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VOLUME 25 NO. 2
2005

PART II LIBRARY SEMINARS AND EVENTS

VIEWING VIETNAM THROUGH THE
LENS OF PEACE

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Photographs by Becky Kirkland and Daniel Kim, NCSU, unless otherwise noted.

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Viewing Vietnam Through the Lens of Peace

BY KATHY BROWN, PLANNING AND RESEARCH

As this year's presidential campaign amply illustrated, the war in Vietnam can still generate heated discussions, even though the fighting ceased three decades ago. From January 8 through March 6, 2005, the NCSU Libraries will host an exhibit that presents a much different perspective on Vietnam than televised news accounts offered during the 1960s and 1970s. Organized for travel by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), *Vietnam, A Journey of the Heart, Photographs by Geoffrey Clifford, 1985–2000* features fifty-two photographs of contemporary Vietnam by Geoffrey Clifford and descriptive text by John Balaban, professor of English and poet-in-residence at NC State.

Both Clifford and Balaban experienced the dangers posed by the war. Clifford flew helicopter supply missions over central Vietnam as an army lieutenant. Frustrated by the distance between himself and the countryside and its civilian population, he returned in 1985 as part of the first organized group tour of the country by American veterans. Balaban, a conscientious objector, took the unusual path of performing his alternate service in Vietnam. He taught linguistics at the university level, secured medical assistance for children who had been severely injured, and recorded Vietnamese folk poetry—all under harrowing conditions. Balaban returned in 1989 to deliver a lecture at the Institute of Literature in Hanoi and to find some of the people for whom he had arranged medical care. Both Clifford and Balaban subsequently visited Vietnam numerous times to achieve a deeper understanding of the country, its people, and its culture. Together, they created first a book and then an exhibit that illustrate Vietnam's ancient and modern cultures and reveal the daily lives of the Vietnamese.

The author of twelve books of poetry and prose, Balaban has received numerous honors for



John Balaban, poet-in-residence at NC State, discussed his contribution to an upcoming exhibit at the NCSU Libraries, Vietnam, A Journey of the Heart.

his work, including the Academy of American Poets' Lamont Prize, the Poetry Society of America's William Carlos Williams Award, two nominations for the National Book Award, and a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. Balaban is an ideal choice to provide the text to accompany the photographs in the exhibit, for he has delved into the soul of Vietnam through its literature. He edited and translated *Ca Dao Vietnam: A Bilingual Anthology of Vietnamese Folk Poetry*, and coedited *Vietnam: A Traveler's Literary Companion* with Nguyen Qui Duc. *Spring*

Essence, his translations of the poetry of an eighteenth-century concubine named Ho Xuan Huong, captures the rich textures of the language, complete with double entendres and astute observations about society. Balaban recently dropped by the library to talk about the exhibit and Vietnam with Kathy Brown, director for Planning and Research, who posed the following questions.

You initially collaborated with Clifford on a book entitled *Vietnam: The Land We Never Knew*. I gather the exhibit has many of the photographs that appear in this book. How did your partnership come about?

He tracked me down. He wanted to do a book of photography and everyone said, “Well, you will need some text with it,” and my name kept coming up. He called me up one day and asked if I

depth of work involved in making a concise but historically accurate caption. He would take a picture . . . [of] a temple. But the world wants to know what temple and when it was built. I had to track down a lot of the history behind the photographs. [Points to an image of a woman reading] This is the kind of thing that I was useful for. We would blow it up so we could see exactly what the woman was reading—what brand of Buddhism she was following.

And then we worked with one of the great design houses in New York run by a Norwegian named B. Martin Pedersen. Clifford was *really* happy about that because of the elegance of the product—they came up with a beautiful rice paper effect. Unfortunately, he had so many photographs they also had to resort to using small ones. These are beautiful landscapes, like a painting with the colors, the textures, and the



GEORGE CLIFFORD

Ha Long Bay, 1985.

would be willing. When I saw [the photographs], I was willing. I liked his eye and what he was willing to see. He did not focus on the war. I hadn’t done this sort of thing before, and I didn’t realize how much work I was getting into. I remember there was a series of his photographs in the old *Life* magazine, and we went and talked with the editor. I happened to do the captions for those photographs. The questions that came out of *Life* magazine about each one made me realize the

sunlight in the early morning. I had fun. I was able to take part in the editing. I found all of these design elements [points to stylized heron as an example]. They are typical of Vietnamese books—absolutely traditional. This could have been a book three times the size. A lot of care went into this book. . . .

Geoffrey was the first person, I think—certainly the first and maybe the only Westerner—to go all the way from the Chinese border in the north

down to the Ca Mau Peninsula at the tip in the south. He did it mostly on foot, with occasional travel on the bus. He would walk off into the countryside to get the photographs.

The paperback edition of your memoir about your wartime service, *Remembering Heaven's Face*, has a photograph by Clifford on the cover. The photograph shows two men riding bicycles on a dirt road toward very mountainous terrain. The image is very iconic: a simple event in a landscape of great beauty. Did you select it? Why did this particular image appeal to you in the context of your memoir?

I sent [the editors] half a dozen images, and they picked that one. I was not so sure about it, but it does imply a journey. I have a book of poetry [*Locusts at the Edge of Summer*] that also uses one of his photographs on the cover.

You know Vietnam very well. In your memoir you note that you “often saw a Vietnam that other Americans missed.” Did Clifford’s photographs reveal new truths to you about the country?

I think it revealed an old truth that soldiers in certain quiet moments all knew—that when you could subtract the terror from the landscape, the landscape was beautiful. Everyone at some point was attracted to the place. He saw it with a photographer’s—even a painter’s—eye. You can see that from the cover, which is like a Turner painting. I knew it was a beautiful place because I had traveled the countryside. Most people didn’t quite see it, and most people never got close enough to the Vietnamese to take these pictures. They were always taking other kinds of pictures. The moments that Clifford did were of

families, just doing ordinary things together, or of everyday scenes. Now you see lots and lots of photographs like this. But what he did then was ground breaking and has been picked up by other photographers.

There were some photographs that I insisted he get. He had a sense of people and a sense of beautiful landscapes. But there was a lot of history that Clifford wasn’t aware of and didn’t think it was really all that important to get. . . . I asked him to get at least one picture of General Tran Hung Dao from the thirteenth century, who liberated Vietnam by defeating the Mongol army. He went back a couple of times with a list of things that would be good to have if he could find them.

Your memoir is subtitled *A Story of Rescue in Wartime Vietnam*. This strikes me as accurate on several levels: your rescue of wounded children, your taping and translations of Vietnamese folk poetry, and your efforts to preserve the twelve-hundred-year-old Nom writing system. Do you think the concept of “rescue” is applicable to these photographs?

Yes—rescue for an American audience of a place that they could have known differently, and rescue in the sense of a Vietnam that we thought might disappear quickly. When this book was done . . . I don’t think there was even normalization of relations yet between the two countries. I don’t think at that point we would have ever guessed that there would be tours and tourism from America and the whole world going to Vietnam and to these exquisite places that Clifford photographed. [Looks at the cover photograph of Ha Long Bay] You can take a



Harvesting rice near Long Xuyen in the Mekong Delta, 1987.



Worker in rice field, Mai Chau district, Hoa Binh province, 1992.

one-day trip into these lagoons—some of them are hidden lagoons. Others have large caves that have been turned into temples, and others have caves that anthropologists and archaeologists are going into only now and discovering prehistoric creatures. . . . So it's a huge mysterious place.

One thing that surprised me in reading the text that accompanies the photographs is the extent to which Vietnam is an agricultural society. Some of the photographs convey a life that must be difficult.

Yes, 90 percent of the population is involved. The population is now about 80 million and growing. It's a hard, agricultural life that revolves around monsoons and wet rice. In the north it is a harder life, because it's harder to raise two crops—let alone three crops, which you can do in the south. But once again it is a rice-exporting country like it was before the war. . . . It's exporting rice and *huge* amounts of foodstuffs: fish, and prawns, and fruits. Real trade relations have only just started up. It's going to be interesting to see what comes to America. . . . I have a whole list of fruits that don't appear here yet.

Another striking thing that is brought out in the text is the lack of enmity on the part of the Vietnamese. It shows a great generosity of spirit.

Every American I have ever talked to who has gone to Vietnam has been struck by that and can't figure it out. . . . The Vietnamese get a little embarrassed about [the war], and they say it was a mistake. A bad mistake. They are very polite to guests; they don't want their guests to feel uncomfortable. And then, what they always say is, "it wasn't the American people, it was your government." They make that distinction. At first I think all of us who went there suspected it was . . . a mass propaganda dictate: "this is what you say when you run into Americans." But it is everyone's natural reaction—they couldn't possibly orchestrate that.

In the book's introduction, Clifford says his sincerest wish about his photographs is that they "will aid others with their perceptions of Vietnam and help guide us away from future tragedies." What do you hope people take away from the exhibit?

We get into wars for a whole host of reasons. But what makes warfare readier to engage in has to do with the strangeness of those people we

consider our enemies. One of the things this book does is put a human face, as well as a beautiful place, behind the name. For most Americans still, Vietnam is just the name of a war. We can't imagine for a moment what a Vietnamese life is like, or what it's like in their backyards, or what they do on the weekends. But once we start picturing that, it is almost as if we've taken a step toward diplomacy. Just by doing that, people become human like ourselves.

We're all sort of educated now about Iraq, but before 9/11 could anybody in this country *commonly* know that there was a difference between Sunni and Shi'a Islam? These weren't words we even used. . . . We still, I think, do not have a sense of Iraqis and their aspirations. We hear interpreters, but they're the interpreters of Iraqi identities through the lens of war.

I'll be curious to see if people have different reactions to the exhibit depending on their generation. Those of us who saw the news reports on the television every night when the hostilities were in full swing often have strong emotions about those years.

We did two things that obviously were political in their intention that had to do with the kind of reconciliation that we thought the book would have. One, we asked Senator John McCain to say something about the book. We also asked the current leader of Vietnam, Pham Van Dong—who was one of the so-called Iron Triangle along with Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap—to say something. Dong wrote, "I invite you to a journey into this collection of photographs. Look carefully and a stirring silent dialogue is likely to weave itself between yourselves and these photographs. A dialogue which goes the way of our contemporary world." That's what we hoped would happen as well.

Vietnam, A Journey of the Heart has the power to foster dialogs across distances, cultures, and memories. Clifford's stunning photographs and Balaban's informed text present a rare opportunity to explore a country whose history intersected so dramatically with our own. This is a journey well worth taking—a journey that will touch both the heart and the intellect with its fresh perspectives on a country at peace. ❖

NCSU Libraries Taps First Cyma Rubin Libraries Fellow

BY ANNA DAHLSTEIN, EXTERNAL RELATIONS



Left to right] Cyma Rubin and Catherine Pellegrino.

NCSU Libraries Fellow Catherine Pellegrino has been named the first Cyma Rubin Libraries Fellow. As such, she will benefit from a professional development stipend supported by annual income from the **Cyma Rubin Endowment for the NCSU Libraries Fellows Program**. At a reception on October 7, 2004, Friends of the Library members and special guests gathered at the D. H. Hill Library to hear Vice Provost and Director of Libraries Susan K. Nutter's announcement of the first Cyma Rubin Libraries Fellow. The evening's ceremonies were interrupted by a false fire alarm in the D. H. Hill

Library, but attendees regrouped outside and continued the celebration.

Cyma Rubin, an NC State graduate and vice president of the Friends of the Library Board of Directors, established the endowment fund in fall 2003. Following a call for support from former Chancellor Marye Anne Fox, additional donors responded with generous contributions. Rubin explained her motivation in funding the endowment:

Today, the NCSU Libraries is not the library I knew as a student. It has moved to the cutting edge of technology and its future has no limitations. To enhance and assist in the execution

of planning for the future, it needs Fellows. When the NCSU Libraries created the first “named Fellow” endowment, I knew that the Libraries had the ability to attract the best and the brightest of library school graduates. It was an honor to be asked to be part of this innovative development.

Pellegrino, deeply honored to be selected for the named position, explained the importance of the support it will bring:

The ability to travel to conferences and training seminars is essential to building a career as a new librarian—it’s how you meet other professionals, establish connections, and learn more about the latest developments in the field. The generous professional development stipend is one of the things that really set the Fellows Program apart from a regular entry-level job.

Pellegrino not only shows great promise as an academic librarian, but she also shares Rubin’s keen interest in the arts. In addition to receiving an M.S.L.S. from UNC–Chapel Hill, Pellegrino holds advanced degrees in music theory from Yale University [*see* “New NCSU Libraries Fellows,” page 18]. She has played in orchestras for various musicals, Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, and a summer-stock theater company.

Rubin is a longtime participant and supporter of the performing and visual arts. She is president of the Business of Entertainment, Inc., an independent entertainment production company, and has produced a Tony Award-winning Broadway musical, feature films, and television documentaries, one of which received an Emmy Award. Rubin is also the curator, writer, and producer for the exhibition *Capture the Moment: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs*, which enjoyed an enormously successful run at the NCSU Libraries in 2003. She received an honorary doctorate of fine arts from North Carolina State University, as well as a Distinguished Alumni Award, in 2003.

The NCSU Libraries Fellows Program addresses the need to develop the next generation of leaders in the academic library field. To date, a total of twenty-four librarians have been NCSU Libraries Fellows. Of these, 95 percent have gone on to pursue successful careers in academic librarianship at the NCSU Libraries or other research institutions.

For information on contributing to the Cyma Rubin Endowment for the NCSU Libraries Fellows Program or establishing a new endowment, please call Jim Mulvey at (919) 513-3339 or send an electronic-mail message to jim_mulvey@ncsu.edu. ❖



Focus, a newsletter published three times a year, seeks to promote the services, activities, needs, and interests of the NCSU Libraries to the university, the Friends of the Library, and beyond.

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