

1-9-2013

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Recommended Citation

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Legacies of War: Reflections on Culture and Conflict in Contemporary South-East Asia

Beth Turner

09 January 2013

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Breathing In

Honestly, I wasn't sure what to expect when coming to Vietnam. I knew that Ho Chi Minh City would be crowded and that the weather would be warm and oppressively humid, but beyond that, I didn't really have any preconceptions. What really struck me upon leaving the airport and stepping onto the city streets was the odor – it smelled kind of like a cross between China and Japan, with the humidity amplifying the smells of local food and millions of people scuttling around, trying to make a living. I always forget how spacious America is until I visit Asia.

Vietnam's contradictions also intrigued me, with its government based on communism and its increasingly market-based economy; the juxtaposition of a large billboard bearing the communist hammer and sickle with a sign advertising Domino's pizza illustrated this nicely. Ho Chi Minh's face and the symbol of communism were right next to an extension of the Western capitalist imperialism the North Vietnamese expelled. How does the Vietnamese government reconcile its ideologies with economic growth and reform, which smacks of capitalism? Do they simply accept this as one of the stages of capitalism a socialist nation must pass through?

Another contradiction – or maybe tension is a better word – exists between remembering the war and its atrocities and forgiving those who precipitated the horrors. The War Remnants Museum really drove this home for me. The building was full of enlarged photographs of American troops with guns, civilian casualties whom Americans killed, the devastation from U.S. bombings, and children deformed by Agent Orange. Yet the museum director talked about events that united American and Vietnamese veterans, during which all seemed to have been forgiven. This is probably a result of my Western upbringing, but I have a hard time understanding how one can simultaneously remember atrocities and forgive their perpetrators. I guess this stands as a tribute to the Vietnamese compassion that Mr. Son, the North Vietnamese veteran we met today, and the director of the War Remnants Museum described?

It's interesting how these two speakers never acknowledged psychological trauma or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder from the war. When Professor Sumner asked Mr. Son about war's psychological effects on Vietnamese soldiers, Mr. Son told us that because the Vietnamese endured poverty and various hardships, they weren't terribly traumatized by battle. The Americans, however, had a different "psychological starting point" – because Americans live cushy lives, they weren't able to handle the war's privations. This struck me as interesting – it's often said that the Vietnam War was the "poor man's war" because impoverished young men couldn't avoid the draft through student exemptions. Also, I disagree with Mr. Son's implied assumption that war's psychological trauma results from privation. His argument completely overlooks the damage one's psyche endures from seeing comrades shot or blown apart by mines and grenades. Even though I haven't finished reading Bao Ninh's novel *The Sorrow of War* yet, it's already apparent that Kien, the main character, is scarred from losing all of his comrades, and during his deployment in the forest, cleaning up the remains of KIA/MIA soldiers, he is literally haunted by the past. Bao Ninh is a veteran of the war, so I can only assume that Kien is Ninh's avatar in the book.

This is going to sound incredibly clichéd, but Mr. Son's story of how he got his guitar as a gift from a group of South Vietnamese moved me. The fact that through playing a Saigonese song, he was able to touch the South Vietnamese – his former enemy – in the audience and

facilitate forgiveness demonstrates the power of music. I think that often, melodies can convey emotion better than language can, and music can be understood by anyone, regardless of what language the listener speaks. Therein lies its strength. Our meeting with the director of the War Remnants Museum reinforced this – one event she discussed (a joint music night where American and Vietnamese veterans would take turns singing) allowed the former enemies to bond, seeing each other's humanity, and forgive one another. Music can inspire, like Mr. Son's protest songs, or can serve as a form of catharsis. That's why even though our guide and translator Anh complained about Mr. Son's singing, I'm glad the veteran took the time to serenade us. I feel as though we were better able to connect with him because of it.

11 January 2013
Mekong Delta, Vietnam

Of Tradition and Westernization

To me, Ho Chi Minh City seemed like any other metropolis – crowds of people running back and forth, beggars, lush hotels, restaurants, and a myriad of clothing stores. Sure, there were some superficial differences, such as the preponderance of motorbikes and the plastic stools and chairs on the sidewalk, but the lifestyle was pretty much the same as in any other large city. That's why our bicycle tour of a small Mekong Delta town seemed like a breath of fresh air – I felt like we were actually experiencing Vietnam. As we rode by, women tended various crops and splashed nutrient-rich, sediment-laden water on their plants as fertilizer. Chickens rustled in the foliage. And two women wove a straw mat while we stopped for refreshment. Here, many houses were roofed with fronds from what our guide called water coconut plants-- something one wouldn't see in Ho Chi Minh City.

As much as America – and any other industrial(izing) country – relies on a global economic market, I often feel as though this globalization is overall detrimental. Of course, it can facilitate the proliferation of sweatshops, outsourcing, and the like, but if Ho Chi Minh City is any indication, it also effaces distinct local cultures. To ensure world-wide demand, I think the global marketplace thrives on a homogenous consumer culture; this is why everything from coffee shops to Western clothing stores can be found in cities world-wide. This standardized set of material desires and their accompanying cultural baggage supplants local needs and mores.

Unfortunately, as isolated and authentic as the places we stopped seemed, they still bore testament to the West's dominance of the global cultural economy (to use Arjun Appadurai's term) – the school children we passed wore backpacks emblazoned with Barbie, Power Rangers, Angry Birds, and Disney Princesses. The West exports more cultural artifacts – music, movies, television shows, etc. – to the East than it imports. This imbalance privileges Western (especially American) cultures over those of the countries that consume these cultural exports; this is reinforced by the fact that the world in which these goods are produced and that in which they are consumed are different. Appadurai gives the Philippines as an example: American music pervades the Philippines, and many Filipinos long for the world portrayed in the songs they hear. Do Vietnamese long for the West? I'm not sure yet; if I could speak Vietnamese, it would be interesting to talk with people and find out.

After travelling around the Mekong Delta, I finally understood why Northern Vietnamese see the Southerners as lazy – with the abundance of fruit-bearing trees and the Mekong's steady supply of silt, crops aren't likely to fail. As *Where the Domino Fell* and other readings have explained, the relative difficulty of horticulture in the North fostered a strong sense of community and cooperation, which isn't so fully developed in the South. The aquaculture practiced in the Mekong Delta – we passed by boats under which schools of fish were kept – further contributes to the South's comparative ease of living. Even though Vietnam was reunified after the war, a strong North/South divide still exists.

12 January 2013
Mekong Delta, Vietnam

Of Communism and Culture

I am not a morning person; my fifth grade teacher joked that I don't truly wake up until 11 AM, and this still holds true. However, visiting the floating market made getting up at 5:30 worth it. As our small boat neared the market, we were approached by merchants selling beverages and snacks; they clipped their boats to ours until they realized we weren't buying. Finally the market itself came into sight – a field of boats appeared before us. Produce was lashed onto a large pole at each boat's front, advertising what was for sale. If I heard our guide Anh correctly – I was at the back of the boat, near the noisy outboard motor – these merchants weren't the farmers who grew the produce, but were rather middlemen who linked farmer with buyer; some of the customers were even purchasing goods wholesale in order to peddle them elsewhere! This surprised me – such a chain of middlemen is a hallmark of capitalism. This, then, was a visible example of how Vietnam's growing economy is moving away from the government's communist ideal.

Even though the *doi moi* economic reforms smack of capitalism, however, there is apparently enough centralized control over the economy to be problematic. When someone asked Anh what the three main problems are that Vietnam faces, he replied that although the economy is growing, central companies control it to such an extent that there is little innovation. The blossoming economy has also led to a growing middle class that clamors for increased democracy and participation in the government. With a single party dominating the government, I can understand their frustration. Why is it that communism seems to go hand-in-hand with totalitarianism? Is it because people inherently selfish and will not follow the “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need” doctrine of communism by their own volition? I guess, then, that uncompromisingly communist governments would need to force compliance with their economic policies and acquiescence to their government. If a multiple party system existed, people may put into power a capitalist economy-favoring party.

In Hanoi, we met with a Linfield alumnus named Brett; his testimony reinforced the notion of Vietnam's government as totalitarian. Apparently, the Vietnamese government occasionally gets up in arms if they believe someone is using the internet to criticize the Communist Party, and they block access to social media sites and some e-mail providers. This is probably why I couldn't access Gmail or Facebook my first few nights in Saigon – it turns out that we arrived in Vietnam during one of these episodes. The Hanoi police also travel the city at 11:30 PM to shut down parties and bars; I guess the preciousness of independence and freedom only goes so far?

Despite these concerns about oppression, however, life in Vietnam remains very vibrant. In the cities, people bustle around on motorbikes or sit on bright plastic stools to eat and chat. Vendors on the side of the road in some areas cook and sell their food from large pots; already, this seems more prevalent in Hanoi than Saigon, although it could be because we're staying in the old quarter, rather than Saigon's fashionable and touristy core. And I still enjoy the more traditional culture of the places we stopped along the Mekong River. For example, almost all of the boats on the river had eyes painted on their fronts. When I asked Anh, he told me that this stems from a traditional belief that the eyes scared away any ghosts and spirits that haunted the

river. He also said that the design varies between regions, with the eyes slanted differently. I have to wonder if this tradition came from China during one of their many periods of occupation. Although it's not the most scholarly or reliable source of information on Chinese culture, the children's book *The Story of Ping* mentioned this practice of putting eyes on boats. Ping the duck escapes his boat and gets lost; as he looks for his boat, he uses the painted eyes as guides, since his boat was ornamented with wise eyes. It seems more likely to me that this practice was brought over from China rather than developing simultaneously in both China and Vietnam, but I could be wrong.

13 January 2013
Hanoi, Vietnam

History, Delusions, and Discomfort

I'm going to cut to the chase – Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum was much more disconcerting than expected. I knew that the North Vietnamese had preserved his corpse, but I didn't think they would display it; I thought, for some odd reason, that they would have a marble casket with a sculpture of him on top à la various English figures like the Black Prince. Boy, was I wrong. It probably didn't help that I was set on edge by the guards when I first entered the complex. Apparently, I wasn't allowed to bring water in, so I had to deposit the offending bottle in a basket near the check-in point. By the time I had finished this, the rest of the group had been herded ahead, and we were trapped in the middle of a group of Vietnamese. I expected a group of high-stepping guards to spot me and arrest the white American capitalist scum at any point – that's how rattled I was.

So needless to say, Ho Chi Minh's light-up, preserved corpse only weirded me out more. Between the color of the lights – a sickly yellow-orange – and the angle at which they were set, it looked like the North Vietnamese had hollowed out old Uncle Ho and used him to make a corpse lamp. The black marble of the mausoleum further emphasized both how somber and disconcerting the place was. I'm assuming that for most Vietnamese, however, the experience of seeing Ho Chi Minh's body is profoundly moving. After all, a strong cult of personality developed around the wise, humble leader, so visiting the mausoleum must almost be akin to entering a place of worship.

Between Lenin's, Mao's, and Ho Chi Minh's mausoleums, I have to wonder if this veneration of communist founding fathers plays a key part in maintaining loyalty to the government. By being so ostentatiously displayed, it seems as though these leaders have been put on a pedestal to be worshipped and have been transmuted from men into symbols that represent the nation's ideals. Yet these cultish practices aren't restricted to just communist or totalitarian countries – as Professor Sumner pointed out, the Lincoln Memorial serves a similar function to Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum, and we idealize Lincoln just as the Vietnamese do with Ho. Is there an inherent human need for these embodiments –projections-- of ideals?

The last stop on the tour – the “Hanoi Hilton,” Hoa Lo prison – was equally, if not more, disturbing than Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum. Between the concrete walls painted black, the unsettling orchestral soundtrack blared over various speakers, the narrow and lightless hallways, and the gruesome history of the place, I was discomforted and on edge the entire time. The cells for prisoners condemned to death especially disturbed me. I'm sure it didn't help that they were located right after the guillotine used by the French and photos of Vietnamese rebels' heads displayed after execution... But the hallway that proceeded into darkness and the heavy, black cell doors with small grated windows really freaked me out. My imagination conjured images of the inmates on death row, locked in darkness, and I guess I empathized with them. I wanted to run out of there and find an open space away from the sorrow.

Because of my emotions, the display about how well American prisoners were treated seemed extra tacky and superficial. My (albeit limited) knowledge of North Vietnamese cruelty during the war – namely, the executions of more than 1,000 intellectuals or government officials and another 1,000 civilians after the fall of Hué – already made me skeptical about the North's purported compassion and lack of desire for revenge, so I took their exhibit at Hoa Lo worth a

grain of salt. The photographs and artifacts displayed *did* show that the Americans were allowed to celebrate Christmas, but I'm inclined to disagree with the propaganda video's assertion that the troops were "lucky to be North Vietnam's prisoners".

After stopping for some lunch, I shook off my discomfort from visiting the prison and mausoleum by walking around the nearby lake. The scenery was beautiful, but like the rest of Hanoi, it teemed with people. As I walked by a group of young men, one of them reached out and said, "Hello!"; I assumed they were street vendors and brushed by them until I did a double take and realized they wanted to take a picture with me. I agreed, but it felt strange – I wasn't dressed especially nicely, so it wasn't like they were taking a picture with a pretty American girl. Still, I guess my whiteness was such a commodity that it merited a photograph. This happened again half-way around the lake with a group of young women, and I was later interviewed by what I assume was a herd of students on my opinions about Vietnamese food. It's weird that my skin color or nationality set me apart as someone valuable to take a picture with or talk to; this felt different than the attention I got in Japan, which made me feel like a spectacle or strange animal to be gawked at rather than a status symbol to associate with. I wonder what accounts for this difference?

19 January 2013
Bangkok, Thailand

Monarchies, Muay Thai, and Buddhism –or-- Thailand: First Impressions

The transition from Hanoi to Bangkok was jarring, not only because of the change in climate and language but also because of the difference in culture. Sure, there were some similarities such as noodle and rice-based cuisine and a myriad of street food vendors, but the chaos of Vietnam was replaced by (relative) order in Thailand. Most notably, drivers actually followed the lane markings in Thailand, unlike their Vietnamese counterparts who viewed the lines as only suggestions. The Thai also followed traffic signals, and there were crossing guards at various intersections to help pedestrians across the street. What accounts for this difference? Did Vietnam's long history of being colonized lead to a disregard for authority that is mirrored by their apathy towards rules of the road? Is it that Thailand is more Westernized and orderly? Or did the two cultures simply evolve differently?

One thing Vietnam and Thailand share, however, is limited freedom of speech. Vietnam's communist government is quick to punish those who criticize it, and Thailand's policy of *lèse majesté* forbids anyone – even foreigners – to speak ill of the King and the royal family. Apparently, Americans have even been imprisoned despite their ignorance of this law. Of course, the highly unpopular Crown Prince's antics make it easy to violate *lèse majesté*; the most illustrative example of his wanton extravagance involves his poodle Foofoo. It started when the Crown Prince decided on a whim to promote Foofoo to Air Chief Marshal, one of the highest military ranks. He then decided to pull out all the stops and throw a huge *fête* for Air Chief Marshal Foofoo's sixth birthday; he even encouraged his wife to give a strip tease performance for the dog! I guess because the concept of face is important in many Asian cultures – Thai and Vietnamese included – public criticism of such actions brings shame to those targeted, so people in power limit free speech to save face.

The omnipresent paintings and photographs of the King serve as a reminder of the importance of Thailand's monarchy, but I got my first true taste of monarchial zeal at the Muay Thai fights. Before the first event, loud speakers blared forth the King's Anthem, and the various beer and snack vendors ran around reminding the foreigners in the audience to stand up and face the 15~20 foot tall image of the King and Queen. At first, this struck me as normal—after all, don't Americans stand and face the flag while the national anthem plays before sporting events? Then I thought about it more. "The Star Spangled Banner" praises the founding ideals of our country by remembering the American Revolutionary War, during which we fought against oppressive oligarchy to (ostensibly) create a government that accurately reflected its constituents' needs and respected their rights. The King's Anthem, meanwhile, glorifies an individual – the monarch – rather than a nation, its people, or its ideals. This mandatory reverence for the King ties back into the *lèse majesté* laws and the current King's cult of personality; I have to wonder, though, how much a population *actually* loves a leader who enforces laws prohibiting public criticism...

As I had never seen a fight before, Muay Thai disturbed me at first. It probably didn't help that the first match was between two boys who looked to be around twelve years old; my friend Becky also told me that because they stalled a lot—refusing to throw any kicks or punches – the boys were likely friends. And here I was, paying to watch them beat each other up. My

conflicted feelings were slightly mitigated by the fact that a) apparently, it's a great honor for the fighters' villages and families to have a son learn Muay Thai and b) each fighter should, if my math is right, earn about \$2 per audience member.

I also had to remind myself that I went because watching Muay Thai was a cultural experience rather than an act of sadistic voyeurism. In addition to being a recognizable part of Thai culture, Muay Thai is also a Buddhist cultural artifact. Before each match, the fighters (wearing garlands of marigolds and ceremonial headbands) walk around the ring and dance; Becky told me that during this ritual, they pray to Buddha. After they finished, their coaches anoint the fighters' heads with water and bless them. At first, this blend of Buddhism and violence confused me – after all, beating the stuffing out of someone seems to run counter to the Eight-Fold Path, especially Right Action. However, I think Muay Thai is less about flying into a rage and obliterating one's opponent than it is about discipline, honor, and diligently practicing to improve. I didn't realize that anger wasn't really a factor in Muay Thai until the main match, during which Becky and the other audience members gasped. The fighters often tap each other's glove during the match; Becky told me this is to show they bear no hard feelings towards one another. In the main match, however, the fighter in the red corner held out his glove for a tap, and the blue fighter refused it. This happened again later, although the blue fighter took his actions a step further and *kicked* his opponent while the red fighter's glove was still outstretched. The blue fighter ultimately lost, and sportsmanship no doubt played a part in the judges' decision.

One last note on Muay Thai and Buddhism – Becky told me that the fighters abstain from alcohol, drugs, and sex; they don't even have girlfriends. Although this apparently helps them keep focused in the ring, it also brought to mind the code of conduct followed by Buddhist monks. I don't think the Muay Thai fighters avoid meat like their holy counterparts, but both stay pure through celibacy and avoiding intoxicants. So rather than being an excuse to brawl, Muay Thai is actually an extension of Buddhism!

And speaking of Buddhism – our visit to Wat Pho today was incredible, despite the heat. I noticed this in Japan, too, with the large Buddha statues in Kamakura and Todaiji (Nara) – Buddhist iconography is always grand, awe-inspiring, and lavish. The Reclining Buddha really drove this home: the 46 meter-long statue is plated in gold and its feet are inlaid with mother of pearl. The sheer size and opulence of the figure convey quite effectively Buddha's divinity and inspire reverence from Buddhists and non-Buddhist visitors alike. The quantity of Buddha images contained in Wat Pho also filled me with awe; there's nothing quite like standing in a courtyard and being surrounded by gold-leafed Buddhas.

25 January 2013
Phang Nga, Thailand

Farming, Feminism, and Thoughts on the Yaowawit School

On an academic level, I knew that there was a strong urban/rural divide in Thailand, as demonstrated by the class-based differing views on Thaksin and the ongoing conflict between the Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts. However, my experiences in Bangkok and Phang Nga made this division concrete in my mind. While education is taken for granted by the children of Bangkok's middle and upper classes, subsistence is of greater concern to Phang Nga's rural students. Many families have at least five children, as far as I can tell, so it becomes difficult to care for them even though they'll be a valuable asset once they can contribute to farm work. And Becky was telling me that one fourth-grader at the Yaowawit School for disadvantaged children with whom she talked was apparently a good student but because he worried about his behavioral issues, he planned on dropping out and becoming a fisherman.

I guess that because of my preconceptions of Phang Nga's hard-scrabbled rural folk, I was disappointed by my experience working on Yaowawit's farm – or maybe calling our work that day “farming” misled me. Regardless, I expected to labor in the hot sun, tilling the earth, clearing brush, pulling weeds, or tending plants. So when we were led to a small shack to help cut pre-harvested lemongrass, I was a bit crestfallen, even though I knew it would still help the Yaowawit kids.

After we finished processing the lemongrass, a boy named Golf led our group to help pour cement paving stones in the herb garden. I smiled when I saw a young man mixing cement – I thought, “Here's my chance to do some actual work!” That is, until I realized he probably wouldn't let me help him stir it. “It's because you're a woman,” Becky pointed out. Instead, we were relegated to hauling small buckets of cement and placing stones on top of the pavers that had been smoothed out. Now, I'm not normally a vocal feminist, but I leapt when I saw the chance to demonstrate some girl power. The two men in charge of the project roped in a teenaged Thai boy to haul a large, full pail of wet cement to the empty paver molds, and I could hear them teasing him in Thai, joking about filling the bucket up more. Finally, as they stooped to load the large pail, I stepped in and said, “May I?” The men smiled, nodded – and filled the bucket half-full. “More?” I asked, grinning sweetly. The men laughed, and the one filling the bucket pointed at the teen and said, “Same same?” I nodded, and I think they were genuinely impressed when I lifted the pail one-handed.

After seeing this, Becky also jumped on the feminist bandwagon, and by the time we had finished the pavers, Becky and I had earned some respect from the men. Later, when we returned to the lemongrass shack for water, one of the men handed Becky and me a leaf and told us it would make us energetic and strong. The other men stood around, chewing their “energy leaves”... so I guess we were part of the club? The leaf tasted bitter and did no good, so I can only assume that it functioned as a placebo for the men.

If this incident is any indication, I'm assuming Thai society is still very much male-dominated. Given the fact that many Thais trace their ancestry to China, then, I bet that Confucianism – with its inherent subordination of women – is a key cultural influence on Thai society. If that's the case, how does the patriarchal Thai society reconcile itself with Thailand's

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female prime minister? Do voters just assume she's a puppet for her brother Thaksin, or is her victory in the elections a sign of Thai culture moving towards gender equality?

29 January 2013
Siem Reap, Cambodia

Living after the Khmer Rouge

If I didn't have a general understanding of Cambodia's recent history, I would have seen Siem Reap simply as a city in a developing country – its visible homeless population of women and children, as well as its irregular quality of infrastructure and amenities, set it apart from its first-world counterparts. I would not have guessed that its people only gained peace after a protracted, violent civil war just 14-ish years ago, in 1998. This, I think, is mainly because the Cambodians do not dwell on the terror of the Khmer Rouge's regime and resistance. I have only heard our guide mention them a handful of times, despite their dominance of recent Cambodian history; our guide Narath's comment that many Cambodians vote for the People's Party because it offers stability and they fear another group like the Khmer Rouge implies the nation's desire to keep its head down and move on.

Of course, there are visual reminders of the recent turbulence. Various groups of land mine victims dot the city, such as the small musical band we saw outside of the Jungle Temple, and bullet holes mar the magnificent carvings and architecture of Angkor Wat, which the Khmer Rouge used as a base. Judging by Narath's reluctance to talk about the Khmer Rouge, I assume that Cambodians overlook these daily reminders. Becky told me that when she asked Narath about Angkor Wat's decapitated Buddha statues, he simply replied that the "bad guys" vandalized them. I think it's interesting that he chose to use a euphemism rather than call the Khmer Rouge by name – it's almost as if he fears the name and just wants to forget, even though he was born in 1984, after the worst of the Khmer Rouge's oppression!

The Khmer Rouge's wanton disregard for cultural artifacts made me hate them even more than I already did after reading Luong Ung's memoir *First They Killed My Father*. The murder of innocents and the gross human rights abuses detailed by the memoir filled me with disgust and anger, to be sure. But the additional fact that their dislike of history and culture led them to destroy an architectural masterpiece that took 37 years and countless workers to complete, that lasted nearly a thousand years, that serves as a manifestation of Cambodian history and cultural heritage – to obliterate all this in a moment of blind selfishness denies future generations the opportunity to see Angkor Wat at its best. That *really* got my goat and drove home the moral blindness of this group that could unflinchingly kill and abuse their own innocent countrymen and women.

How *can* people move on from this trauma? Maybe trying to forget is the only way to survive – I'm sure Chou and the rest of the Ung family wouldn't be where they are today (as shown in the later photographs in *First They Killed My Father*) if they spent every day dwelling on the Khmer Rouge's atrocities. It will be interesting to see if Phnom Penh bears similar scars and a desire to forget as Siem Reap does.

31 January 2013
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

I don't even know where to begin processing what I've seen today; I feel as though the Killing Fields, S-21 prison, and the National Museum encompass the worst and best humanity has to offer, respectively. Reading Luong Ung's memoir *First They Killed My Father* moved me because it showed the horror of the Khmer Rouge regime by making the reader care about the author's family before detailing their suffering and deaths. I have to admit that I cried when Pa, Keav, Ma, and Geak died. However, visiting the Killing Fields made tangible what *First They Killed My Father* led me to experience in my imagination. It's one thing to read about the mass executions; it's another to see the skulls of 8,000 victims stacked in a towering monument; the clothes worn by victims; pieces of bone sticking out of the ground as the soil over the mass graves erodes; and the tree against which Khmer Rouge soldiers beat children's skulls in. I was taken aback by the lush, green lawn that first greeted us today – I expected something more serene to match the sense of solemnity and death that pervaded the place. So I guess I was relieved when the sites of the mass graves were relatively barren.

As disturbing and powerful as the Killing Fields were, however, I was truly moved by the S-21 prison/genocide museum. The photographs there really drove home the Khmer Rouge's atrocities and gave the nameless victims human faces. The fear and resignation in the prisoners' eyes really touched me. I was also surprised by the youth of the Khmer Rouge guards; Veasna, our guide, said they averaged around 13 to 15 years of age. How could boys that young commit the horrible acts of torture and abuse that took place at the prison? Prisoners were whipped, strung up by their wrists, or tortured with water; some had their fingernails ripped out. It terrifies me to think that the teenaged guards could ignore the humanity of their victims to inflict such cruelty. Becky even told me about this documentary she saw in which some of these young guards, now adults, were brought back to S-21, and upon entering former cells, they flashed back and began kicking imaginary prisoners, shouting, and so on. I tend to have an optimistic view of human nature, but our visits to the Killing Fields and S-21 made me remember humanity's deep capacity to do evil.

So why *do* we remember the past, even when (or especially when) it's painful and traumatic? The brochure from the Genocide Museum at S-21 says, "Keeping the memory of the atrocities committed on Cambodia soil alive is the key to build a strong and just state. Furthermore, making the crimes of the inhuman regime of Khmer Rouge [Rouge?] public plays crucial role in preventing new Pol Pot from emerging in the lands of Angkor or anywhere on Earth." I agree with this logic – why else do we study history if not to avoid repeating past mistakes? I'm just not sure of humanity's ability to learn; genocide still happens despite our "never again" attitude towards the Holocaust. And the Vietnam War and the war in Iraq seem eerily similar...

1 February 2013
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Remembering Sihanouk

It's a happy coincidence that we're in Phnom Penh during the start of the week-long holiday leading up to King Sihanouk's cremation. It turns out that Sihanouk had passed away last October, but since it's Cambodian tradition for the king's corpse to lie in state for a hundred days before cremation, we came just at the right time; the Royal Palace was even within walking distance from our hotel! Of course, a large group of us took advantage of this proximity and went down to see the festivities. What greeted us was an odd combination of solemnity and celebration, tradition and modernity. The Royal Palace and nearby crematorium were lit up like Christmas Trees, and a crowd of spectators sat on the lawn as people moved to pay their respects to the departed king. Vendors wove through the masses, selling everything from buttons emblazoned with Sihanouk's face to cotton candy and popcorn – definitely an odd combination of remembrance and carnivalesque spectatorship. And to make matters more strange, a massive television blaring out footage of the royal family and various advertisements competed for the crowd's attention with the projected recording of what I'm assuming were Buddhist funerary chants.

What about Sihanouk merited such a display? I'm assuming that the fanfare resulted in part from a long, engrained tradition of national mourning for kings. Veasna also pointed out that Sihanouk earned a cult-like devoted following by expelling the French from Cambodia and reducing poverty through promoting industrialization. He also ended Cambodia's civil war by heading to Paris in 1987 and asking the U.N. to hold peace talks. However, these acts are overshadowed by another piece of Sihanouk's history that Veasna pointed out – the deceased king was the original leader of the Khmer Rouge. His atrocities were so notable that one of Veasna's textbooks from his childhood listed Sihanouk with Pol Pot and Sun Sen as traitors to Cambodia.

Many of us were confused by Sihanouk's popularity and his initial involvement with the Khmer Rouge; the grandiose, drawn-out funerary celebration only furthered my confusion. When Becky asked Veasna about this discrepancy between history and popular sentiment, he replied that a lot of Sihanouk's supporters are uneducated. Veasna explained that Cambodia as a whole is highly uneducated – 70% of the population finishes elementary school, compared to the 55% that make it through middle school and the 15% that graduate from high school; only 5% complete college. From what I could gather, the educated people are more likely than their uneducated counterparts to know about Sihanouk's time with the Khmer Rouge and are more willing to question the information presented by the government that glorifies the monarchy.

What, then, were Veasna's thoughts on Sihanouk? "I don't care that he's dead. He is nothing to me," Veasna said, and I could hear bitterness and hurt in his voice. Veasna never got to know his father because he was murdered the Khmer Rouge, as were other members of Veasna's family. His apathy towards Sihanouk's funeral makes sense, then – how could he even pretend to mourn the man who first led the group responsible for taking his father out of his life?

2 February 2013

Breathing Out

This month of travel seemed to last an entire four-month semester, yet at the same time it was over in the blink of an eye. It feels as though our meetings with Mr. Son and Mr. Hoang happened years ago. This course covered so much, I'm not sure where to begin in writing a final, summative journal entry; I guess the most important thing to do is look at how this course changed me.

First, my time in South-East Asia challenged my preconceptions about communism. In my A.P. U.S. History class, the textbook ran on the assumption that communism went hand-in-hand with totalitarianism and was therefore evil. This was especially apparent in the chapter on the Vietnam War, which was presented as democracy vs. communism, good vs. evil. This completely overlooks the complexity of the war – the textbook made little to no mention of French colonialism or the Diem regime in the South, so as such, it glossed over the oppressive conditions in Vietnam that made communism attractive. Mr. Son's protest songs – one about Division 307's fight against the French, the other about the "five tank brothers" taking on Americans – made real the nationalistic zeal and desire for independence that fuelled the North's cause.

Our meetings with Mr. Son and Mr. Hoang, combined with reading *The Sorrow of War*, let me see America through the eyes of our so-called enemies. Often, the Vietnam War is taught in America from a biased point of view – texts examine why we entered the war, casualty statistics, and so forth, with the only criticisms of our conduct centering on the draft, our use of Agent Orange, and the My Lai massacre. The former Viet Cong offered a completely different point of view. America transformed from the hero trying to stop communism from taking over the world to an aggressor working to preserve both colonialism and its own interests. And Bao Ninh's novel – in addition to showing Americans as murderers and Othering them as hair apes afraid of death – also humanizes the North Vietnamese. They play cards, joke, question the purpose of the war, and do drugs just as their American counterparts do. Of course, there's no room for such complexity or a focus on the human aspects of war in history textbooks' factual us-vs.-them overview of the war (much to students' detriment). It was also interesting that Mr. Hoang offered a portrait of the North Vietnamese that was completely opposite of the American portrayal of "gooks." While the U.S. bestialized the North Vietnamese, seeing them as impoverished and stupid animals incapable of kindness, Mr. Hoang painted them as the embodiment of grace. According to him, no North Vietnamese wanted revenge against the U.S. or South Vietnam; Mr. Son, too, said that the North Vietnamese never abused their prisoners because they had an attitude of "If you lose your sword, there's no point fighting you."

Of course, neither portrayal is accurate. Just as the American perspective on the Vietnam War ignores both the complexity of the situation and the humanity of the Viet Cong, Mr. Son's and Mr. Hoang's views glorify the North Vietnamese. Historical facts such as the North Vietnamese massacre of intellectuals, government officials, and civilians after the fall of Huế and the mass exodus of the "boat people" after the North seized Saigon show that reality is more complex than the Vietnamese men's views suggest. In a way, their perspective also dehumanizes the North Vietnamese – it denies them the normal human emotions of fear and anger.

In addition to challenging my conventional American understanding of the Vietnam War, this course also broadened my knowledge of South-East Asia. Before this course, the only thing

I really knew about Thailand was its food, and Cambodia was a complete mystery to me. After studying Thailand's recent political history and the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia (reinforced by our visits to the Killing Fields and S-21), I feel like a better-informed world citizen. Even my day-to-day experiences in these countries were eye-opening: before this trip, the only developing nation I had visited was China, which wasn't nearly as impoverished as Thailand or Cambodia (or Vietnam, I assume). So coming face-to-face with poverty and victims disabled by landmines or Agent Orange really drove home the fact that not many people are as well-off as Americans or Westerners. I'm still conflicted about how to remedy this poverty – there are tensions between development, Westernization (at the expense of local culture), and the environment that I'm not sure how to navigate.

As much as I've learned on this trip, it's left me with more questions than I had coming in. How *can* poverty be reduced in Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia? What will happen when Thailand's king dies and the unpopular Crown Prince ascends to the throne? What does Burma/Myanmar's future hold? How can Vietnam keep walking the tightrope between communism and capitalism? Does the United States have the right to try and spread its values to South-East Asia, or is this egocentric and unethical? And when should we remember the past's horrors, or is it better to simply forgive and forget? These questions are not easy, and I may have to accept that they will never clearly be resolved. The countries of South-East Asia are too vibrant and complex for anything to be simple and straight-forward.