End of January in Hanoi: the Tet-festival – Vietnam’s New Year’s celebration – has brought a pause to the usual hustle and bustle in the city. People have left the capital and returned to their home villages. Even the police headquarters is deserted. This is the only reason why political commissar Hung calls criminal detective Pham Van Ly, who had been suspended from duty 10 months before. An "noir story." In this novel it is a dark, hard and cold and often colorless Hanoi we are drawn into, not the exotic tourist destination which many authors face when writing from the perspective of the opposite gender or creating a protagonist with a different cultural background. This is why Nora Luttmer’s "Totenkranz" works very well as a story and surprises towards the end with an unexpected twist. The characters are not overly complex, but they are credible. What’s more, on top of an entertaining mystery the reader can also learn a lot about people’s everyday life in Vietnam. Luttmer’s vivid descriptions of Hanoi’s markets, streets, cookshops or his box reveal her journalistic background and eye for detail. She takes the reader even deeper into the lives of average Vietnamese people; when she portrays the crammed housing situation of Ly’s family or when she describes the Vietnamese belief in ghosts and spirits. This is already Luttmer’s third Detective Ly novel translated into English or German. It would be nice to see what a fictional Vietnamese detective written by an actual Vietnamese author would be like.

As a European reader with some experience of Asia, I find that Luttmer’s story and characters are believable. Luttmer got the idea for parts of the story from a real case of land theft and property speculation in Northern Vietnam. With a realistic plot “Totenkranz” works very well as a story and surprises towards the end with an unexpected twist. The characters are not overly complex, but they are credible. What’s more, on top of an entertaining mystery the reader can also learn a lot about people’s everyday life in Vietnam. Luttmer’s vivid descriptions of Hanoi’s markets, streets, cookshops or his box reveal her journalistic background and eye for detail. She takes the reader even deeper into the lives of average Vietnamese people; when she portrays the crammed housing situation of Ly’s family or when she describes the Vietnamese belief in ghosts and spirits. This is already Luttmer’s third Detective Ly novel translated into English or German. It would be nice to see what a fictional Vietnamese detective written by an actual Vietnamese author would be like.

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