

"Mekong Lifeways" Exhibition Opening in Vietnam

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What are the stories that six villages in the Mekong Delta of southern Vietnam have to tell? The Center's Mekong Lifeways training and capacity building program is approaching its climax after 18 months of workshops and activities. In January 2004, a traveling exhibition will open in our host city, Long Xuyen-the capital of An Giang Province, in the westernmost part of Vietnam's Mekong Delta-before moving on later in the year to Ho Chi Minh City, Can Tho, and Hanoi. The 1,800-square-foot exhibition will feature 300 artifacts reflecting the material culture of six villages, including both the Kinh (Viet) majority and the Khmer, Cham, and Hoa (Chinese) minorities. The objects will be complemented by stunning photos and six short videos, all produced by the 33 participants in the training program, drawn from 17 different provincial and national museums.

In An Giang Province (in the upriver region of the Mekong), research sites include a Kinh (Viet) village with an active woodcarving industry and a thriving agricultural life; a Khmer village where the exhibit themes are pottery and wedding traditions; and a Cham Muslim village that is a center for weaving and other textile arts. In Soc Trang Province (in the coastal area where the Mekong empties into the sea), the three sites include a Khmer village where the focus of research is the Buddhist temple as the heart of the community; a Kinh (Viet) village that is in the midst of transition from a rice-growing economy to one based on shrimp aquaculture; and a Hoa (Chinese) community where exhibit themes include agriculture, calligraphy, and the importance of the Chinese language as a means to preserve ethnic and cultural identity.

Each of the training workshops or activities has been organized around a particular skill set, including interviewing methods and audio recording, collecting material culture artifacts for a museum, photo documentation, exhibit planning and design, and video documentation. Each time, trainees returned as teams to the same villages, developing long-term relations with local people as they continued their work. The first workshop, in March 2002, focused on collaborative exhibition planning, team research methods, cultural self-representation, interviewing and transcribing methods, and audio recording. The instructors were Cynthia Vidaurri, of the Smithsonian CFCH, and myself. The second workshop in May 2002 focused on material culture research and collecting objects. The instructors for that workshop were Christine Mullen Kreamer of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art and independent craft consultant Claire Loren Burkert. The third workshop in August 2002 focused on photo documentation, with instructors including Steven L. Raymer of Indiana University's School of Journalism, independent documentary photographer Doan Bao Chau, and myself. The winter and spring months of 2002-03 were devoted to video fieldwork training in each research village, led by independent videographers John R. Paulson, Hoa Thi Tran, Richard B. Connors, and Nguyen Truong Giang. After an involuntary interlude imposed by SARS travel restrictions, the Center's media specialist Charlie Weber and I traveled to Hanoi in July to lead the first digital video editing training session, followed by a penultimate workshop on exhibition design, led by Robert Staples and Barbara Charles of the independent exhibition firm, Staples and Charles, Ltd.

The bilingual (Vietnamese-English) traveling exhibition will be accompanied by "living traditions" craft demonstrations and performances at each of its venues, featuring villagers from the six research sites. An innovative museum education program and teacher workshops will be organized in each city, integrating the exhibition content and research documentation into the middle-school curriculum in geography, arts, music, and technology. The project is implemented in Vietnam by the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology and An Giang University, with primary funding support from the Rockefeller Foundation and additional support from the Ford Foundation. An exhibition catalogue and Web page will extend the project's reach to Vietnamese and international audiences who cannot attend the exhibition.