

## All that is solid

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### A remarkable exhibit at Hanoi's Museum of Ethnology reminds us why Marxism melted into air

By Matt Steinglass | September 10, 2006

FOR A DECADE and a half, one of the West's central narratives has been the triumph of free-market capitalism over the Soviet-style command economy. So why is it that for an exhibit on the hardships of everyday material life in a Communist economy, one must go to Hanoi-capital of a nominally Communist country?

This summer, Hanoi residents have been flocking to a new exhibit at the city's Museum of Ethnology commemorating the years many of them remember as the toughest in their lives. Not the war years, which many recall with patriotic nostalgia, but the decade after the Communist victory in 1975, when Vietnam's government imposed its ruinous command economy on the South as well as the North. The country was dependent on Soviet bloc subsidies; everything from rice to fabric was rationed, and malnutrition was widespread.

That era, known as "thoi bao cap," or the "subsidy economy period," ended in 1986, when Vietnam turned to the free market. Today, after 20 years of "doi moi" ("renewal") and a surging economy, Hanoi boasts a growing middle class, equipped with shiny motorbikes and mobile phones, that is investing frantically in real estate and the country's booming new stock market. Though still poor by Western standards, urban Vietnamese are becoming well-off enough to look back at the hard times for inspiration, much as Americans in the '60s might have looked back at the Depression: The old come to celebrate their escape from poverty, the young to understand what their parents went through.

The Museum of Ethnology's wonderfully immersive exhibit, "Hanoi Life Under the Subsidy Economy, 1975-1986," is the kind of critically aware popular history one might expect to find in New York or Paris. But, in fact, there aren't any exhibits like this in New York or Paris-or almost anywhere else.

History museums in the former Soviet bloc generally slight the controversial Communist period. Those that do address it-like Budapest's "Terror House," Bucharest's Memorial of the Victims of Communism (based in a former Securitate prison), or Berlin's Stasi (Secret Police) Museum-concentrate on political repression, rather than economic hardship. The closest comparable exhibits are in the West, where two interesting private museums, the Wende Museum in Los Angeles and Berlin's recently opened DDR Museum, focus on the everyday culture and society of the former East Germany. But neither gives a central role to the crucial Communist experiences of poverty and scarcity.

Hanoi itself isn't exactly teeming with provocative examinations of contemporary history. Most museums in Vietnam are dated, unchanging propaganda warehouses. The "Subsidy Economy" exhibit, by contrast, is open-ended and skeptical. It takes a participatory anthropological approach: The curators recruited several dozen middle-aged to elderly Hanoians, who were invited to dredge their memories, their scrapbooks, and their storage rooms.

The result is a collection of powerful artifacts. One glass case features a rock marked with the name "Mai Hai" and the number 127-the marker Hai used to hold his place in the hours-long queue for rice rations. Another display recreates a typical middle-class Hanoi doctor's apartment of the time: four generations crammed into 300 square feet, with the bathroom converted into a pen full of squealing pigs.

In a section on how Hanoi residents coped with scarcity, there is a sweater knit from factory-floor nylon scraps and a homemade kit for refilling disposable pens for resale-a common way to earn a bit of extra money. On one wall hangs a 1970s Peugeot bicycle in near mint condition. Its owner remembers saving for years to buy it; when her nephew scratched the paint, she was so upset she couldn't eat all day, and stuffed the precious bike back in its box for 20 years.

Perhaps only against the backdrop of desperate poverty can an object as prosaic as a bicycle become the occasion for such a drama of spiteful rage. Such strange, personal, incontestably authentic stories communicate the narrowness of life under the "Subsidy Economy" in a way ideological generalities never could.

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The vividness of the Museum of Ethnology's exhibit owes much to the participatory approach it took with those who were interviewed. Throughout the exhibit, curators largely allow the interviewees to render their own judgments on the era, rather than forcing a single authoritative viewpoint on the visitor. This nondogmatic approach is unique in Vietnam. But so is the Museum of Ethnology.

Founded in 1995 to showcase the cultures of Vietnam's 54 ethnic minorities, the museum has from the beginning enjoyed financial support and guidance from France. (French President Jacques Chirac, a noted indigenous cultures buff, gave the project a big push.) The museum's director, professor Nguyen Van Huy, is the doyen of Vietnamese ethnology; his father was the first Vietnamese ethnologist, trained in France in the '30s. Huy has collaborated intensively with foreign institutions like Paris's Museum of Man, the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, and Amsterdam's Tropical Museum.

Such collaborations were possible because in Vietnam, as in many Communist countries, "traditional" and minority cultures have served as an intellectual safe zone, relatively free of ideological interference. Gradually, though, the museum has expanded to subjects beyond ethnic minorities, such as a 2003 omnibus exhibit of Vietnamese culture and society, coproduced with New York's Museum of Natural History.

"From an anthropological point of view," said professor Huy in a recent interview, "the Museum of Ethnology can address any contemporary issue. The important thing is that it reflect how people experience their lives." Hence the "Subsidy Economy Period" exhibit, which treats the Communist society of the time much the same as the museum would treat an ethnic minority culture.

The intellectual independence of the Ethnology Museum may have provided the impulse for this exhibit. But, as with most any educational text or display in Vietnam, it also serves a political function.

How far to go in privatizing the economy remains a burning issue in Vietnam, where state-owned monopolies like PetroVietnam and Vietnam Airlines retain tremendous power. Vietnamese students are still required to take classes in Marxism-Leninism, though virtually no one places any stock in socialist economic ideology.

Yet the Ethnology Museum's exhibit demonstrates that, while the government may retain ownership of certain strategic industries, there is now a broad consensus in the Party on the general value of market economics-so much so that it can serve as the basis of pro-government propaganda.

Previous Vietnamese accounts of the '70s and '80s ascribed material hardships to the legacy of war; this exhibit squarely blames an "inappropriate" method of socioeconomic management and a "sluggish and inefficient production system," which "stifled" initiative. One display charts the discriminatory rice quotas that gave Party bureaucrats more and peasants less-the first time this information has ever been published in Vietnam.

The exhibit ends with a montage of the benefits of 20 years of doi moi, including a photo of US and Vietnamese trade negotiators reaching the May 31 agreement which will allow Vietnam to join the WTO. The political overtones are clear: These are the benefits of wise Party leadership towards economic reform and integration with the world economy-since 1986, anyway.

The Museum of Ethnology is of course hardly free to say just anything it wants about the country's history. There is no mention here of the millions of Vietnamese ``boat people" who fled the country in the `70s and `80s. And given that political repression remains a taboo subject in Vietnam, it's hardly surprising that the Hanoians interviewed for the exhibit concentrate on memories of economic and cultural hardships, not political ones.

But for Western viewers, the ``Subsidy Economy" exhibit is a sharp reminder of how little we understand what life under Soviet-style Communism was actually like. The Western image of Communism was formed in the middle of the last century, when the struggle against totalitarianism appeared to be fundamentally a matter of political freedom. Our imaginings of life under that system are still shaped more by the infernal visions of Orwell and Solzhenitsyn than by any more prosaic accounting of the day to day struggle to buy rice and holiday gifts in an economy of perennial shortages.

Of course, if Westerners never learned much about what life was really like under the command economy, it's because the supposedly fearsome monolith of Soviet Communism dissolved within a few years of exposure to Western influence. In the words of the Communist Manifesto, in the face of capitalism, ``all that is solid melts into air." Marx was talking about the way capitalism's productive power overwhelms traditional societies, its corporations bankrupting peasants and artisans, its bourgeoisie leveling the aristocracy. He could hardly have foreseen that Marxism itself would be overwhelmed in the same way.

In this sense, the Museum of Ethnology's approach is indeed fitting: The command economy really was like an ethnic minority culture-peculiar, fragile, alien, and ultimately doomed to extinction.

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