experiences during the subsidy era, and I have argued that this emphasis on 'ordinary citizens' was a strategy on the part of the exhibit team to show that people's stories are important for understanding Vietnam's pre-reform era; by choosing this emphasis, they created a supplemental narrative to the official story about the need for reform. By stressing the agency of the people, it was suggested that the people themselves wanted change and helped reforms to succeed. Another interpretation is that the exhibit's narrative simultaneously critiqued and validated the government and the Party. Such validation is most clear in the final panel, which applauds the work of the government and the Party since *đổi mới* in 1986, when they 'realized the problems of *bao cấp* and worked to change'. This would appear to contradict the insistence that 'ordinary people' were also to be credited with pushing reforms but, as I suggest elsewhere (Bodemer 2010), it may well have been a strategy employed by the team in order to gain the necessary acceptance to stage the exhibit in the first place.

Thus in considering the politics of memory and the state in Vietnam, I suggest that museum exhibits, such as this one, are not neutral sites for the production of knowledge,[13] but rather, can become sites for indirect negotiation between people and the state. This is also implicated in an open question which was scrawled by a visitor in the comment book: 'Who made us live through the subsidy era?'[14] This terse comment, scrawled anonymously in Vietnamese amid the pages of salutations, thank yous and comments like 'I Love Vietnam', indicates a critical sentiment and the effort to place blame somewhere for this decade of suffering. This kind of sentiment seems to be one kind of message the exhibit hoped to communicate to visitors.

NOTES

[1] The name of the exhibit in Vietnamese was *Cuộc sống ở Hà Nội thời bao cấp (1975–1986).*

[2] Research in Hanoi was funded by a Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad award (2006–2007) and hosted by the VME.

[3] The revolutionary efforts in this period are collectively referred to in Vietnam as the August Revolution (*cách mạng tháng tám).* In Vietnam, September 2, 1945 is remembered as Independence Day, although in fact political control of the country was not realized until 1954 in the north, and 1976 for the entire country.

[4] The country was divided at the 17th parallel, following the Geneva Accords which were signed by the US and South Vietnam (and a few other nations). This was followed by massive population movements as many Catholics fled south while others moved north.

[5] A subsidy system had previously been enacted by the northern state in the early 1960s, in order to provide food and consumer goods (such as bicycles and clothing from China) to citizens and military forces (Lockhart and Duiker 2006).

[6] The acronym XHCN is used to stand for *xã hội chủ nghĩa* (socialism) and in the joke is transposed with *xếp hàng cả ngày* (stand in line all day) (personal anecdote, 2007).

[7] From the VME quarterly newsletter, 'Trưng bày về cuộc sống người Hà Nội thời bao cấp' in *Tin Hoạt Động của Bảo Tàng Dân Tộc Học Việt Nam*, Quý I 2006: 3; hereafter, THDBT. Translated by author and used with permission from the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology. In this early article, the title of the exhibit is not stated.

[8] This figure included replicated objects, original objects, texts, photographs and video. Replicated objects were clearly denoted (*hàng gia)* in the exhibit and texts, following the VME's standard practice. Staff reported that visitors to Vietnamese museums commonly express doubts about the authenticity of objects, asking, 'is it real?'—meaning 'authentic'—even in an ethnological museum which, unlike history museums, does not feature ancient or antique objects. Thus, identifying replicated objects reflects the VME policy of gaining the trust of the visiting public just as much as the concern with correctly identifying objects in the interest of 'scientific' museum practice.

[9] Further invoking the feeling of the subsidy era was the music selected to play in the exhibit continuously. The lighting was dull and dim though after some complaints it was adjusted at some point to provide a little more light.

[10] Feb. 2, 2007 Press Release: 'The Closing Date of the Exhibition'.

[11] Quy IV, 2007, VME News Bulletin: 2.

[12] June 28, 2007 VME Press Release: 'Review the One year Exhibition of Hanoi'.

[13] As Schwenkel concludes in her analysis of Vietnamese and American war photography exhibits and the politics of transnational commemoration: 'Requiem [an exhibit of war photography] was not a politically neutral site of knowledge production and transnational commemoration. The competing visual narratives that surfaced in the exhibit through displays of capitalist and socialist realisms—namely vanquished versus victorious bodies—point to persistent historical-ideological struggles that permeate reconciliatory processes and play out in the complex and unstable relations between memory and forgetfulness.' (Schwenkel 2008: 62)

[14] Original: *Ai đã làm chúng ta phải trải qua thời bao cấp?* Anonymous comment written in visitor's book, March 2006. Translated by author and used with permission from Education Department, Vietnam Museum of Ethnology.

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