Hoa Lo: a Vietnamese approach to conserving places of pain and injustice

William S. Logan

The scars of history

Most societies have their scars of history — and Vietnam is a country more scarred than most as the result of centuries of intermittent civil war and frequent foreign intervention. It has very many places that represent these painful periods but only those that reflect the official interpretation of historical events are currently commemorated.

One place that encapsulates the way that the Vietnamese are coming to terms with a difficult past is the former prison located in Ly Thuyong Kiet Street in central Hanoi, the Vietnamese capital. Constructed by the French colonial regime as its 'Maison centrale', or main security headquarters and jail, in the late nineteenth century, it took up a whole block and behind its high stone wall was a major townscape feature until the mid-1990s.

This paper analyses the links between ideology and heritage that are demonstrated firstly by the recent history of the prison, in particular the conversion of part of it to a museum, and secondly by the approach taken by the Vietnamese authorities to the issues of museum interpretation, marketing and management.

Figure 1 Hoa Lo Prison, Hanoi, in the early 1990s.

History: The regime changes but the agony lingers on

Before the French took control of Vietnam in the nineteenth century, the Nguyen emperors ran a harsh punishment regime to enforce public obedience to imperial codes of laws and regulations. From time to time they also persecuted Christian missionaries and harassed Western traders. But this was not on the scale of the mistreatment the Vietnamese population experienced under French colonialism. Before the French conquered the Indochinese territories in the nineteenth century, incarceration was not a usual way of dealing with offenders. In a Confucian society such as Vietnam it was considered that it was best to leave punishment to the family and village. However incarceration was the European approach and it was immediately introduced by the French administration once it took hold in the various parts of Vietnam. Initially prisoners were kept in houses rented from the Vietnamese, but this was soon regarded as a costly, inefficient and, from the moral and physical hygiene point of view, unsatisfactory solution. Consequently one of the early colonial buildings erected in Hanoi was a prison. Constructed in 1886-1889, the prison commonly known as Hoa Lo was a major, bleak testimony to the French colonial record of forced military 'pacification', the commercial exploitation conducted in the name of spreading 'la mission civilisateur' to the natives, and efforts to preserve France's hold on Indochina.

The prison was built on the site of Phu Khanh village, which had specialised in the production of terra-cotta teapots and kettles. The colonial authorities expelled the residents and demolished the houses, dinh (communal house) and pagodas to make way for the prison and adjacent courthouse. The prison design is attributed to the chief government architect of the time, Auguste-Henri Vildieu. Its architecture, according to Vietnamese architectural historian Dang Thai Hoang, was especially formidable: with its walls of stone 'making it look so strong, [and] by puncturing the surrounding... walls with iron-barred portholes, the French must have sought to create, especially for those outside, a most terrifying impression of life within.' In the years 1900-1906, almost next door to the prison, the Palais de Justice ('Supreme Court') was erected with similar visual intent. Again the classically beaux-arts design was by Hanoi's chief architect, Vildieu.

Over the course of the nineteenth century there had been much experimentation in running prisons in France and elsewhere in Europe. But while the French penal code was imposed on the Indochinese territories, the reforms in design and management taking place in the metropolis do not appear to have been transferred to Hoa Lo. Indeed the prison's bland name of 'Maison centrale' obscured the brutal reality. Originally designed for 450 prisoners, by 1954, when the French regime collapsed with the rout at Dien Bien Phu, it held more than 2000. Many early resisters and rebels were incarcerated in its dark cells. They called it Hoa Lo — literally meaning 'furnace with coal' (referring to the kilns of the original Phu Khanh village), but figuratively meaning 'Hells Hole'.

Peter Zinoman in his recent book, The Colonial Bastille, estimates that 5%, rising to 13%, of prisoners in Indochina's central prisons (that is, in Hanoi, Saigon, Phnom Penh and Vientiane) were women. One of the reforms introduced into France since the Revolution had been the establishment of separate prisons for women and adolescent girls. This did not happen in Indochina; indeed, women were even sometimes kept in the same cells as men. Zinoman guesses that this failure to adopt the French reform was partly for financial reasons, partly because women were a useful source of prison labour, and partly because it was thought they would not join in the men's secret societies and anti-colonial activities.
A more significant proportion of prisoners in Hoa Lo were those who sought to subvert the colonial government’s opium monopoly by manufacturing, importing or selling supplies from alternative sources. The severe repression of opium smuggling had unintended political consequences – a redemption of sorts, or at least a retribution on the perpetrators of oppression. It outraged Vietnamese nationalists, as, too, did the government’s encouragement of opium consumption to benefit the state-run trade monopoly. They saw this as one of the most hideous and detestable aspects of French colonial oppression. Thus the opium trade acted as a catalyst to the nationalist movement, leading to the incarceration of political prisoners and even rating a mention in Ho Chi Minh’s 1945 Declaration of Independence.

An upsurge in anticolonial activity in the 1930s led to a rapid increase in the number of communists, nationalists, secret society members and radicalised workers and peasants held in Hoa Lo and other Vietnamese prisons. The roll call of revolutionary and later communist government figures incarcerated there includes Nguyen Thai Hoc, leader of Yen Bay Mutiny 1930, who was imprisoned and executed in 1930. Truong Chinh, imprisoned in 1931-1932, was luckier and later became the General-Secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party from 1941 to 1956. Le Duan was also imprisoned in 1931-1932, but later became Secretary-General of the VNCP 1960-1969 and President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam after Ho’s death in 1969. Nguyen Van Linh was imprisoned in 1930 before rising to General-Secretary in 1986. Do Muoi, who was Secretary-General from 1991 to 1997 and is still a powerful figure behind the scenes, spent 1941 and 1945 in the prison.

Far from repressing the nationalist movement, the imprisonment of key leaders in Hoa Lo made it one of the main centres for revolutionary education and the instillation of nationalist fervour. Even a revolutionary newsletter, Lao tu tap chi (‘Prison Review’), was published monthly without discovery. Many inmates were able to rise above their suffering to engage in poetry and singing, political discussions and plays. Some of the memoirs used by Peter Zinoman refer to the liberation from the rigid feudal class divisions that was made possible by living at such close quarters, sharing the same prison food, experiencing the coarse informality of communal nudity, primitive and public toilets, and the inversion of the rigid Vietnamese pronoun system.

A further consequence resulted from the French authorities’ attempt to buy off the ethnic minorities, especially the White Thai in Tonkin and the Hmong in Laos, by turning a blind eye to the opium smuggling. This was to become a source of political instability through much of the twentieth century and public health and social problems associated with opium production, smuggling and consumption among these groups still persist today.

In 1945 and again in the mid-1950s the type of prisoner held in Hoa Lo changed dramatically. During the period of Japanese control (1940-1945), the French colonial authorities had been left to run Vietnam’s civil administration under Japanese observation. This applied to Hoa Lo. Some nationalists were released, being replaced, after the coup de force in 1945, by several hundred French civilians rounded up by the Japanese Kenpeitai, on suspicion of aiding or being likely to aid the Allies, and thrown into Hoa Lo and other prisons.

In 1955 Hoa Lo passed into the hands of the communist regime installed in North Vietnam, and during the American Vietnam War, it held American pilots who had been shot down and taken prisoner in and around Hanoi. These men dubbed Hoa Lo the ‘Hanoi Hilton’. The most famous prisoners included Senator John McCain, a Republican from Arizona and presidential candidate in 2000, who was shot down over Hanoi’s West Lake and spent six years in captivity there, and Lt Everett Alvarez Jr of San Jose, California, the first pilot shot down (in 1964), who was kept in Hoa Lo until the Paris Peace Agreement was signed eight years later. Pete Peterson, the US ambassador to Vietnam in the late 1990s, spent much of his six years as a POW in a dark, cramped cell in Hoa Lo.

Much of the American press in the 1960s reflected the passions aroused in the United States by the humiliating imprisonment of their downed pilots in Hoa Lo. Conditions in the prison were graphically described – beds of concrete, spiders bigger than one’s fist. The nicknames of the various parts of the ‘Hanoi Hilton’ became widely broadcast – ‘New Guys Village’ for the new arrivals’ cells, ‘Las Vegas’ for the torture rooms and ‘Camp Unity’ for the meeting room the prisoners were allowed from 1971. So, too, were the names given to other prisons – ‘Alcatraz’ and ‘Skid Row’ for the more recalcitrant prisoners and ‘Model Farm’ and ‘Plantation’ for the gaols to which they were taken when inspections were expected.

Significance: Nuances of meaning and memory

Places hold different values for different people. There are many Vietnamese, notably in the South and in the Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) communities, who have a more ambivalent attitude towards the prison’s symbolism in the 1960s and early 1970s, tied as it was to the communist regime installed in Hanoi. Similarly some such people, now ageing of course, may also perhaps react negatively to the prison’s role in holding key French officers after the 1954 Dien Bien Phu rout. For most older residents of Hanoi and former North Vietnam, the issues are more straightforward: while it might be argued that the French were doing no more than was expected of colonial powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this is no justification and colonial times are remembered with bitterness.

For the current Vietnamese government, it is the incarceration of political prisoners in Hoa Lo during the colonial period that must be kept uppermost in the collective memory. The Hoa Lo prison stood out as an obvious symbol of French oppression and the Vietnamese had to keep it for at least two reasons: because of the colonial brutality it demonstrated and because of the significant part it played in the revolutionary struggle. But the Vietnamese ultimately won their battle for national sovereignty and so for the victorious regime Hoa Lo has become the symbol of actions to be commemorated rather than erased or ignored. In this it is different from many other prisons, such as the slave-gathering centres in West Africa or other sites where suffering has not been mitigated by better times. Hoa Lo is seen as a symbol of transcendence – both at the personal level for those political prisoners held there who now have heroic status and at the national level. It is classified as a building of national significance.
Planning: Finding a new use for the site

However, the question in the 1990s, after Vietnam decided to re-join the world economy with its doi moi policies, was what to do with the prison, sitting as it did in the heart of the city, in the French Quarter that was becoming a prime target for commercial redevelopment activity. What was the relevance of the Hoa Lo prison to the Vietnamese in the postdoi moi era? Clearly, in a country where the government's highest priority was the improvement in the people's standard of living, economic development could normally be expected to take precedence over the protection of historic buildings. Through the 1990s high-rise development projects were proposed for Hanoi and a dozen or so were built, the first appearing above the tree-tops in 1996, a decade after the adoption of the doi moi policies.

The ambivalent attitudes came to the fore but worked themselves out in a way that demonstrates the distinctively resourceful character of the Vietnamese. There were, of course, some calls to expunge totally the prison's physical presence from the city because it was seen as representing a bitter past that was now over and best forgotten. This preference for erasure of the offending places is often seen in conservation discussions in Hanoi, especially in the initial step of identifying the city's significant heritage features from which the attitude flows into policy and action. However against this pro-demolition and redevelopment attitude were ranged the pleas of veterans to keep the whole complex as a memorial. It is notable that these pleas came from both the Vietnamese and American sides. In the end, the Vietnamese authorities resisted the calls for total demolition, instead, they have completely re-worked the prison site, turning this place of sorrows into a new museum for the citizenry and foreign tourists to visit, but opening the rest of the site up to redevelopment. Some foreign developers interested in the site's potential were put off by its historical associations. This included an international hotel chain that apparently decided against association with the prison and opted for a location on the other side of town.

But eventually in September 1993 a Vietnamese-Singaporean joint venture company tendered successfully to build a US$60 million 24-storey complex comprising a luxury hotel, apartments, a conference centre and offices, known as Hanoi Towers. The Vietnamese state-owned Hanoi Civil Construction Co had a 24% stake in the project, largely by providing the land valued at US$4.8 million. The Singaporean partner, Burton Engineering (financed by property developers Liang Court Holdings), had a 76% stake in the project but was also required to provide US$1.5 million for the relocation of the existing prison and construction of a new prison on the outskirts of Hanoi.

Conservation: Looking after and interpreting the fabric

From the Vietnamese government's point of view, the total redevelopment of the site sought to make the most of both the past and the future. The Hanoi People's Committee entrusted the restoration of the gaol and the creation of a historical museum to the Ministry of Culture and Information in January 1994. Work began in 1995 after a year of dispute and capital uncertainties. This included debate about what to do, what needed to be kept and what could be demolished. Dinh Hanh, Vice-Chairman of the Hanoi People's Committee, noted at the ground-breaking ceremony, in November 1994, that many prominent Vietnamese nationalists and communists were held in the French-built prison. 'This project', he is reported to have said, 'is being built in a place which has a historical position in the struggle against foreign aggressors of the Vietnamese nation'. This dominance of this symbolism meant that the whole prison could not be demolished, and that the retention effort and subsequent development of the museum focussed on the French treatment of Vietnamese nationalists.

Hoa Lo has now been reduced to the main two-storey entrance block and opened to the public as a museum under Vietnamese government management. How successful is the museum at capturing the meaning? How effectively is the monument interpreted? The principal observation to be made is that almost all of the horror of the place has disappeared. This is probably inevitable, although soundscapes and other gimmickry can sometimes make past experiences and sensations 'come alive' to modern visitors — though Hoa Lo, like most Vietnamese museums, is under-resourced and such high-tech solutions are currently out of the question.

Figure 2 The ‘Hanoi Towers’ rise above the remnants of Hoa Lo Prison 1996.

Figure 3 Hoa Lo main building, prior to restoration, 1998.
For the Vietnamese visitor, of course, the background is known through the public education system. If not through personal or family memories of the prison's role in earlier times. Whether the education system with its ideological content attracts young Vietnamese to explore their recent past by visiting museums such as Hoa Lo or in fact turns them off is a question worthy of further investigation.

The foreign tourist – the largest nationality in Hanoi being French – is somewhat at a loss when trying to understand the place. It is possible to see several narrow cells, with their black walls and tiny window too high to see anything but a patch of grey or blue sky according to the passing seasons. Two guillotines are on display. But the interpretation panels, which attempt to tell the story of French brutality towards political prisoners, lack explanation in the major tourist languages other than English.

Moreover, as mentioned, the museum is antisepically clean; the smells and cries of prisoners are gone. History is being rewritten here through the changed appearance of the buildings. History is being turned into heritage, serving current needs rather than attempting to reflect the past in a more scholarly or objective way. There is enough to remind but not completely offend French tourists, and a deliberate effort to counter the expectations American tourists have of the harsh treatment meted out to their pilots. Outside, the sense of colonial oppression has been totally swept away, to be replaced, perhaps, with a new kind of economic control represented by the new twin tower business complex.

Perhaps the cleanest area is where the American airmen are said to have been kept. American reactions are relatively easy to access, there being numerous personal websites of American GIs and other tourists containing photos and commentaries. One American reaction is that of Richard Lennon, who served with the 3rd Marine Division in Vietnam in 1968 and who returned to Vietnam 30 years later. Clearly for him the museum was a disappointment: ‘Most of the museum exhibit focuses on the shackles, instruments of torture, isolation cells and guillotines used by the French colonial forces’, while the Vietnam War episode was relegated to a single room that ‘purports to represent comparatively benign conditions’.

Another set of impressions is given by Tom Mintier, a CNN journalist who visited in April 2000. Despite the sanitisation process the prison has undergone, Mintier nevertheless found himself struggling to understand the meaning of the place.

Standing inside a cell, I could not help but wonder what misery the POWs endured. The long days and nights of solitary confinement. The beatings and torture at the hands of the guards. As I stood there for a few minutes, I had to shake away memories that I had never actually experienced. So many ghosts, so much torture is embedded into the concrete walls.

While he was old enough to remember the Vietnam War, he was forced to acknowledge that ‘many of the tourists shuttled by guides from cell to cell inside the “Hanoi Hilton” are too young to have personal memories of the war’. The danger here is that, without such personal memories or deliberate reading into the prison’s history, young visitors are likely to accept the sanitised view presented by the museum management.

Yet another American response is to do better at home – to recreate Hoa Lo in the States. At Pensacola, Florida, the National Museum of Aviation has a display room with artefacts and photographs of US Air Force and US Navy prisoners. The museum also began producing the ‘Return With Honor’ website in 1997.

Conclusion: Hoa Lo, a Vietnamese compromise

With the country opening up to international tourism from 1990, Hanoi tourism and other Vietnamese government-owned tourism companies favoured group tours by relatively affluent Westerners rather than individual and economy travellers such as backpackers. It was believed that the affluent tourist groups expected to find Western-style hotels and tourism services. It also seems that the authorities want to present a bland version of prison life, not wanting to offend the sensitivities of the French, American or other Western visitors. This has led to greater falsification of the historical environment than necessary. Might it have been better to demolish the lot? At least the growth of tourism has provided new uses for some historic buildings that had been struggling to maintain viability. And while such adaptive re-use falsifies much of the historical evidence, this is better than losing the buildings altogether.

The well-educated Western visitor might also have wished for more inclusive interpretation. But in the new Hoa Lo museum, the focus on cleanliness – on ‘clean history’ – is seen as meeting both Western and Vietnamese requirements. It tells the prison story – at least with the ideological spin that the authorities demand. From the point of view of the current Vietnamese regime, the museum provides a valuable opportunity to spread its message of endurance and survival against the greatest of odds, a message that remains relevant to today’s Vietnamese struggling still to achieve reasonable living standards as well as to the foreigners whose forebears thought it their right to try to conquer and exploit Vietnam and its people.

In the West cultural heritage professionals working in museums are allowed considerable independence in the way they mount exhibitions and interpret national stories. In Vietnam museum professionals are restricted by ideology and government requirements. It is still difficult for them to develop a more objective ‘warts and all’ interpretation approach. This is, it is hoped, largely a function of time – both in terms of the gradual liberalisation of government in Vietnam and distance from the events portrayed in Vietnamese museums like Hoa Lo. It is still
too early to expect the Vietnamese authorities to cede this independence to professionals - but this will come as personal memories dim, as the people of Vietnam prosper, and as the state of Vietnam gains courage to confront the past more openly.

Acknowledgment

I wish to thank my research assistant, Emily Edwards, and Josh Millen and Normand Rodriguez of the Hanoi UNESCO Office who photographed Hoa Lo for this research project.

References

 Biles, Annabelle, Lloyd, Kate and William S. Logan, "'Tiger on a bicycle': the growth, character and dilemmas of international tourism in Vietnam", Pacific Tourism Review, in press.
 Danh Thai Hoang, Hanoi's Architecture in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. 2 vols (in Vietnamese), Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Xay Dung 1955.

Endnotes

1 The French took control of southern Vietnam (Cochin-China) with the Treaty of Saigon in 1902, and the centre (Annam) and north (Tonkin) under the Treaty of Protectorate signed at the Harmond Convention in 1883.
2 The Nguyen dynasty ruled from 1802 to 1945. The second emperor, Minh Mang (1820-40), was most concerned to restrict and penalise Christian missionary activity.
3 Zinoman 2001: 27.
4 Le Brusq 1999: 166.
5 Leprun and Aubry 1991: 54.
7 Zinoman 2001: 105.
11 Estimates of the numbers held in Hoa Lo are unclear. For the total number of US airmen captured during the entire Vietnam War, the number varies from nearly 600 (Karrow 1994: 389) to more than 700 (Maclear 1981: 361). Most of these were held in the 14 or so prisons in and around Hanoi.
14 It was apparently classified in the early 1990s (www.refer.org/vietn_ct/mc/medi/courrier/9631125.htm).
15 The doi moi (renovation) policies were introduced at the Sixth Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1986 and were aimed at shifting Vietnam towards an internationalised market economy.
16 For a discussion of the development vs conservation debate in this period, see Logan 1996.
17 Mintier 2000.
22 See www.vietvet.org/lennon96.htm.
23 Mintier 2000.
24 Biles, Lloyd and Logan in press.