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Repression and resistance? French colonialism as seen through Vietnamese museums

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Abstract

The paper examines how resistance to colonial rule is officially represented in contemporary Vietnam. It does so by analyzing selected museums - which are all state-controlled - in the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi. Although Hanoi's rich colonial era architectural heritage is slowly being recognized, this reassessment has yet to find a parallel in Vietnam's official museum discourse. The manner in which the imperial legacy is treated or ignored today through the didactic medium of the museum helps us to understand how contemporary national identity is constructed in opposition to empire. Vietnam's imperial history remains shadowy, indicating a continuing post-colonial malaise. The fact that museum representation must cater both to an internal audience of Vietnamese and an external audience of tourists, donors, potential investors and foreign dignitaries helps to explain this lack of clarity.

Keywords: Colonialism, Vietnam, Museum, Representation

Introduction

Hanoi's rich, colonial-era architectural heritage is slowly being reassessed, but this has yet to find a parallel in Vietnam's official museum discourse on the period. The Vietnamese government's political rhetoric concerning the nation's past continues to be dominated by memories of national resistance and valour. Historical symbols and heroic tales also colour social relations and foster everyday expressions of 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995) in Vietnam, of which museums are a prime example. Although colonial conflict has a place in this narrative, it is generally downplayed in favour of other periods, such as the Vietnam-American war and Vietnam's successive attempts at repelling northern invaders. The present paper examines how resistance to colonial rule is officially represented in contemporary Vietnam by looking at a range of museums, all of which are state-controlled, in the capital of Hanoi.

The manner in which resistance to colonialism is addressed or ignored today through the didactic medium of the museum helps us to understand how contemporary national identity is constructed in opposition to empire. Given France's colonial exploitation of Indochina, symbols of repression might be expected to take pride of place in Hanoi's museums. Nonetheless, such displays are relatively rare, and a systematic overview of the era is nowhere to be found. The first section of the paper develops a theoretical framework for analysing museum discourse in Vietnam before exploring the Vietnamese museum context in the second section. Finally, the third section relates museum discourse to the Vietnamese government's attempts to supplant the image of Indochina propagated by the French with that of an ancient and united Vietnamese nation, concluding that treatment of colonial history in state-run museums is rather fragmentary and inconsistent. This is an unexpected finding in a country where there is an official party line on most issues, including historiography and ethnography. The fact that museum representation must cater both to an internal audience of Vietnamese and an external audience of tourists, donors, potential investors and foreign dignitaries helps to explain this lack of clarity.

Representing the nation

Nationalism, both as a government ideology and a popular feeling of belonging, is often recognized as being very present in Vietnam (Templer 1998), but has rarely been the subject of study in its own right (Duiker 1976). Recent studies on official national historiography (Pelley 2002) and commemoration (Hue-Tam 2001) explore the theme of historical representation, without explicitly teasing out the nationalist thread of government discourse. Nationalist movements throughout the colonial period have been the subject of detailed historical studies (Marr 1971 and 1981, Hue-Tam 1992, Duiker 1976 and 1981, Woodside 1976), often based on archival materials (Marr 1981) or literary sources (Jamieson 1993). However, analysis of the contemporary 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) is relatively rare (Hue-Tam 2001 ; Schwenkel 2004). The present paper sets out to analyze how government attempts to shape Vietnamese national identity today find their expression in museological interpretations of the French colonial period.

In his important book entitled *Banal Nationalism* (1995), Michael Billig marks a departure from the tendency to associate nationalism with peripheral, separatist movements: '[t]hose in established nations – at the centre of things – are led to see nationalism as the property of others' (Billig 1995: 5). Instead, he sets out to question the assumptions implicit in the equation of 'nation' with 'state' by looking at everyday examples of 'banal' nationalism, as opposed to the 'hot' nationalism typical of warmongering or other international crises. Nationalism, he asserts, 'far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition' (Billig 1995, 6). Ironically, however, Billig's own empirical study of newspapers distributed in the United Kingdom assumed them to be British newspapers, neglecting to explore the extent to which they flagged distinctly English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish identities.

Subsequent work (Rosie *et al.* 2004) has shown how the language used in newspapers targeting, say, a predominantly Scottish or English readership, must manipulate national representations in order to avoid offending their respective sensibilities. These national representations are not only shaped across space but also across time, with the legitimating aura of *longue durée* constituting a central plank of nationalist ideology. Bond, McCrone and Brown (2003) have theorized this process in terms of 'reiteration, recapture, reinterpretation and repudiation'. Taking economic development agencies as an example, they show how non-political institutions harness cultural resources to what is perceived to be the current national interest (Bond *et al.* 2003: 371). In so doing, these institutions use and manipulate nationalism in a banal, economic context as opposed to a politically charged one. At the same time, they are sensitive to both internal and external mobilizations of identity. In the latter case, the aim is to enhance or reshape the nation's reputation in the eyes of those 'beyond the nation' itself (Bond *et al.* 2003: 376). It represents an exercise in image-making or national branding designed to attract foreign tourists, investors and entrepreneurs.

Christina Schwenkel (2004) has demonstrated how museum representation in Vietnam is directed at both an internal and an external audience. One element of this phenomenon is the 'reinvention' of Vietnamese history to fit the dominant national narrative of resistance to foreign aggression (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979, for example, has been reinterpreted and often all but eclipsed in order to fit in with this discourse. However, in the wake of improvements in diplomatic relations, museum exhibits on USA or Chinese 'war crimes' have been toned down or removed altogether so as to spare foreign sensibilities. This paper looks at a further instance of 'museum manipulation', namely selected depictions of resistance to French colonialism. In so doing, it seeks to draw out a certain lack of focus in the narrative. One important reason for this is the difficulty in reconciling exhibits targeting both an internal and an external audience. Interestingly, the French currently find themselves in a comparable situation, as a piece of legislation promoting the positive portrayal of French colonial history is hotly debated.¹

The museum as a European institution grew in popularity during the nineteenth century, at the same time as the nation-state concept was being consolidated (Macdonald 2003; McCarthy 2004). The nationalization of princely collections and the development of art museums such as the Louvre was one means by which citizenship was nurtured and by which

high culture was transmitted to the masses. However, there is also the question of how citizens were enlisted for the purposes of war and colonial conquest and how museums 'invented' the nation within its international setting. Institutions such as France's *Musée des Colonies* or the British Imperial War Museum were undoubtedly ideological tools used to present colonization and war as national sources of pride and glory. An ideology is defined here as an adaptable but internally coherent belief system that offers an interpretation of society coupled with practical measures for maintaining or changing the political *status quo*. In other words, ideology is a world view combining a flexible, active political strategy with its principled justification. A nationalist ideology, in turn, places the nation at the core of its political project, making it the central referential point of any policy (Freeden 1998). In this case, museums are ultimately an expression of Vietnamese Communist Party ideology, which 'managed to capture the nationalist discourse' (Ninh 2002: 1) and co-opt or eliminate political opponents following Vietnam's August revolution of 1945. The use of terms such as 'memory workers' and 'heritage brokers' to describe museum curators (Gielen 2004: 148) testifies to their role as agents and manipulators of the past.

This paper sets out from the premise that today's museums continue to be engaged in ideological work, and that the identities they represent are thus imbued with a political project. However, Macdonald (2003:1) asks whether museums are 'too inextricably entangled in 'old' forms of identity to be able to express 'new' ones?' This question is also relevant to Vietnamese museums, although 'old' and 'new' must be carefully defined. Does 'old' refer to the colonial buildings in which many museums are housed, or does it refer to the pre-colonial past which Vietnam's socialist government has self-consciously shaped and propagated since 1945 (Pelley 2002)? Does 'new' still refer to socialist principles - as opposed to colonialism and feudalism - or to the 'socialist market economy' model, which the Vietnamese state has sought to develop since 1986? Studies of Vietnamese representations of colonial history, such as war memorials (Malarney 2001; Schwenkel 2004), tourist attractions (Kennedy and Williams 2001), official historiography (Pelley 2002) and cultural policy (Ninh 2002) identify general trends in state discourse concerning Vietnam and its colonial 'Other'. Again, discussion of the colonial 'Other' must distinguish French entrepreneur and administrator from Vietnamese collaborator. Both French colonialism and the so-called 'feudalism' of the Vietnamese emperor's court are condemned in museum representations of the colonial period, although to differing degrees. Priya Chacko's (2004) reference to India could also be applied to Vietnam: '[t]he postcolonial Self is defined against the colonizing, exploiting foreign Other as well as against an internal, premodern India'.

Post-colonial theory offers some guidance on how to interpret the colonizer/colonized relationship. Studying Vietnamese post-colonialism as an ideological coming-to-terms, or a 'contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism' (Loomba 1998: 12), is useful in understanding the ambivalent relationship between colonizer and colonized. This is encapsulated in anti-colonial nationalism, which launched a 'most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a 'modern' national culture that is nevertheless not Western' (Chatterjee 1993: 6). Post-colonial theory teaches us that there is no clear colonizer/colonized binary. This is evident in the difficulties the Vietnamese Communist Party encountered in purging Vietnamese intellectuals of Western ideas and of reinventing history to fit the framework laid down by the brotherhood of socialist states. Ironically, the museum as an institution was a French innovation in Vietnam, later copied by a Vietnamese emperor in Hue, before being harnessed to the Communist Party cause. Today, a piece of museum legislation dating from 2001 has led to the first private museums in Vietnam and the search for non-state sources of funding, which will gradually weaken state control on museum representation.² The museum is thus an example of hybridity or cultural mixing (Schech and Haggis 2000: 79). It is a Western import which has acted as a vehicle for the representation of both colonial and anti-colonial ideologies in Vietnam.

In the twenty-first century, global exchange is added to the cultural mix. In seeking to position itself on the world stage (Dosch and Ta 2004), Vietnam has to reconcile nation-building with building up new relationships together with erstwhile enemies. This, in turn, can lead to mixed messages. At the interface between these external and internal audiences, museums provide a useful illustration of this phenomenon. In attempting to understand contemporary

Vietnamese government discourse on colonialism, the present paper will concentrate on museological rather than visitor interpretation. The methodological approach adopted here derives from the analysis of artefacts as representative of organizational goals and thinking (Kuehl and Strodtholz 2002). In this case, organizational thinking is likened to the ideological, nation-building work undertaken by a given museum through its institutional discourse. The second methodological source is interpretation guidelines intended for museum practitioners (Hiller 2001). Artefact analysis amounts to the researcher's self-conscious assessment of the exhibit's theme, point of view and selection, one which can be supplemented by any number of alternative perspectives. The focus on Hanoi's museums means that the Northern Vietnamese perspective dominates this paper. Southern Vietnam's situation on decolonization should also be signposted, however. A French colony since 1864 (northern and central Vietnam had officially been protectorates and only since 1887) with a completely different history of population and eventual occupation by northern Vietnam (Tana 1993), southern Vietnam has also had to be incorporated into contemporary government nation-building (Hue-Tam 1998).

Museums as mediators

France's colonization of Indochina began with the acquisition of Cochinchina (Southern Vietnam) from the Vietnamese emperor in 1864 and ended with the defeat of the battle of *Dien Bien Phu* in 1954. In 1910, the French established the first Vietnamese museum in Hanoi. In 1915 and 1926 respectively, Danang's Cham sculpture museum and the Louis Finot museum in Hanoi were opened to house the collections of the *Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient* (EFEO). This last institution was founded in 1901 to study Indochina's monuments, languages and cultures. The Northern and Southern Vietnamese governments appropriated its museum collections in Hanoi and Saigon after the French defeat. EFEO left Hanoi in 1957, reopening offices and a library there in 1993. Although no additional museums were created by the Southern Vietnamese government during its lifetime, the Northern Vietnamese state actively added to the museum landscape, creating the Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution, the Vietnam Military History Museum and the Vietnam Fine Arts Museum between 1959 and 1966 in Hanoi alone.³ All three are housed in colonial buildings. These initiatives were taken by the fledgling Ministry of Culture. Created in 1955 as an offshoot of the propaganda ministry, it soon began to assert itself as the defining force of official Vietnamese culture.

The Ministry of Culture made some false starts before a 1958 evaluation by none other than Ho Chi Minh himself insisted that it approach culture as an ideological and educational tool, rather than merely as a form of entertainment (Ninh 2002). During the 1950s, the very content of Vietnamese culture was being revolutionized at the same time as the countryside was undergoing the upheaval of land reform. The socialist nature of the revolution meant that a return to the past was not the order of the day. On the contrary, most religious festivals and rituals were banned as superstitious, wedding and funeral feasts were severely curtailed, and ostentatious ancestral altars were strongly discouraged. Furthermore, '[s]ome of the Ministry of Culture's most important work would be in sketching out the shape and content of Vietnamese culture untainted by colonialism' (Ninh 2002: 173). One of its four explicit goals was to construct a national culture by making good use of past heritage and eradicating vestiges of the enemy's culture (Ninh 2002: 169).

With the end of the first Indochinese War in 1954, Vietnamese intellectuals had begun to voice their discontent that censorship and other controls were not being relaxed. A crackdown on the publications they used to voice their opinions came in 1956. This was followed in 1958 by the campaign entitled 'Wage a New Life,' designed to discourage outdated practices. Through measures such as these, the Vietnamese government set about eradicating 'the enemy within', namely bourgeois attitudes and French educational influence, which had been all too evident from the style and substance of the intellectuals' protests. The government's initial ambivalence as to whether to do so by preserving or destroying the past (Ninh 2002: 240) recalls the impassioned debates on Vietnamese national identity of the 1920s and 30s (Marr 1971 and 1981). This contested nation-building process necessarily continues to this day, as Vietnam positions itself vis-à-vis China, the West and its own traditions. The need to cater to

these different audiences helps to explain the lack of a clear narrative on the colonial period across state-run museums. More general trends appear to be the celebration of an ancient past - an archaeological 'race to antiquity' also being pursued by Thailand, Laos and China among others (Loofs-Wissowa 1993; Pholsena 2004) - and a selective rehabilitation and revival of folk beliefs (Taylor 2002). However, no clear thread in post-colonial *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or coming to terms with the past, is evident from museum discourse in Hanoi.

Today, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a one-party state. The Vietnamese Communist Party (under various titles) has governed in Northern Vietnam since 1945 and across the unified state since 1975. Its current cultural policy continues to be based on party principles laid down in 1943. These state that culture is the spiritual foundation of society, that Vietnam's culture should be progressive and imbued with national identity, that it is both united and diversified, and that the Communist Party leads all the people in building and developing culture.⁴ The exact wording of 1943 regarding national identity was repeated in a 1998 resolution, intended to tackle the negative influence on Vietnam's traditional heritage of the internet, pornography, Western culture and 'social evils' such as drug abuse and prostitution. The Ministry of Culture and Information still strongly emphasizes the core values and overall unity of Vietnamese culture.

In a system running parallel to government structures, the Vietnamese Communist Party oversees an extensive network of literary, artistic, theatrical, film, ethnology and other associations, which all continue to adhere to the party line. Artists should become members if they wish to work for the state or comfortably within it. Since 1997, a government directive has called on the cultural sector to look for additional sources of funding to state subsidies, which have been severely scaled back since a market-oriented renovation policy known as *đổi mới* was introduced at the 6th Communist Party Congress in 1986. Many cultural institutions have lacked the skills to market themselves in this new environment. One notable exception is Vietnam's Museum of Ethnology, which receives technical support from the Rockefeller Foundation and Smithsonian Institute, as well as funding from a raft of foreign embassies.

From a current nationwide total of around 120 major metropolitan and provincially-run museums and 3000 listed cultural and heritage sites, Hanoi itself is home to circa fifteen museums, with additional museums devoted to the city of Hanoi and traditional performing arts scheduled to open in 2005 and 2006 respectively. The Military History Museum has also been earmarked for major refurbishment, and a Museum of South-East Asian culture has long been planned on the Museum of Ethnology grounds. This continuous activity of support and extension suggests that the Vietnamese government considers museums to be an important pillar of its cultural policy. The structure and contents of nationalist discourse in Vietnam are exemplified by the Hanoi Museum of History, which tells a linear, chronological story emphasizing the idea of national unity. This is complemented by the Museum of Ethnology (*bảo tàng dân tộc*) which is designed to document Vietnam's ethnic diversity.

The Vietnamese term *dân tộc* - variously translated as nation, race, ethnic group and nationality - is used both to create the term *chủ nghĩa dân tộc* for nationalism and also *dân tộc thiểu số*, meaning ethnic minority. Vietnam is thus described today as being both one nation (*dân tộc Việt Nam là một* - the Vietnamese nation is one) and a country of many nationalities or ethnic groups (*Việt Nam là một nước có nhiều dân tộc* - Vietnam is a country of many nationalities). This tension was also evident in post-colonial histories sponsored by the Vietnamese Communist Party. Official histories characterized Vietnam as a single, fixed bloc, with a common language, territory, economy and culture (Pelley 1995: 240), in direct contrast to French colonial accounts of Vietnam as an ethnically divided society (Pelley 1998, 376). Today, Vietnam's Museum of Ethnology celebrates the country's fifty-four officially recognized ethnic groups, whilst seeking to reinforce a sense of national unity. A visit to the museum begins with ethnographic maps and a timeline which records when different ethnic groups migrated to Vietnam. As the visitor's eye moves along the timeline, these groups are seen to join the linear flow of Vietnam's common history and destiny. Although each dynastic reign is marked, mention of the colonial period does not feature here or anywhere else in the museum, except in the bookshop.

The Museum of Ethnology bookshop stocks a badly photocopied collection of French texts from the colonial era, containing such statements as: '[i]t can be said that [Annam's]⁵

intellectual and moral subjection to the Chinese was absolute [...] and the Annamites have yet to develop a national culture' (Gourdon 1930: 61). Another text blithely affirms the benefit of colonial-led progress to Vietnam's prosperity and political organization (Loubet 1934: 92). This must be put in the context of the terrible conditions in French-run plantations and mines, as well as highly exploitative taxes and a state monopoly on salt, alcohol and opium (Descours-Gatin 1992).⁶ Today even the most blatant apologist of colonial economics admits that the colonial administration was bloated and expensive, and that the huge investments made in infrastructure were neither logical nor beneficial (Aumiphin 1996).

Fifty years after the official end of colonialism, the decision to stock these reprints is presumably based on the descriptions of Indochinese geography and society they contain. These are nevertheless blighted by the phenomenon of 'thingification' identified by the anti-colonialist Aimé Césaire (cited in Loomba 1998: 22). For instance, the Lao are dismissed as a 'lazy race' and the French are described as attempting to 'tear the Khmer from their torpid state' (Gourdon 1930: 87 and 60). It is somewhat surprising that these works should be freely available, when the Vietnamese government continues to submit film, literature, the press and the internet to political censorship and control. Apparently, these texts are considered too outdated to be pernicious. Furthermore, the museum may be pandering to colonial nostalgia tourism by commercializing cheap copies and thus 'trivialising' the colonial era in the sense of 'portraying the past without the pain' (Kennedy and Williams 2001, 135 and 145). The colonial period tends to be portrayed as a negligible blip in Vietnam's ancient and glorious past. This is in line with a strategy of 'historical minimisation' of the war years 1946-1975 for a foreign audience, which has been documented within the Vietnamese tourism industry: '[s]ince the profit must come from those who lost the war, aspects of the story must be muted and key roles recast to make the story more palatable' (Kennedy and Williams 2001: 145). The Museum of Ethnology bookshop illustrates how the official narrative of national unity is supplemented with another aimed at outsiders, resulting in a rather incongruous selection of books for foreign consumption.

The Museum of the Revolution also betrays a rather ambivalent attitude towards the colonial period. It is located in a colonial building facing the Red River, which once housed the French departments of town planning, customs and public services. The exhibits depict the colonial experience through black and white photographs of Vietnamese street scenes, including images of beggars, young opium addicts and the Emperor Bao Dai conferring with French soldiers. These illustrate both colonial exploitation and collaboration. Further exhibits document the colonial state monopoly on alcohol and opium manufacture, the consumption of which was encouraged by forcing distribution quotas on the Vietnamese population. There is no reference to the third, and perhaps most iniquitous state monopoly, that on simple salt, which saw producers forced to sell their entire production to the state before buying it back at a highly inflated rate. During the 1990s, the museum also displayed spears used by the French to ram into storage spaces in their search for concealed salt.⁷ This provides evidence of displays being modified and having their anti-colonial message somewhat toned down for the benefit of foreign visitors (cf. Schwenkel 2004). An illuminating comparison can be made with the former Museum of American and Chinese War Crimes in Ho Chi Minh City, which has been renamed the War Remnants Museum. Attempts to close the American rooms failed, but the Chinese rooms were shut down when China and Vietnam resumed diplomatic relations (Kennedy and Williams 2001: 146).

Nevertheless, scenes of exploitation and collaboration continue to feature in the Museum of the Revolution. A large sepia print depicts a Frenchman in tropical garb, waving to the camera as a Vietnamese drags him along on a rickshaw. The caption reads 'aggressor and slave'. Next to it hangs a coloured cartoon of skeletal Vietnamese figures bowed under the weight of huge sacks labelled 'taxes', on top of which are piled a pyramid of fat mandarins and cigar-smoking colonialists. The case also holds medals stamped with the face of the French mascot Marianne next to honours bestowed by the Nguyen dynasty. A parallel is thus clearly drawn between the feudal and colonial regimes, whilst the juxtaposition of a small wooden Vietnamese ship and a photograph of hulking French warships in the port of Haiphong points to the latter's military and technological superiority. The Nguyen dynasty's ignominious defeat by the French led to its loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the Vietnamese people and the search

for another leader to take on 'the mandate of heaven'. However, there are no introductory or explanatory panels at any point throughout the pre-war rooms of the museum relating to these themes. Nor is there any interpretation of the profusion of framed political tracts making up the bulk of the display on resistance to colonialism. The lack of a clear guiding thread is evidence that there is no strong party line on the colonial period, which the Museum of the Revolution would be expected to promote. Having to cater both to parties of schoolchildren and international tourists, the museum appears unsure of how to tell its story.

Hoa Lo Prison Museum, known as *Maison Centrale* under the French and later as the 'Hanoi Hilton' by the American pilots incarcerated there, adopts a far stronger stance to the Museum of the Revolution. Indeed, it provides graphic descriptions and depictions of the French atrocities committed there. Introductory panels to each section, a rarity in Hanoi's other museums, twice declare in large lettering: 'Hoa Lo prison; a crime by French colonialists towards jailed patriots and revolutionaries.' Another panel describes the dungeon as a 'hell of hell', going on to list the diseases which would afflict prisoners left to 'languish and die'. Peepholes in the cell doors reveal skeletal-looking mannequins fettered to the floor. Two guillotines are displayed, along with shackles and various torture implements such as electrical wiring, boxing gloves and a water barrel. Along the prison's outside wall, three low reliefs depict scenes of torture and suffering, as well as prisoners interacting and plotting resistance from within the 'colonial Bastille' (Zinoman 2001a).

The prison museum brochure states that: 'many leading patriots and revolutionaries were incarcerated at Hoa Lo during the French colonial period, including [...] five future General Secretaries of the Vietnamese Communist Party'. Indeed, a stint in prison has practically been a precondition of high office for all but the current generation of Vietnamese leaders (Zinoman 2001b). The museum's role as a shrine to these and other national heroes, further reinforced by a large 'monument in honour of patriotic and revolutionary combatants' (Hoa Lo Museum Brochure, undated), helps to explain why the museum clearly depicts and condemns colonial repression. The focus on individual histories is an example of the Northern Vietnamese government's practice of according 'extensive attention to dead soldiers so that their deaths would be regarded as noble and meaningful' (Malarney 2001: 46). Characterizing death in terms of sacrifice and martyrdom was an essential element of the Vietnamese war effort and continues to justify the heavy loss of human life. Monuments erected to war heroes, and particularly those to 'patriots and revolutionaries', link their bravery to Vietnam's hard-won independence and the Communist Party as leader of the revolution. As such, they are central to the Vietnamese government's legitimacy today: '[t]he war was the mother's milk, the school and the testing-ground of Vietnamese communism. It provides historical justification for the indispensable leadership of the Communist Party, endowing it with the 'mandate of heaven' (Pham 2005).

'As a monument containing a museum [...] its history is specific' (Cooke 2000: 6). This statement describing the power of an Irish prison museum as a symbol of nationalist struggle against the British, can be applied to Hoa Lo. Already largely truncated by a new high-rise development, the prison could not function as a museum without evoking conditions there. These were indeed atrocious under French control (Zinoman 2001a). The history of such a place cannot be manipulated as easily as the more neutral space of a purpose-built museum. Nevertheless, Hoa Lo prison attempts to do just that with regards to the period when its American inmates, whose bombers had been shot down over Northern Vietnam during the American-Vietnam war, dubbed the prison 'Hanoi Hilton'. In stark contrast to the colonial era exhibit, photographs of prisoners playing games, going to church, celebrating Christmas and – according to the caption – reading 'without fear of being brainwashed' paint an extremely rosy picture of prison life. In a rather transparent attempt to woo an international audience, the displays are located in neutral, bare rooms away from the cellblock. Overall, however, Hoa Lo prison offers the bluntest juxtaposition of colonial aggressor and Vietnamese patriots engaged in 'saving the nation [as] a sacred obligation', as then Communist Party Secretary Le Duan put it to an anti-aircraft unit in 1965 (cited in Malarney 2001: 48).

The Ho Chi Minh Museum, located next to Ho's mausoleum in Hanoi's Ba Dinh quarter, joins the Hoa Lo Prison Museum as an example of a 'museum-shrine' (Giebel 2001). It is organized around a central atrium displaying a larger-than-life statue of 'Uncle Ho', with a sun

and a banyan tree representing the light of his thought and the longevity of the Vietnamese people respectively. Ho Chi Minh continues to be greatly revered in official Vietnamese discourse, and references to other resistance heroes in and around the museum attempt to incorporate him into this national pantheon (Hue-Tam 1995: 283). The museum stands out for its futuristic displays, such as that representing the cave where Ho Chi Minh planned the Viet Minh resistance between 1941 and 1945 as a stylized human brain. It is also resolutely international in its scope, constantly putting Ho Chi Minh's life in the context of early twentieth-century intellectual and political ferment. Haunting photographs of Ho Chi Minh in Paris in 1946, looking distraught amongst his French hosts as peace negotiations begin to break down, are a rare representation of the reassertion of French control in Vietnam after World War II.

Ho Chi Minh spent part of his youth in France where he entered political life and embraced Communism. He was much more directly involved in the war of resistance against the French than in that against the Americans. The fight against colonialism was his life's work and thus permeates the exhibition, without the French 'Other' or the colonial regime ever being the subject of a separate room (as is the case with Picasso's *Guernica* which is used to represent anti-Fascism). In a museum full of imposing, symbolic displays – a romanticized vision of Ho's birthplace stands on a lotus pedestal usually reserved for Buddha figures and giant pieces of fruit stand for his faith in the next generation – colonialism is depicted through displays of written documents, with hardly even a newspaper caricature in sight. This suggests that there is no officially sanctioned nodal point around which to organize representations of the colonial period, indicative of a lack of clarity within the 'monumental ambiguity' (Hue-Tam 1995) of the Ho Chi Minh cult as a whole.

National education, international showcase

There is a tension inherent in Vietnamese museum exhibits between their role in legitimating the Communist regime as the inheritor of an allegedly long and glorious national resistance struggle and making this narrative palatable to an external audience. Evidence suggests that the internal audience is not particularly open to Vietnamese museum interpretations. Vietnamese are unlikely to visit museums of their own accord and only tend to participate in institutionalized visits with schools or other state-controlled organizations (Schwenkel 2004: 230). With regards to Vietnam's national reputation abroad (Bond *et al.* 2003: 376), museum curators find themselves responding to changes in international relations. In the words of the vice director of the Ho Chi Minh museum in Hanoi (cited in Schwenkel 2004: 267); '[t]oday there is a softer language in museums and in newspapers. We need history to respect the past and not forget. But at the same time we are also concerned with economic development. We want to look to the future [...] We forget everything in order to make friends for the future'. The Janus-faced nature of the museum's role can be compared to that of nationalist ideology itself (Nairn 1977), which bases appeals for building a common future on myths of a common past. Vietnamese museums in particular, as state-run institutions functioning both as national educator and international showcase, embody the tension between internal and external representation.

Vietnamese official historiography privileges the theme of resistance to foreign aggression, a trend clearly illustrated in Hanoi's Military and History Museums. The first episode usually highlighted is the successful attempt by the Trung sisters to drive the occupying Chinese from Vietnam in AD 40-41. The litany of heroes continues with the revered figures of Lady Trieu, Ngo Quyen, Tran Hung Dao, Nguyen Trai and Le Loi. Maps and weapons from epic battles, photographs of shrines to these heroes and poems lauding their courage are focal points of the Hanoi History Museum's linear interpretation of Vietnam's past. In the room of the Military History Museum devoted to pre-colonial Vietnam, these figures are listed next to the entrance, and the main wall of the room is occupied by a huge oil painting of the thirteenth-century Mongol defeat on the Bach Dang River, complete with the wooden stakes on which the enemy warships were impaled. The same oil painting and more stakes are exhibited in the Hanoi History Museum.

The 1954 battle of Dien Bien Phu which marked the final French defeat is an important element of Vietnamese government discourse, forming part of the national resistance theme. It is the subject of a large auditorium in the Military History Museum, which screens original

footage accompanied by a very detailed account in the form of voiceover (available in French, English or Vietnamese) which describes the Vietnamese strategy of attack. Its tone is resolute, referring at one point to Vietnam's millennial national tradition of inflicting defeat. A relief map on the ground below the screen lights up to show the fortifications and troop movements referred to in the film. Display cases along both adjacent walls show weapons and equipment as well as photographs and belongings of fallen soldiers. Above them, friezes of soldiers on the march exemplify state-sponsored socialist realist art depicting a timeless Vietnamese 'national character' (Taylor 2001: 113). Overall, the Military History Museum offers one of the starkest treatments of colonial history, albeit covering only 1945-54. However, the fact that it has been singled out for an overhaul in a new, purpose-built space, suggests that its message is set to be updated with an internationally palatable vision of the Vietnamese military in peacetime; 'The deconstruction of the official past is thus an untidy, sometimes surreptitious, seldom openly confrontational by-product of economic reconstruction' (Hue-Tam 2001: 3).

Patricia Pelley (1995, 1998, 2002) has demonstrated how the Vietnamese government's emphasis on the 'spirit of resistance' was a product of post-colonial historians working for the government Institute of History after 1954: '[t]o the extent that there really is, or was, a shared sense of the past [...] it clearly emanated from the didacticism of the 1950s and 1960s' (Pelley 1995: 233). Attempts to create a discourse of unity in diversity can also be traced to this source, which in turn rested upon Stalin's definition of the nation (Pelley 1995: 241) as laid out in his essay entitled 'Marxism and the National Question' (Hutchinson and Smith 1994: 18). During the 1960s, it was politically imperative to present a resolutely united front, victorious against the French and ready to face further attacks. Furthermore, French colonial researchers had been particularly active in the field of ethnology, thereby documenting the country's diversity. The Vietnamese were keen to undo these colonial ethnographies with their all-too-apposite connotations of looming splits, and redraw the map of Vietnam on their own terms. As Christopher Goscha (1995) carefully documents, this was no easy matter. The Vietnamese Communist Party itself was, after all, originally called the Indochinese Communist Party, and was initially unsure whether to pursue the goal of a Vietnamese or Indochinese state. The unfixity of the national space in Vietnamese minds helps to explain the flurry of ethnographic and historical writing which took place after 1954, with the resulting interpretations still being represented in Hanoi's museums today.

The History Museum's treatment of the colonial era is perhaps the most consequential of Hanoi's museums. The pre-colonial and colonial stages of the Nguyen dynasty are clearly distinguished. One pre-colonial exhibit represents the system of government but tellingly, the weapons shown were only for hunting and ritual use. The works of classical Chinese literature displayed are perhaps a comment on court decadence, as its over-reliance on Confucian teachings proved to be its downfall. The majority of the other exhibits are purely decorative, comprising mainly of bronzes, furniture and ceremonial robes. Moving to the colonial era, a diagram of the colonial administrative system provides evidence of Vietnamese collaboration with the French. Title deeds also testify that Vietnamese landowners appropriated large tracts of land under this system. Yet nineteenth-century resistance movements also find a place, among them one headed by the Emperor Ham Nghi himself. A rare information panel then gives a sense of the scale of resistance against French rule in the twentieth century. It refers to some of the twenty-five workers' strikes recorded between 1919 and 1925, emphasizing that these were not only to improve conditions but also in the name of the international proletariat. French weapons are also on show. A knobbed whip is labelled as a French instrument of torture in Vietnamese, but merely as a whip in English. In an adjacent glass case there lies the very bomb used by a Vietnamese revolutionary to assassinate a French governor general, together with a huge crossbow. These exhibits highlight the violence involved in colonial repression and resistance.

The History Museum conveys one of the clearest messages concerning the colonial period of any museum surveyed. It represents both rising French power in the region and successive waves of Vietnamese resistance. There are several dichotomies on show; before and during colonization, collaboration and resistance, uprising and repression. Portraits of six resistance heroes now honoured with street names personify the 'noble cause'. Oil paintings of a nineteenth-century resistance fighter and the declaration of independence in 1945 provide

centrepieces, suggesting beginning and end-points of the struggle against colonial occupation. The Battle of Dien Bien Phu is not depicted, however, which is somewhat surprising given the prominence of battlefield maps and dioramas elsewhere in the museum. Instead, a huge oil painting of Ho Chi Minh declaring Vietnamese independence in 1945 serves to underline the narrative of resistance to foreign aggression and make the link to the Vietnamese Communist Party as its inheritor. The Hanoi History Museum thus sets up and follows through the antagonism between the imperial/colonial and its subjects.

One might expect resistance against French colonialism to feature strongly in Vietnamese narratives on national resistance. Indeed, the choice of Stalin as a mentor on the national question was originally an attempt to repudiate French influence (the French collaborator Pham Quynh was an admirer of Ernest Renan) and align with the brotherhood of socialist states. After the French defeat in 1954, Vietnamese scholars still had to work within colonial categories, however, in order to repudiate them effectively. Pelley (1998: 374) draws a parallel between the Vietnamese army's successful defeat of France's supposedly impregnable defences at Dien Bien Phu and their subsequent 'intellectual assault' on the colonial reading of Vietnamese culture. Fifty years after the final French military defeat, it seems that this ideological battle has been interrupted and perhaps abandoned. At least in museum discourse, as Christoph Giebel (2001: 77) remarks with reference to a southern Vietnamese museum-shrine, there is an 'inconsistency in message and form that appears at first sight'.

Conclusion

By documenting representations of resistance to colonialism in selected Hanoian museums, this paper has sought to show that contemporary Vietnamese national identity is constructed less in opposition to colonialism than in support of national unity and, latterly, with deference to international donor and tourist sensibilities; '[Museums] are institutions that produce certain truths for global consumption' (Schwenkel 2004: 228). This conclusion also echoes the following assessment by Hue-Tam Ho Tai:

'[p]ublic memory in present-day Vietnam is characterized as much by confusion as by profusion. A key to understanding this situation lies in the difficulty of assigning historical meaning to the upheavals that form the raw materials of modern Vietnamese history' (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 2001: 3).

The need to reinterpret history for nation-building purposes is further complicated by the exigencies of international relations, as Vietnam seeks to shed its image as a closed Communist state and play a full part in regional and bilateral exchanges. As a result, treatment of the colonial period varies significantly across museums. Overall, however, the colonial era tends to be skated over in favour of a nationalist vision of *longue durée*. Wherever resistance to the colonial period is an integral part of the museum's story, the emphasis tends to be on a self-affirming discourse of heroic resistance, with minimal representation of the colonial adversaries and their humiliating oppression. This can be seen as one attempt to reconcile nation-building for an internal audience with an awareness of Vietnam's national reputation abroad. The channels by which the competing demands of government claims to legitimacy, foreign nostalgia tourism and new trends in museology flow into representations of colonial resistance offer avenues for further research, as does the influence of northern, central and southern Vietnam's differing historical experiences and cultural backgrounds on their regional museums.

Notes

- ¹ Ganley, E. 'France orders positive spin on colonialism', Associated Press, October 21st 2005 http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/national/1103AP_France_Gilding_History.html, accessed on October 28th 2005.
- ² Vietnam Cultural Profile Website, Sectoral Overview, http://www.culturalprofiles.org.uk/Viet%5FNam/Directories/Vi_ACYAlw-7879_ADs-t_Nam_Cultural_Profile/-3584.html, accessed on 21st March 2005.

- 3 Vietnam Cultural Profile Website, Historical Background, http://www.culturalprofiles.org.uk/Viet%5FNam/Directories/Vi_ACYA1w-7879_ADs-t_Nam_Cultural_Profile/-3583.html, accessed on 21st March 2005.
- 4 Vietnam Cultural Profile Website, Origins of Vietnamese Cultural Policy, http://www.culturalprofiles.org.uk/Viet%5FNam/Directories/Vi_ACYA1w-7879_ADs-t_Nam_Cultural_Profile/-3549.html, accessed on 21st March 2005.
- 5 Annam was one of the five 'pays' or regions within French Indochina, corresponding to present-day central Vietnam. However, the term Annamese was often used during the French colonial period to refer to the Vietnamese as a whole.
- 6 Nevertheless, a recent French history of Indochina from a well-known publisher concludes; 'In the end, let us not shy away from heartfelt words, this meeting between two peoples, the French and the Vietnamese, was a love story' (Héduy 1998:21, my translation). Cf. note 1
- 7 Maria Laudenbach, personal communication.

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