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# Review of "The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam," edited by Hue-Tam Ho Tai

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slow-going. But persistent reading will be rewarded with insights into the powerful interactions between museums and memory. As these provocative essays show, the construction of memory happens not only in history museums but also in exhibitions of art and natural history. Memory is not confined by national boundaries, but reaches across space as well as time. Memory itself has a history, as do museums. Understanding these dynamics will enrich the study and practice of public history.

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*The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* edited by HUE-TAM HO TAI. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001; xiv + 274 pp.; photographs, notes, glossary, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$50.00; paperbound, \$19.95.

Vietnam's tumultuous twentieth century has exacted a tremendous human toll. The ubiquitous public memorials and graveyards in Vietnam tell only part of the story of suffering. Colonized by the French at the end of the nineteenth century, the Vietnamese mounted a resistance that became increasingly violent by the 1930s yet produced few tangible results. In the early 1940s, Japan wrested control of Vietnam from France, inspiring great hope in 1945 that Japan's defeat would bring Vietnam's independence. While Ho Chi Minh established an independent communist government in the north, the French set about reestablishing control over the south, leading almost inevitably to the Franco-Viet Minh War of 1946-1954. After their crushing defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the French withdrew and the character of the north-south conflict in Vietnam began to shift from a war of anti-colonial resistance to a civil conflict between the northern communists and the anti-communist south. The advent of U.S. military involvement in the early 1960s reintroduced the anti-colonial element to the mix. Not long after the withdrawal of American troops in 1973, the north overtook the south, reuniting the country under a single government. After decades of authoritarian control, first by the respective regimes in north and south and, after 1975, by the communist government, Vietnam's *doi moi* reforms finally began to relax political and economic controls.

Now neither fully totalitarian nor fully democratic (p. 9), the Vietnamese government and the Vietnamese people are grappling with the problem of finding a "usable past." How can they make sense and extract some value out of a century of turmoil that left millions dead and millions more grieving? What message and what lessons does the government want to glean from this history and to what end? Likewise, what features of their past do the people value, and why? The goal of *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* is to address some of these questions. As editor Hue-Tam Ho Tai, professor of Sino-Vietnamese history at Harvard, writes, the book aims to "present

analyses of how Vietnam's pasts have been constructed by different actors over four decades with particular emphasis on the postwar period" (p. 1).

A number of issues arise in trying to construct Vietnam's past. One issue is the question of exactly *whose* past should be commemorated. Not peculiar to Vietnam, this issue has become increasingly common in the United States as we recognize our diverse national make-up. In Vietnam's case, however, the problem is especially stark: the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, a joyful, triumphant event for the north, was a day of devastation for the south. Both sides suffered horrendous losses, yet in the official memory, the government commemorates northern soldiers as heroes, whereas southern soldiers are excoriated as traitors.

Even where general agreement exists on *whose* past to commemorate, the issue of who should do the commemorating crops up. As is typical in Asian societies, and also in communist societies, public and private are often conflated—the distinction between each sphere, often maintained as sacrosanct in western societies, is blurred. As many of the essays in this volume point out, for Vietnam, this conflation of public and private means that the government, rather than private organizations, tries to take the lead in framing the national view of the past. The Vietnamese people, however, especially the younger generations ever more removed from the decades of war, are increasingly taking the telling of their past into their own hands, posing a challenge to the government.

In the first essay of the collection, "The Fatherland Remembers Your Sacrifice: Commemorating War Dead in North Vietnam," Shaun Kingsley Malarney writes that during the wars and after, the northern government found it necessary to go to extraordinary lengths to try to legitimize the tremendous loss of life. To this end it developed a memorial service for war dead that was conducted by official personnel in the bereaved family's home, acknowledging their great sacrifice. Ultimately, however, this ceremony did not satisfy the emotional needs of the families. Instead, families created new funerary rites to compensate for the absence of two fundamental elements of the traditional funeral, the enactment of the rites by the deceased's offspring, and the presence of the corpse at the funeral. In this case, the public event was designed by the government to satisfy the family's need to commemorate their war dead, but privately families created a complementary rite. Although public and private messages were essentially the same (in that both commemorated the sacrifice), the private rites very subtly provided a challenge to the government's right to construct the past in its own interpretive framework.

Exploring similar issues about the public vs. private role in analyzing the past are Nora A. Taylor's "Framing the National Spirit: Viewing and Reviewing Painting under the Revolution" and Mark Philip Bradley's "Contests of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting the War in the Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema." Both essays examine the ways in which art and artists analyze and present the Vietnamese past. In her article, Taylor argues that Vietnamese artists today are rejecting the de-

cares-long tradition of socialist-realism that depicted only the heroic sacrifices of patriotic soldiers, farmers, and laborers. Instead, reflecting a shift in the public/private dynamic, the Vietnamese people have “chosen to ‘forget’ the state view and ‘remember’ instead those artists who display none of the state criteria for nationalistic art” (p. 111). Bradley sees a similar transition in the cinema, where younger filmmakers are posing a “powerful, if sometimes oblique, narrative challenge to official memories of the Vietnamese experience of the war” (p. 198). For example, in Nguyen Xuan Son’s film, *Fairy Tale for Seventeen-Year-Olds*, one bereaved mother says, “I never thought I would experience such grief on this day of our victory.” Her companion replies, “We’ve won independence at the cost of young lives” (p. 201).

This public/private shift is probably characteristic of a society that is evolving away from totalitarian control. The freedom to interpret the past, in both north and south Vietnam, will likely be fraught with difficulty, but will emerge more prominently in years to come. Though focusing on issues in Vietnam’s interpretation of its past, this collection of essays explores valuable issues for anyone interested in public history.

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*Stagecoach. Book One: Wells Fargo and the American West* by PHILIP L. FRADKIN and *Book Two: Wells Fargo and the Rise of the American Financial Services Industry* by ANDY ANDERSON. New York: Simon and Schuster Source, 2002; xvi + 464 pp., photographs, notes, index; clothbound, \$27.95.

This is a work for a popular audience, but one that makes a serious academic contribution. It is divided, not altogether seamlessly, into two “books” (*Wells Fargo and the American West* and *Wells Fargo and the Rise of the American Financial Services Industry*) written by two authors (Phillip L. Fradkin and Andy Anderson) and ranges in approach from rigorous analysis to loose anecdote. It should be noted that the book in this format is currently only available for Wells Fargo employees, but Fradkin’s publication can be purchased in retail bookstores. *Stagecoach* has the virtue of completeness, a good eye for quotation from primary material, and emphasis on just how thorough-going and effective the services of Wells Fargo have been, often in areas that have been assumed to be “natural” purviews of government. Wells Fargo in its original form as an express company combined services now divided between letter mail, e-mail, faxes, telephone, parcel post, UPS, Federal Express, and armored car services, as well as a series of full service banks—“the nearest thing to a universal service company ever invented” (p. 27). Its considerable sophistication from the first (from perfectly designed and expensive Concord coaches to “turnpike”-style high speed roads) and its “reliability in the face of adversity” belie popular