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A Visit to the Vietnam Women's Museum

by Ann Hibner Koblitz

Long time readers of the *Newsletter* will know that we have been visiting and collaborating with the Vietnam Women's Museum since before it even had a building of its own. In fact, the formation of the Museum was announced in January 1987 at the Southeast Asian Seminar on Women in Science, which we cosponsored with the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU).

Our suggestions have sometimes generated intense discussion and debate. For example, a decade ago we (as well as some VWU leaders) objected to a large exhibit on beauty contests that gave them a positive spin, and during our last visit in December 2007 we criticized an exhibit that glorified an essentially Confucian image of women as all-sacrificing mothers who suppress any concern for their own lives and careers. In the 2008 *Newsletter* we reported on our dissatisfaction with that exhibit and with the email correspondence we subsequently had with VWU and Museum people about it.

As a result of our experience two years ago, we were expecting to be disappointed when we visited the Museum on March 9 of this year. To our surprise, however, a lot had changed — and in our view much for the better. The Museum has been undergoing a massive remodel and expansion, and does not officially open until October; however, two exhibition halls are open to the public. One large room is dedicated to memories of the American war; it is similar to the exhibit that we saw and liked in 2007.

The second exhibit, on Hanoi street vendors, is radically different in both content and style from anything that has been in the Museum before. The vendors are overwhelmingly female, rural, and poor. The exhibit chronicles their lives using photographs and excerpts from interviews with the women. While some of them come from several generations of street vendors, others recently turned to this occupation because marketization processes have rendered their agricultural jobs obsolete. Their income from vending is small and unpredictable, and they often endure harassment from police and licensed shopkeepers. The exhibit also includes conflicting comments from passers-by in favor of and against the vendors.

What distinguishes the Museum's new approach is a greater concern for women as protagonists and for what is sometimes called "cultural anthropology." That is, the Museum staff supplies much more information about the social context of each artifact, and they have been preparing a series of explanatory booklets devoted to collections that will be put on display in the future. In addition, this new approach shows interest in women as more than just subjects of the exhibits. For example, the Museum staff has compiled a registry of around 1000 street vendors, and they have supplied them with maps showing which streets have been declared off-limits to them (and thus where the police will be conducting raids); the city authorities keep changing this, and the women often simply do not know what is permitted and what is forbidden.

The vendors generally count on finishing up by mid-day. But when it takes them too long to sell their wares, they have to stay overnight in the city. They prefer to bunk

with 6 to 8 other vendors to minimize expenses. (Some of the women actually enjoy this experience and view it as a sort of “girls’ night out.”) Museum staff coordinate a room-sharing roster and distribute lists of cheap rooming houses.

Future projects seem equally innovative. Exhibits are planned on domestic violence and the VWU’s response, as well as on the lives and working conditions of the numerous rural and ethnic minority maids and nannies who now toil in the homes of middle-class and affluent families in Hanoi and other urban centers.

The new director of the Museum is Nguyễn Thị Bích Vân, whom we have known for a long time — in fact, since she was a graduate student. Years ago we spent many long days with her editing the English-language captions on the two historical floors. Under her leadership the Women’s Museum is carving out an important role in educating both the Vietnamese public and foreign visitors about the history and present circumstances of women in Vietnam.