Urban Development and Fishing Livelihoods in the Museum: Nostalgia and Discontent in Central Vietnam

Graeme Were

Abstract

This article explores how the topics of fishing and urban development are addressed in a Vietnamese social history museum. Drawing on a project taking place in the Museum of Danang, it describes the way the museum represented the voices of a displaced fishing community who were moved from traditional fishing huts on the riverside to a social housing complex as part of Danang's urban development plan in the 2000s. Capturing the impact of the community's relocation on their fishing livelihoods through an exhibition of objects, photographs and texts, the article reveals ways in which nostalgia is recruited to make social, political and moral commentary on urban equality and livelihood change in a rapidly developing city. Methodologically, the project explored the limits of critical representation in an authoritarian state and how nostalgia can be understood as a subtle call for ethical action.

Key words: Fishing heritage; social history; development; nostalgia; Vietnam

Ever since I first visited Vietnam's coastal city of Danang, I would take an early evening stroll along the Han River – a busy waterway that bisects the city from north to south – and try to pick out the remnants of old colonial port infrastructure that remains in Hai Chau district, once the French commercial centre. Every year, the riverside promenade seemed to grow in high-rise developments, the crumbling colonial architecture casting shadows from the bright neon frontages. I imagined how only two decades earlier, the walk would have been markedly different: the riverbank would have been lined with precariously built wooden fishing huts (*nhà chồ*), the homes of some of the city's fishing community who eked out a living working on the river.

In the distance, just beyond the flotillas of brightly lit pleasure boats and twinkling steel bridges on the river lies Son Tra peninsula with its forested mountain slopes overlooking Hai Chau and the rest of the city. Hidden in the lush greenery stands a memorial to some of these fishing communities that once resided along Han River and along the coast. Titled *Memories of a fishing village* (*Ký ức làng chài*), the installation is an artistic interpretation of a fishing hut once found on the Han River. The structure is made from pieces of basket coracle and inside, an assemblage of oars, buoys, nets as well as old colonial French photographs of the Son Tra community are displayed. A wooden sign describes the installation as '…the remaining part after the whirlwind of urbanization…'. This nostalgic reminder of Danang's fishing past is one part of a series of installations at the Dong Dinh Museum (*Bảo tàng Đồng Đình*) created by director Mr Giao, a famous documentary filmmaker in Vietnam. He constructed his private museum as a 'garden of memories' (*khu vườn của ký ức*) in response to the rapid urban development of the city.

This article begins with the story of nostalgia, memory and place because it serves to emphasize how the presence of the fishing hut memorial is used as a complaint about urbanization and change. It is a response to the relocation of fishing communities on the Han River as part of an urban development project and the introduction of new regulations that threaten fishing livelihoods. The memorial also reflects a general undercurrent of criticism and

resentment to unregulated and rapid economic development within post-reform Vietnam. This tension boiled to the surface in 2016 with widespread protests in key cities, after a chemical spill in the rivers and coastline in Ha Tinh in April of the same year led to a massive fish die-off and restrictions on fishing and fish consumption. The protestors called for government action on factory pollution and the upholding of environmental regulations. As a result, topics related to land, compensation, the environment, and fishing are politically sensitive issues that raise anger and dissent (Harms 2012).[1]

In this article, I examine how nostalgia is used to convey a discontent to the predicament of fishing communities in the city and their marginalization. In recognizing how nostalgia reflects and constitutes 'the construction and expression of a kind of counter-memory' (Berdahl 1999: 202), I use ethnography to reveal the visual and narrative forms nostalgia takes as a moral critique of the present (Angé and Berliner 2015). I describe how nostalgia is a type of cultural practice with specific tropes and effects that make social and political commentary and critique (Stewart 1988; Campbell *et al.* 2017). In the context of authoritarian Vietnam, I demonstrate how nostalgia is recruited in an emotive and affective way to expand socialist memoryscapes and make dissonant feelings known about urban equality (Watson 1994). While the number of people living in poverty may have declined nationally since the economic reforms of the doi moi period in 1986, economic growth has also widened the gap between urban dwellers and rural communities, the rich and the poor, and has left many questioning government policy, especially as land grabs and corruption appear commonplace in the news (Harms 2012; Maclean 2012). Thus, I want to demonstrate how the past has increasingly become a means to register discontent with the ways things are done, especially from those who command more precarious livelihoods.

This article focuses on a collaborative project between staff at the Museum of Danang and the Han River's displaced fishing community over a one-month period in November 2019. Its aim was to research the multidimensional experience of a fishing community who were relocated from their traditional fishing houses (*nhà chồ*) along the Han River to a modern housing development in Son Tra district of Danang from 2000 to 2005. Working within a framework where fishing is regarded in Vietnam as a difficult subject (Logan and Reeves 2009; Macdonald 2009; Bonnell and Simon 2015), I use a first-hand account of my own role in the collaborative project – both as an anthropologist, project partner, and an invited member of the museum curatorial team – to explore how the project sought to deal with themes of marginalization and urban equality that emerged as a result of these changes, issues derived as part of a larger project established by a network of scholars conducting research in key cities around the world undergoing rapid urban development.[2] A major consequence of the project was the presentation of the research through a temporary exhibition in the Museum of Danang which presented the voices and feelings of the displaced fishing community. Nostalgia, as I demonstrate, was a tacit method for bringing discord and resentment into the public sphere of the museum. As such, this article contributes to anthropological discourses on the uses of heritage as an artful and strategic form of resistance and dissent in authoritarian states (Scott 1990; Watson 1994; Smith 2006).

Heritage Livelihoods and Urban Development

Danang is Vietnam's third largest urban area after Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. The city is the only main hub in central Vietnam with a deep-water port and international airport, offering direct connections across Asia. As a maritime city, it is undergoing rapid urbanization supported largely by overseas investment (Scarwell and Leducq 2021). A core component of its maritime image is the development of tourist resorts and seafood restaurants along its coastline on Son Tra peninsula, a low-lying region stretching as far south as the UNESCO World Heritage site Hoi An. As a major hub for domestic and international tourism, the city provides a gateway to UNESCO World Heritage sites in Hue, Hoi An and My Son, all within easy access of the city.

Danang is aligned with other major cities undergoing rapid transformation, where urban regeneration and place branding have become hallmarks of urban policy and development across the globe (Kearns and Philo 1993; Govers and Go 2009; Morgan *et al.* 2011). In

these cities, urban landscapes, such as old factories and mills, have been transformed from producers of things to spaces of consumption, tourist destinations to revive stagnant economies and provide employment for local people in the post-industrial age. To attract new investment, the difficult aspects of the past often have to be disguised, controlled, or erased in order to promote a positive image (Macdonald 2013). This means that particular aspects of heritage and identity may become marginalized, reinvented or lost in a bid to move on from the shackles of the past. The promotion of particular aspects of the past is a selective process, driven by policies that market and promote positive aspects of place, whilst other parts of the urban landscape risk erasure and destruction (Dearborn and Stallmeyer 2010).

Evidently, the problem with development and regeneration is that in any movement forward, some aspects of local heritage often do not fit into the demands of new visions of the city. As Atkinson *et al*. (2002) demonstrate in relation to Hull, a maritime city located in the northeast of England with a rich fishing heritage, the city government embarked on a place-making strategy that set out to negate negative and neutral images of the city. The strategy meant that certain aspects of the city's maritime past were ignored in favour of a more sanitized version. This lack of sensitivity brought protests from residents and politicians who were in favour of a more fitting memorial for Hull's fishing community.

In Danang, a comparable programme of sanitization took place as part of the city's vision and redevelopment plan in the early 2000s. This process – launched by the city government – involved the relocation of one of the city's fishing communities who had lived along the east bank of the Han River in wooden stilt houses. The precariously-built ramshackle houses were constructed using pieces of timber and old metal sheeting placed on wooden stilts (*chồ*), much of which was scavenged either as discarded materials or timber taken from the forested area of Son Tra. The stilt houses first appeared in numbers in Danang during the US-Vietnam conflict when households who lived their lives on boats as fishermen and women fled from warfare in Quang Nam province to the south and Hue to the north, to take up refuge along the Han River close to the US military base. After the war ended, many people moved back to Quang Nam and Hue on boats while others, according to local people, fled overseas in their boats to Hong Kong and Thailand.

As part of the project to redevelop the waterfront, around 360 households were rehoused in this period to government social housing built in Son Tra district. The city government wanted to improve the infrastructure and services for residents in the area by moving them to permanent and safe housing in the vicinity. Their relocation coincided with the building of three bridges from Hai Chau district – the main economic hub and the centre of commercial activity since French colonial times – to the peninsula, which had previously been only accessible by boat. The relocation took place in two phases. The first phase relocated households to a development close to the riverside (about one hundred metres away), just off Tran Hung Dao Street, a road that runs along the east side of the Han River. These were a complex of fifty low-rise units – some of which seemed to be in poor condition, according to residents – but which allowed fishing families to move equipment to and from boats along the riverbank with relative ease. The second phase involved moving the households out of these units to a new site further inland comprising a complex of six storey units. In 2019, the fishing community were still living in the district of Son Tra, their precarity in government housing emphasized by the gradual encroachment of international tourist hotels and luxury residential developments in their neighbourhood. It was this story of relocation and the impact on traditional fishing livelihoods that the museum collaboration sought to give voice to.

Museum, Fishing, and Urban Equality

Across the other side of the Han River, on its west bank, stands the Museum of Danang, built on the ruins of the Dien Hai ramparts, the citadel where national hero General Nguyen Tri Phuong fought French invasion in the nineteenth century. Flaunting a blue glass frontage fashioned as a wave to symbolize Danang's maritime identity, the museum houses social history collections related to Danang's fishing heritage. Fishing heritage was mainly located on the ground floor of the museum and included a life-size set of mannequins representing the *Cá Ông* whale worshipping ceremony which takes place in coastal villages in Danang

and is currently under threat from tourism expansion (Parnwell 2013); a series of large black and white colonial French photographs depicting life in Danang and along the river from the late nineteenth century; and a scale model of the city and a series of photographs depicting the growth of the city over the past twenty years, including a photograph of a United States navy ship which berthed in Danang in 2015. Beyond these spaces were other installations focusing on ceramic pot making traditions in Danang, which featured a range of photographs and mannequins representing the craft-making process.

Significantly, the museum also displayed one of the last remaining fishing huts (nhà chồ) from the Han waterfront which now stands at the back corner of the ground floor of the museum (figure 1). The fishing hut is a reminder of the rapid changes taking place in Vietnam, and a memory-space for the city's fishing heritage (Nora 1989). Placed in the museum alongside photographs of the development of the city, visitors are led on a journey of the city's development culminating in colour photographs of Danang infrastructure and cityscapes, providing little time to reflect or contemplate loss or change. This uncritical emphasis on the elite visions and dreams of economic development masks what Appadurai (2001: 3) states are any anxieties about globalization amongst the grassroots city dwellers. In Danang, this is signified as the loss of fishing livelihoods along the river, the speed of development and conspicuous wealth of the city (especially from overseas investors), and the transformation of the river from a busy industrial waterfront into a space for tourism and leisure.

Figure 1 Fishing hut installation in the Museum of Danang. Credit: the author.

The museum project aimed to raise issues of urban equality by working with the fishing community displaced by these changes on the waterfront and to understand their access to resources, concerns about development, and the impact of urbanization on their traditional livelihoods. It intended to co-produce new knowledge and understanding on the theme of urban equality which would be presented by the Museum of Danang through a temporary exhibition that drew on the strengths of the museum's fishing heritage collections. Another stated aim, moreover, was to generate a new museum policy of inclusion and outreach relevant to Danang's rapidly expanding city and the diverse communities who live there as a means to activate transformations towards urban equality. As Sandell (2002: 3) has stated, 'museums and galleries of all kinds have both the potential to contribute towards the combating of social inequality and a responsibility to do so'. The social role of museums has come to prominence

through a range of exhibitions and activities that seek to draw attention to social justice and human rights issues. These activities tend to address issues around diversity and community participation, in a bid to engage museum institutions in more open and democratic processes through the inclusion of marginalized peoples and stakeholder communities (Karp *et al.* 1992; Pieterse 1997; Sandell 1998; Peers and Brown 2003; Crooke 2007 and others). Yet, I worry that much of this scholarly work has focused on Western museum practice as a response to inclusive policies expounded by liberal states. At the same time, this raises questions about how museums in one-party and authoritarian states such as Vietnam approach issues of social justice and equality – especially in the public space of a state-run museum – where there is often assumed to be a top-down and heavy-handed, controlling approach to historical representation that lacks public participation in the space of memory (Tai 1998; 2001).

        Kavanagh (2002: 110-11) – in her analysis of the relation between trauma, memory and museums – reminds us that museums are conventionally tidy and organized spaces, operating through structures and procedures. In stark contrast to this order, she adds a warning that memory-work requires an emotional and ethical response, testing limits and forcing difficult questions, often beyond the expertise and comfort of museums. In the context of Vietnam, state museums rarely adopt memory approaches, partly because history is an incendiary topic and also because museums often lack the resources to take on such projects (Tai 1998; Logan 2005). Instead, scholars have emphasized how Vietnamese museums follow a rigid system dictated by state policy and political relations (Pelley 2002; Sutherland 2005; Schwenkel 2009; Nguyen 2012). Scholarly analysis of the Vietnamese museum underscores how the museum orders history neatly into epochal events, focused on triumphant moments in the development of the nation, which is transmitted through authoritative displays, rarely engaging first-person testimony or multiple perspectives, and preferring the museum model of temple to forum (Cameron 1971) – a point I come back to at the end of this article.

        In Vietnam, only a handful of museums have used a participatory methodology to address social inequalities and marginalization in exhibitions. In March 2011, the Vietnamese Women's Museum (*Bảo tàng Phụ nữ Việt Nam*) opened an exhibition called *Single Mothers' Voices* (*Chuyện những bà mẹ đơn than*). As a collaboration between the museum, single mothers from Soc Son district near Hanoi and the Finnish embassy, the project used photography and testimony to challenge negative stereotypes about single mothers, urging visitors to work towards creating a more equal society by positively portraying their lives in the community. Similarly, Bodemer (2010) documents how the Vietnam National Museum of Ethnology incorporated first person testimony into a temporary exhibition on the economic subsidy period in Vietnam, which opened in 2006. Focusing on personal experiences during a period of intense rationing and hardship known as *bao cấp*, Maclean (2008) writes how this exhibition was widely regarded as a landmark event, bringing the collective experience of austerity into the public domain for the first time, and thus transforming public opinion and discourse.

        Inspired by the policy of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in establishing close relationships with ethnic communities in Vietnam by promoting the sale of traditional handicrafts (Nguyen 2008), the Museum of Danang had developed strong links with diverse communities in the city to help support their social, cultural and spiritual wellbeing. This policy developed in 2011 when the museum moved to its current location off Tran Phu Street in Hai Chau district, including collecting fishing implements from the fishing community on the Han River. Most recent strategies within the museum have focused on building collaborations with stakeholder communities such as the Katu ethnic people or traditional artisans in craft villages on the outskirts of Danang in order to promote new economic activities through traditional craft making.[3] The museum also positions itself as a leader for safeguarding and promoting the culture of Danang to local people and to tourists (who visit from other parts of Vietnam as well as China, South Korea and Europe). For instance, the museum participated in Vietnamese National Culture Day on 23 November 2019 and hosted a festival of local intangible heritage. The event organized fish sauce making workshops for students to participate in and celebrate the recent national heritage nomination of Nam O fish sauce. Nam O is a local fishing village thirty minutes northwest of Danang and had received official recognition from the state for producing fish sauce using traditional techniques of national significance.

In order to research the experience of the fishing community, the museum director established a small project team, one member of which already had connections to the fishing community in Son Tra. The group, including myself, visited the community many times over the course of the project, interviewing community members about life on the riverbank and the relocation to Son Tra. With anthropological training, my role was to work with museums staff to develop ethnographic skills and the participatory approach. In diversifying the work that the museum participates in through participatory methodologies, and addressing issues of urban development and equality, the museum recognized its opportunity to take on a new civic role in shaping public policy and raising awareness of issues relating to rapid urban development and safeguarding heritage livelihoods in one of the region's fastest growing cities (Fuller 1992; Sandell 2002; Golding and Modest 2013). How processes of participation could be put into effect to recognize diverse voices and opinions about urban equality became one of the challenges of this project.

Life on the Waterfront and Life on Land

For the community in Son Tra, fishing heritage is not a break from a past that once existed (Lowenthal 1985; Watson 2007); it is an ongoing set of activities and relationships that are maintained not only through continued fishing practices, but also through ritual worship and in community identity. Ways in which their fishing identity was maintained became evident over the duration of the project as we met community members in shady outdoor places, in their homes and at community events, and in the corridors of their apartment buildings where plastic chairs and tables were placed to share friendly chatter and nostalgic memories of life on the riverbank.

While stories of life on the river are sustained through informal gatherings and storytelling, the material remnants of the fishing village are barely visible on the east bank of the Han. Former residents took us to the site and showed how the community was organized into two hamlets: either *bờ đá* (*bờ* = bank of the river; *đá* = stone) or *bờ đập* (*đập* = dam), signifying two areas along the riverbank near Tran Hung Dao Street. Their stories described the changes taking place in Son Tra district over the post-war period, an area fringed to the east by the sea (South China Sea); the west by the Han River; and to the northeast, a harbour and forested mountain region, upon which the Linh Ung Buddhist pagoda stands and the Intercontinental Hotel resort is located.[4] Older community members recalled how the low-lying peninsula was prone to flooding and had been used as farmland until urbanization, with housing complexes, hotels, restaurants and shops appearing everywhere. As we walked along the waterfront on the east bank where the fishing huts used to be located, they pointed out how land reclamation had taken place over the last twenty years on Tran Hung Dao Street and where the area was full of billboard signs and hoardings advertising future luxury developments.

Many showed us photographs of life on the river, telling us about their lives in the past before they were moved. Some talked about how life now was more secure economically, given that their children could easily access Hai Chau district where most jobs were located, as well as send their children to school or university. One man reminisced how he used to own a boat and would earn a living by ferrying passengers across the river to work on the wharfs in Hai Chau. Others recalled fishing for crabs and other shellfish off the sides of their fishing huts. Living on the river was convenient and peaceful, with easy access to sources of food.

Residents explained how life on dry land meant that households could diversify their work, by accessing resources and infrastructure provided by the state which was not provided before. The community bought into this aspect of development and the security and safeguards offered with schools and medical facilities. Others recounted the hardships of life living on the river: boats would go fishing at night; then the catch sold at market during the day. Without fish to sell, the residents went hungry. They described the precarious nature of life on the river, especially given that they were vulnerable to typhoons and weather events, which often led to casualties and fatalities each year. In one significant event, one year after the last family was relocated, the fishing community were thankful that they no longer lived on the river as typhoon Xangsane smashed into Danang in 2006, killing several people and causing significant infrastructural damage.

While the relocation to government housing was widely supported, many community members insisted that life had also become harder with industrialization along the Han River. Rising levels of water pollution had meant that their boats required more upkeep because they believed the water consistency had changed considerably and damaged the hulls.

One of the key concerns of the community was how the city was becoming more affluent, and yet they felt marginalized. The building in which they resided was a symbol of this neglect. Completed in 2010 by what residents quipped as 'cheap government labour and materials', the building was in poor repair and the lift only seemed to be put into operation for our arrival. Residents had a ten-year lease, living rent-free. The lease was close to expiring, and once expired, the residents were uncertain what would happen to their homes and whether they would be moved to another development in Son Tra or elsewhere.

The short-term nature of the housing development lease on government land signifies the in-built obsolescence of architecture in Vietnam. As Schwenkel (2012) has described in her analysis of the Quang Trung housing complex in the city of Vinh in northern Vietnam, designed by East German experts and constructed in the 1970s, Vietnamese architecture undergoes cycles of destruction and rehabilitation. Her analysis examines how socialist landscapes are demolished and re-imagined as part of the neo-liberal re-ordering of city spaces. Once regarded as modern dwellings with lavish amenities, Schwenkel shows how Quang Trung was recast as a development known for inadequate facilities and dilapidation. She argues that new modes of urban planning and management are rooted in moral and rational discourses of safety, value, beauty, and quality (Schwenkel 2012: 441).

For the former residents of the fishing community, moving to the modern apartment block was met initially with joy. This move to land could be understood by what Schwenkel (2012) describes as a civilizing process, in which residents could be transformed by cultivating the values and ideologies of what it signifies to live in modern apartments (such as the people in the affluent Hai Chau district on the west bank of the Han River), and not in fishing huts along the riverbank. However, after the initial move, residents spoke about their scepticism as the move meant that they were a long way from the riverbank and the apartment's design did not accommodate their way of life. Moving fishing equipment to and from boats along the riverbank was arduous and difficult and the new apartments had no space for storage. In one apartment we visited, a woman was repairing a fishing net by hanging the net in her living room in criss-cross fashion. She complained that there was little space to suspend the full length of the net and this hampered the way she could repair it.

After visiting several apartments in the social housing complex in Son Tra, it became apparent that the design of the building was not conducive to the moral and religious economy of life inside. Some residents complained that the doors that open out into the corridor enabled visitors passing along the corridors to see inside the kitchen and thus see provisions prepared for the family that day. Some said that they felt uncomfortable about this as it meant that people would make moral judgements about their family. They also complained about the relocation's impact on the spiritual life of the community. Small altars were placed in their houses, and in some cases, in the corridors of the units or on balconies, dedicated to fishing gods. The altars maintained the residents' spiritual connection to the river and the sea, though the government had forbidden the altars from being placed inside the corridors because of a fire risk from the candles. Residents felt that there had been little consideration of their spiritual values in the architectural design of the units to support their livelihoods.

The residents who were relocated were mainly landless and as a result, many of the apartments had multi-generation occupancy. The units in which people lived were two-bedroom units accommodating several generations of the same family. Obviously, this made conditions overcrowded since most did not have the resources to acquire new property: one household we visited had ten people living inside and the tenant tearfully admitted to the tensions that existed between family members because of this. In the apartments we visited, there were also discernible differences in the kinds of consumer goods on show, such as widescreen LCD televisions and music systems. The more affluent families owned their own fishing boats while those less well-off were employed as fishing crew – working weeks out at sea before returning home with their pay.[5]

Many of the residents we spoke to were suspicious of the government's intentions to move them on. They were afraid that the next move would mean being rehoused further away from the riverbank, a source of much of their livelihoods as well as their identity. While most people interviewed acknowledged that the relocation was a positive move, and that they had been consulted over the move, they were deeply sceptical of the motivations of the government given that there were major hotel and leisure developments underway along the coastal region of the city, as well as along the waterfront. With the encroachment of tourism and residential development into their suburb, land prices had soared and the area in the vicinity of where they currently lived had been sold to developers with billboard signage illustrating luxury complexes and lifestyles (figure 2). A potent reminder of this expansion was the demolition of their former homes to make way for a series of new luxury apartments with views across the river towards Hai Chau district.

Figure 2 Billboard sign in Son Tra district advertising luxury riverside development. Credit: the author.

Connecting Community and Collections in the Museum

Even though museums use participatory techniques to empower communities, such as the Museum of Danang in their approach to giving the fishing community recognition and a voice in the exhibition (Fuller 1992; Crooke 2007; Golding and Modest 2013), Lynch and Alberti (2010) offer a cautious reminder of the structural power relations that still exist in museums even when claims are made to practice co-production methodologies. In this context, it is important to reiterate that the museum is state-run and exhibitions are inherently conservative (Tai 1998). Indeed, of the dozens of people we worked with, only about eight community members took up invitations to visit the museum, with six agreeing to participate in the exhibition and tell their story of life in the fishing huts. For those who participated in the exhibition, it was their first ever visit to the museum and they were clearly unsure of what to expect inside. Thus, the exhibition was a test to see how feelings of relocation and urban equality could be expressed in a public space in a way that met the approval of the community, the museum, and the state.

The fishing hut installation became a focal point for the community, who spent a long time analysing its reconstruction and authenticity and sharing stories of various items on display. It drew an emotional and nostalgic response and they spent a considerable time photographing and filming the installation, eagerly pointing out where their house used to stand on the nearby maps of the city. The installation had four mannequins undertaking daily activities: one seated repairing a fishing net; another on a jetty holding a hurricane lamp; and two people inside the structure eating and serving food. Two reed boats were placed in front of the house together with an assortment of pots and kitchen implements, fishing lures, and a cabinet. The installation had a painted backdrop of a river scene, most likely taken from the series of black and white photographs hung along the museum walls nearby. On the painting was a text describing how the city government relocated the families as part of the city development plan.

A freestanding panel placed in front of the house gave details about the history of the fishing hut and underlined the marginalization of the community. The panel also stated: 'A young girl in Son Tra looks older than an old woman in Hai Chau district'. For the community, this pejorative statement not only highlighted the poverty that people in the fishing community experienced and the difference in living standard between the east side of the river compared to the west. It was also a reminder of the stigmatization and separation experienced by fishing communities. As Nadel-Klein (2003: 21) reminds us when she visited a Scottish fishing community: 'The village seems a closed society, with a wary, watching face behind each lace-curtained window. The "clannishness" of fisherfolk is common knowledge. It is also said that fisherfolk are different from other people, perhaps even an inferior breed'. Difference and perceived inferiority also bred distrust and I was sometimes reminded by Vietnamese friends to be on my guard when visiting the Son Tra community.

Figure 3 Community members and museum staff discuss development along the riverside. Credit: the author.
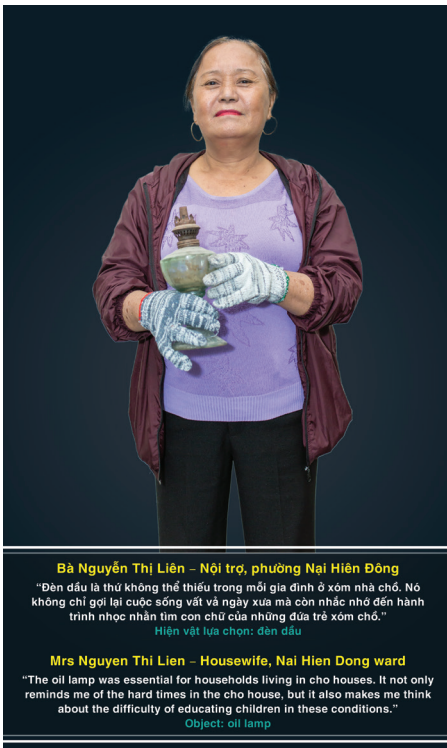
The community walked around the museum displays taking photographs, explaining to museum staff some of the significant objects and sharing stories about their lives in the past (figure 3). The museum and community agreed a plan that each member of the community could

choose an object from the displays that they felt the strongest connection to. These included a crab net; a fishing net; a hurricane lamp; a metal cooking pot and kettle; a scoop net for catching clams; and a boat. Once each person had selected an object from the collections, the objects were taken to an upstairs meeting room where the community and museum staff gathered. Each community member sat with two museum staff and talked about their choice of object. As 'biographical objects' (Hoskins 1998), they carried emotional memories of lives on the riverbank; hardships faced, the relocation to land and their current circumstances. Museum staff worked with the community to write down memories elicited from each of the museum objects. Then staff worked collaboratively with the community members to edit their notes into a short reflective piece about their chosen object. Most of these quotes depicted personal memories of life on the river, past activities and events, and how life had changed – foregrounding nostalgia rather than their current predicament and precarity which they had expressed in interviews. For example, one of the nostalgic testimonies used in the exhibition stated (and translated from Vietnamese):

> This tool reminds me of my time living in the *cho* house in the past when everything in my family life revolved around the river and the sea. Nowadays, since moving to land, many things have changed, including my job.

And another stated:

> Life living in the *cho* house involved simply getting into our boat and going fishing. Over the last ten years, however, I haven't been able to do this anymore. I miss this way of life especially when I see these fishing objects in the museum.

Bà Nguyễn Thị Liên – Nội trợ, phường Nại Hiên Đông
"Đèn dầu là thứ không thể thiếu trong mỗi gia đình ở xóm nhà chồ. Nó không chỉ gợi lại cuộc sống vất vả ngày xưa mà còn nhắc nhở đến hành trình nhọc nhằn tìm con chữ của những đứa trẻ xóm chồ."
Hiện vật lựa chọn: đèn dầu

Mrs Nguyen Thi Lien – Housewife, Nai Hien Dong ward
"The oil lamp was essential for households living in cho houses. It not only reminds me of the hard times in the cho house, but it also makes me think about the difficulty of educating children in these conditions."
Object: oil lamp

Figure 4 Photograph from the exhibition Tales from the Riverbank. Credit: the author.

Since these first-person narratives were placed in the public space of the museum, there was a tacit understanding not to write anything that could be interpreted as overtly critical of the city's urban development plan. Rather, fishing heritage was to appear nostalgic, and thus politically neutral, serving the interests of community, museum and the state. Hence, any strong feelings shared during visits to Son Tra were not aired in the exhibition.

Afterwards, a professional photographer came and photographed each community member holding their chosen object. These portraits would be used as the centrepiece of the temporary exhibition. The exhibition comprised six large photographs of each of the community members who attended the museum together with an introductory text panel and end panel (figure 4).

Arnold-de Simine (2013: 165) points out the 'paradox of nostalgia' in her analysis of German Democratic Republic (GDR) museums in Germany after reunification. She explains how museums, memorials and documentation centres are either split between narratives of state oppression and suffering or a nostalgia for GDR everyday life and consumer objects. This paradox registers conflicting memories, of difficult and traumatic pasts, and yet also a wistfulness for the simplicity of life under socialist normalcy, much in the way that the subsidy exhibition in the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology did (Maclean 2008; Bodemer 2010). Yet, any hint of conflict

amongst the fishing community was shared privately and not voiced publicly in the museum space. Indeed, much as Harms (2012) describes for a displaced community in Ho Chi Minh City in south Vietnam, where displaced families bought into a new aesthetic elite vision of the urban development of their district, the fishing community also aligned themselves to the vision of the Danang city development plan. The exception was they did not want to be forced from the river to make these future visions possible. Indeed, the object testimonies expressed an overriding sense of nostalgia towards life on the river, presented as a set of reflections on the simplicity of life as it was then and how this had changed with the relocation. On the surface, there was little explicit evidence of grievance or accusation about the precariousness of their lives away from the river and the livelihoods they left behind. Moreover, by representing their voices and experiences and being heard, the community and museum were implicitly asking visitors to listen to their predicament and act ethically. In this sense, the use of nostalgia could be seen as a strategy to sidestep direct criticism of politics and ideology and appeal to populist sentiment about the past and its moral worth. Not only did the transient nature of exhibition point to underlying truths about negative impacts of rapid urbanization in the city (it was closed after six weeks), one of the two text panels drew attention to the resilience of the community and their efforts to maintain a traditional way of life in the face of change. Using this juxtaposition, therefore, nostalgia was used as a tacit means to register discord and resentment, a kind of artful resistance to domination, using personal memory and objects to subtly register discord (Scott 1990; Watson 1994).

The exhibition was named *Câu chuyện bên bờ sông* (*Tales from the Riverbank*) and opened on 27 November 2019, closing some weeks after on 8 January 2020. The large portrait photographs in the exhibition were later presented to each of the community members as a gift.

Conclusion: Pathways to Urban Equality

This article has revealed how nostalgia is used as a mechanism for identity maintenance by a fishing community. It has also demonstrated how they deploy it as an artful expression of discontents with the status quo, for making an intervention in contemporary society where they feel marginalized and forgotten. The museum exhibition provided a means to register their predicament, to air their dissatisfaction publicly with the moral economy of urban development and materialism in a public space. While many of the community members recognized that life on the river was often fraught and dangerous compared to living on land, the exhibition narrative suggested that they felt left out from contemporary life and disconnected from their spiritual relationship to the water. It would be wrong to envisage nostalgia solely as a form of reimaging or idealizing the past (Watson 2007). Rather, nostalgia carried them emotionally back to life on the river, a discourse that enabled them to maintain social relations and to work together, now and in the future, through their everyday meetings in their neighbourhood. The use of nostalgia was deployed to share their experience of relocation and hardship, together with inequality and marginalization, a means to act in the future and to maintain values of the past. By invoking the past in the present, nostalgia gives a sense of meaning for their current predicament and vindicates their life alongside the riverbank.

Unlike Harms (2012), who locates anxieties of urbanization amongst the details of compensation payments and individualized complaints over land measurements, the project in Danang highlights how collaboration between museum and community builds trust to share experiences of relocation (which are otherwise absent in the public sphere) amid a context of increasing land prices and rapid urbanization. In a political context that is sensitive to fishing and promotes social development as political ideology, framing first person narratives as nostalgic memories of the past can be understood as a strategy to navigate censure and impel others to act in a way that is acceptable to all. In this light, through the activities of the museum, curators and community can share a common goal, occupy the space of memory, and participate in the civic life of the city by raising anxieties about urban equality amongst the grassroots in subtle and creative ways (Appadurai 2001; Tai 2001).

Yet, like its own exhibitions that tell a story of social progression, the museum too stands juxtaposed against the ruins of the old citadel, a captured green US Bell 'Huey' helicopter, and the shiny new city hall, that towers up into the sky – at once, a microcosm of

changing Vietnam. As an artefact inherited from the French colonial period, what is the role of museums in contemporary Vietnam if they do not support and empower its communities? Cameron (1971), questioning the purpose of museums, famously asked 'a temple or forum?' to reflect a crisis of identity in Western museums, torn between either an object-based or a people-focused museology. It is clear, perhaps, that in the case of Vietnam, this framework does not apply in such an obvious way. Difficult debates about development and livelihoods are happening outside the museum, in the crumbling apartment blocks and amongst visitors who see exhibitions similar to *Tales from the Riverbank*. However, the difference here is that the museum, in this case, registers this absence of debate by valuing the past before it disappears for good. By asking people not to forget and by bringing into focus the nostalgic memories of past lives, the museum represents the community's interests by subtly calling for ethical action and a just future in a rapidly changing landscape – even if only fleetingly listened to in the transience of a temporary exhibition.

Notes

[1]   In the city of Danang, tensions exist between offshore fishermen and the city government over the regulation of fishing boats and equipment. In 2016, the city government introduced a scheme to replace wooden hulled boats with steel ones, offering bank loans to local fishermen to upgrade. However, the quality and design of these new boats and equipment has been questioned, leading to anger and resentment. Moreover, in the nearby fishing village of Nam O, just to the northwest of Danang, another dispute has arisen over seafront land. Some of the beachfront had been sold to developers and fenced off, so that the fishing community could no longer access the sea.

[2]   The project 'Exploring Urban Equality and Heritage Livelihoods in the Museum of Da Nang, Vietnam' was awarded a small grant under the KNOW scheme. Further information and details of the scope of KNOW - Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality can be found by visiting this website: https://www.urban-know.com/.

[3]   For further ethnographic information on the Katu people, see Luu (2007).

[4]   During the US-Vietnam war in the 1960s and 70s, the site housed a US military base and the mountainous tip of the peninsula had been named 'Monkey Mountain' by US troops who saw the monkeys that inhabited it.

[5]   Ruddle (2011) examines credit systems for fishing boat ownership in central and southern Vietnam, centred on families and friends, to co-finance boats and their operations.

References

Angé, O. and Berliner, D. (2015) 'Introduction: Anthropology of Nostalgia – Anthrpology as Nostalgia', in Olivia Angé and David Berliner (eds) *Anthropology and Nostalgia*, 1-16, Oxford: Berghahn.

Appadurai, A. (2001) 'Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination', in Arjun Appadurai (ed) *Globalization*, 1-21, Durham: Duke University Press.

Arnold-de Simine, S. (2013) *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia*, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Atkinson, D., Cooke, S. and Spooner, D. (2002) 'Tales from the Riverbank: Place-marketing and Maritime Heritages', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 8 (1) 25-40.

Berdahl, D. (1999) '(N)Ostalgie' for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things', *Ethnos*, 64 (2) 192-211.

Bodemer, M. (2010) *Museums, Ethnology and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Vietnam*, PhD Diss., University of Hawai'i at Manoa: Unpublished.

Bonnell, J. and Simon, R. (2015) '"Difficult" Exhibitions and Intimate Encounters', *Museum and Society*, 5 (2) 65-85.

Cameron, D.F. (1971) 'The Museum, a Temple or the Forum', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 14 11-24.

Campbell, G., Smith, L. and Wetherell, M. (2017) 'Nostalgia and Heritage: Potentials, Mobilisations and Effects', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 23 (7) 609-11.

Crooke, E.M. (2007) *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues and Challenges*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Dearborn, L.M. and Stallmeyer, J.C. (2010) *Inconvenient Heritage: Erasure and Global Tourism in Luang Prabang*, London: Routledge.

Fuller, N.J. (1992) 'The Museum as a Vehicle for Community Empowerment: The Ak-Chin Indian Community Ecomuseum Project', in Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer and Steven D. Lavine (eds) *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, 327-65, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Golding, V. and Modest, W. (2013) 'Introduction', in Viv Golding and Wayne Modest (eds) *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*, 1-9, London: Bloomsbury.

Govers, R. and Go, F. (2009) *Place Branding: Glocal, Virtual and Physical Identities, Constructed, Imagined and Experienced*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Harms, E. (2012) 'Beauty as Control in the New Saigon: Eviction, New Urban Zones, and Atomized Dissent in a Southeast Asian City', *American Ethnologist*, 39 (4) 735-50.

Hoskins, J. (1998) *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Karp, I., Kreamer, C.M. and Lavine, S.D. (eds) (1992) *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.

Kavanagh, K. (2002) 'Remembering Ourselves in the Work of Museums: Trauma and the Place of the Personal in the Public', in Richard Sandell (ed) *Museums, Society, Inequality*, 110-22, London: Routledge.

Kearns, G. and Philo, C. (eds) (1993) *Selling Places: The City as Cultural Capital, Past and Present*, Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Logan, W. (2005) 'Hoa Lo: A Vietnamese Approach to Preserving Places of Pain and Injustice', in Neal Garnham and Keith Jeffery (eds) *Culture, Place and Identity*, 152-60, Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Logan, W. and Reeves, K. (eds) (2009) *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with 'Difficult Heritage'*, London: Routledge.

Lowenthal, D. (1985) *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Luu, H. (2007) *A Contribution to Katu Ethnography*, Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Thế Giới.

Lynch, B. and Alberti, S. (2010) 'Legacies of Prejudice: Racism, Co-production and Radical Trust in the Museum', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 25 (1) 13-35.

Macdonald, S. (2009) *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*, London: Routledge

(2013) *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*, London: Routledge.

Maclean, K. (2008) 'The Rehabilitation of an Uncomfortable Past: Everyday Life in Vietnam during the Subsidy Period (1975–1986)', *History and Anthropology*, 19 (3) 281-303.

(2012) 'Enacting Anticorruption: The Reconfiguration of Audit Regimes in Contemporary Vietnam', *Positions: Asia Critique* 20 (2) 595-625.

Morgan, N., Pritchard, A. and Pride, R. (eds) (2011) *Destination Brands: Managing Place Reputation* (3rd ed), Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Nadel-Klein, J. (2003) *Fishing for Heritage Modernity and Loss along the Scottish Coast*, Oxford: Berg.

Nguyen, H.T.T. (2012) 'Art in the Rotunda: The Cham Collection at the National Museum of Vietnamese History', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 55 81-93.

Nguyen, H.V. (2008) 'Tourism, Cultural Heritage and the Currant Challenge of Traditional Handicraft Development: Craft Link and the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology', in Văn Huy Nguyễn and Margaret Barnhill Bodemer (eds) *Faces, Voices, and Lives: Experiences of a Director in Building a Museum for Communities*, 41-6, Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers.

Nora, P. (1989) 'Between Memory and History: les lieux de mémoire', *Representations*, 26 (26) 7-25.

Parnwell, M.J.G. (2013) 'Whale Worship and Tourism Development in the Hồi An–Da Nang corridor, Việt Nam', *South East Asia Research*, 21 (3) 475-96.

Peers, L. and Brown, A.K. (eds) (2003) *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, London: Routledge.

Pelley, P. (2002) *Postcolonial Vietnam: Visions of the Present and Past*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Pieterse, J.N. (1997) 'Multiculturalism and Museums: Discourse about Others in the Age of Globalization', *Theory, Culture, Society*, 14 (4) 123-46.

Ruddle, K. (2011) '"Informal" Credit Systems in Fishing Communities: Issues and Examples from Vietnam', *Human Organization*, 70 (3) 224-32.

Sandell, R. (1998) 'Museums as Agents of Social Inclusion', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 17 (4) 401-18.

(2002) 'Museums and the Combating of Social Inequality: Roles, Responsibilities, Resistance', in Richard Sandell (ed) *Museums, Society, Inequality*, 3-22, London: Routledge.

Scarwell, H. and Leducq, D. (2021) 'Danang, a Secondary City Subject to Aspirational Urbanism', *Cities* 118, 103271: 1-11 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2021.103271.

Schwenkel, C. (2009) *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

(2012) 'Civilizing the City: Socialist Ruins and Urban Renewal in Central Vietnam', *Positions: Asia Critique*, 20 (2) 437-70.

Scott, J.C. (1990) *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Smith, L. (2006) *Uses of Heritage*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Stewart, K. (1988) 'Nostalgia – A Polemic', *Cultural Anthropology* 3 227-41.

Sutherland, C. (2005) 'Repression and Resistance? French Colonialism as Seen Through Vietnamese Museums', *Museum and Society*, 3 (3) 153-66.

Tai, H.H. (1998) 'Representing the Past in Vietnamese Museums', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 41 187-99.

(2001) 'Introduction: Situating Memory', in Hue-Tam Ho Tai (ed) *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, 1-16, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Watson, R.S. (1994) 'Memory, History and Opposition under State Socialism: An Introduction', in Rubie S. Watson (ed) *Memory, History and Opposition under State Socialism*, 1-20, Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Watson, S. (2007) 'History Museums, Community Identities and a Sense of Place: Rewriting Histories', in Simon Knell, Suzanne MacLeod and Sheila Watson (eds) *Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and are Changed*, 160-72, London: Routledge.

Author

Professor Graeme Were
Tel ; 0117 331 1191
Email: graeme.were@bristol.ac.uk

Department of Anthropology and Archaeology
University of Bristol
43 Woodland Road
Bristol BS8 1UU

Author bio

Graeme Were is the chair and professor of Anthropology in the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of Bristol. His research interests include museum anthropology, cultural heritage and material culture studies, and he has a regional specialism in Papua New Guinea and Vietnam. He is currently completing a new monograph on 'Museums, Collections and Social Repair in Vietnam' with Routledge.
https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/persons/graeme-were