Introduction

The Vietnam–American War, although it ended a generation ago, continues to engender novel accounts and interpretations. Notable among them are the recent initiatives of some prominent Vietnamese writers, who no longer deliver their youth during war years according to the conventional, official paradigm of the heroic revolutionary struggle of a unified nation against the intervention by a foreign power. As Vietnam is opening up its doors to the economic and cultural influences from the formerly opposite side of the bipolar world order, the meaning of the country's recent war, which was one of the most formative events and violent manifestations of this order, is also opening up to new interpretations.

In a remote place called the Jungle of Screaming Souls, Bao Ninh narrates in his celebrated *The sorrow of war*, two soldiers on a postwar body-finding mission are debating the ghosts of war: "If we found a way to tell them news of a victory would they be happier?" Kien asked. The driver of the body-collecting vehicle said, "Come on! Even if we could, what would be the point? People in hell don't give a damn about wars. They don't remember killing. Killing is a career for the living, not for the dead." The young volunteer soldier Quan, in Duong Thu Huong's *Novel without a name*, is disillusioned with the philosophy of the people's war and makes a solitary journey home through the jungles of central highlands where he encounters the skeleton of a dead soldier. Believing that he was led to lose his way by the spirit of the dead man, he promises that he will take his diary back home to his mother: "I'll bring your belongings to your mother. If by some misfortune she has left us, I'll visit her tomb, light incense, and read your diary to her from beginning to end." In Van Le's *Neu anh con duoc song* (If You Were Still Alive), the soul of a dead revolutionary soldier has to cross the river that divides the world of the dead from that of the living. Unable to continue the journey because he has no money to pay for the crossing, the soldier looks back upon the world he just left and traces back the footsteps of his life in it from the battlefields to his ancestral village.

These new historical accounts use fiction as their principal means of expression and they often employ episodes and discourses about ghosts as an important narrative element. The fictional aspect is a familiar theme in the intellectual landscape of former eastern-bloc societies. We know that intellectuals in eastern and central Europe have sought to empower the fictional narrative of personal experience as a resistance against the truth-claiming official histories. The novelist Milan Kundera crystallized this orientation in his widely debated statement that personal memory militates against inscribed history.[1] However, the element of ghosts is not a familiar theme. Although various scholars today allude to the ghost of the past in trying to elicit the zeitgeist of the contemporary transition, the "specter of ideology," "specter of Marx," "specter of communism," "ghost of Stalin," and "ghost of the cold war" are mainly historical metaphors and not the same as the ghosts appearing in these Vietnamese stories.[2] The idea of specter or ghost can be a powerful means of historical narration, as demonstrated by Walter Benjamin in interwar Germany who described historical memory as a theatre of the living fragments of the past.[3] Recently, Istvan Rev introduced the idea in his gripping account of the "prehistory" of post-communism, exploring how the moral fabric of contemporary Hungarian society is affected by unremembered victims of past injustices and their scattered, unmarked graves.[4] These specters of history are not the same as the ghosts of war (*ma chien tranh*) to be introduced in this book. Even though I approach the latter as living evidence of historical injustice and therefore from an angle similar to that adopted by Rev, they are nevertheless far from being merely an idea of history. Instead, ghosts in Vietnam are primarily of concrete historical identities, whose existence, although belonging to a past era, is believed to continue to the present time in an empirical, rather than allegorical, way. In the narrative of post-socialism and the broader history of the bipolar order in the process of decomposition, ghost stories from Vietnam make up a distinctive genre of ideas and values.

The vitality of ghosts in Vietnam is not only a literary affair; nor is it, as we shall see in the following chapters, oblivious to pressing issues in society. The phenomenon is founded upon the intense popularity of ghost-related stories across Vietnamese communities and the growing ritual intimacy with memories of tragic war death in their everyday life. Ghosts are a preeminent popular cultural form in Vietnam and also a powerful, effective means of historical reflection and self-expression. As such, they constitute a legitimate field of sociological inquiry against the discipline's received wisdom.

In European literary tradition, the discourse of ghosts may be divided into three distinct genres. The first consists of the large corpus of medieval manuscripts, authored predominantly by the Roman Catholic clergy,

whose objective was to assimilate popular ghost beliefs into a theological conceptual order.[5] After the Reformation, the dominant learned discourse of apparition turned against these beliefs. This Protestant-led critical scholarship "rendered ghosts untrustworthy and unable to perform their traditional roles in society,"[6] and this tradition later extended to the militant scholars of the Enlightenment who wrote against the persistent ghost beliefs as antagonistic to their vision of a secular and rational society. The third tradition developed partly in reaction to the critical scholarship and advanced philanthropic exposition of what historians call "popular mentality" or "popular religion."[7] This tradition influenced writers like Charles Dickens who, instead of dismissing popular tales of apparition as irrational, approached them as having the capacity to express poetically, through "a willing suspension of disbelief," the prevailing socio-economic inequalities and other critical aspects of the human condition.[8] In this literary tradition, according to a Dickens specialist, the uncanny actions of the dead (the magical "reality" of the story) are interwoven with the predicaments and contradictions in the material culture and normative orientations of the living (social and psychological "realism").[9]

This book approaches ghost stories in Vietnam partly in the light of the last tradition. It explores issues of social inequality as these are demonstrated in narrative and ritual engagement with the ghosts of tragic death. It aims to elicit how the social actors tell about their collective existence and personal aspirations through the actions of imaginary beings which are considered, in conventional social theory, conceptually outside the domain of social order and therefore outside the sphere of sociological inquiry. One of this book's main objectives is to demonstrate that ghosts, although they may be ideologically marginal to ancestors and other socially revered spiritual identities, are nevertheless constitutive of the order of social life and that ideas about them are instructive to understanding wider moral and political issues. Chapter 1 will outline this objective and suggest that the Durkheimian scheme of symbolic construction of social centrality should be reconsidered in a broad relational framework which is inclusive of vital social marginality.

Related to this theoretical objective that belongs to sociology of religion, this book has also a specific historical interest. Ghosts are inseparable from particular social attitudes to death but also, by definition, from particular historical circumstances of death. I argue in this book that the recent war and postwar revolutionary politics constitute the immediate historical background to the social vitality of ghosts in contemporary Vietnam. The investigation of their vital social life will therefore have to engage with political history as well as sociological theory.

Observers of former socialist societies tend to highlight changes in economic relations and political organizations, although there are some notable exceptions.[10] Katherine Verdery, who is one of these exceptions, also emphasizes the importance of mortuary and commemorative politics in societies undergoing the epochal shift and radical transformation called post-socialist transition. Verdery concludes:

> [Post-socialist] politics is about much more than forming parties, having free elections, setting up independent banks, rewriting history books, or restoring property rights ... Rather, dead bodies have posthumous political life in the service of creating a newly meaningful universe. Their political work is to institute ideas about morality by assessing accountability and punishment, to sanctify space anew, to redefine the temporalities of daily life, to line people up with alternative ancestors and thereby to reconfigure the communities people participate in, and to attend to ancestors properly so they will fructify the enterprise of their descendants.[11]

The scholarship of cold war history, likewise, has not paid much serious attention to the reality of tragic mass death embedded in this history, nor the enduring legacy of the tragedy in the societies once seized by radical and violent bipolarization of social and political forces. The reason for this lack of attention, in my opinion, relates to the persistent, mistaken notion that this bipolar global history as a whole can be explained by the paradigm of "cold war" or "imaginary war," based on the idea of avoiding an actual war with competitive readiness for war.[12] The cold war was a global conflict, but this does not mean it was an identical phenomenon worldwide. As observers note, the paradigm of imaginary war is narrowly based on the North-American and European experience of the second half of the twentieth century, which contradicts how the wider non-western postcolonial world experienced the same epoch with a series of vicious civil wars and other exceptional forms of organized political violence.[13] Walter LaFeber writes in this light that the question of *whose* cold war and *which* cold war is central to any debate about the origin and the aftermath of the global conflict.[14] Bruce Cumings takes issue with the idea of "long peace," with which some historians characterize the international environment during the cold war conflicts, questioning how this primarily Europe-centric historical idiom can extend to the bipolar politics and conflicts endured in other parts of the world, which resulted in millions of human casualties.[15] The novelist Gabriel García Márquez mentions that the nations of Latin America had "not had a moment's rest" from mass death during the time called the cold war,[16] and Greg Grandin describes, quoting Márquez, how the time is remembered in these nations primarily as the "unbridled reality" of vicious domestic conflicts often with prolific foreign interventions.[17]

The works of the above scholars show that the cold war is now remembered through association with mass death or its relative absence, and also that careful consideration of this variation in collective memory is crucial, both for international studies and for discourses of historical transition today. Following this lead, I propose in this book that the history of mass death and the morality of death commemoration are important subject areas, just as much as diplomatic and economic history, for deepening our understanding of bipolar political history and for grasping some of the emergent social forms and political developments in the contemporary world. The stories of war death and postwar memory introduced in this book are intended to shed light on these broad issues of comparative history as well as on Vietnam's modern political history.

Some of the above questions about war and revolution are explored in my earlier work, *After the massacre*, which dealt specifically with the legacy of civilian massacres from the Vietnam conflict. *After the massacre* discussed how villagers of My Lai and Ha My have sought to assimilate their genealogical memory of violent mass tragic death to the existing public and domestic commemorative orders.[18] The present work expands this inquiry into the ritual memory of kinship to an important arena of war death which my earlier work failed to consider. The village massacres brought crisis to traditional family-based commemorative practices, partly because the incidents resulted in the enmeshment of human remains unrelated in kinship. The recent war in Vietnam turned the traditional villages inside out, transforming the secure space of communal life into a fierce and confused battlefield; yet, it also resulted in the prolific, coerced mobility of civilians and combatants across locales. Against this background of generalized human displacement, the communities of southern and central Vietnam keep not only a large number of individual tombs of war-dead relatives and the mass graves of villagers but also equally numerous graves for unknown, non-native (*ngoai*) human bodies. This material condition of displacement in death is closely associated with the perceived vitality of grievous ghosts of war.

Therefore, this book explores ghosts in Vietnam mainly as a vital source of historical evidence (and a cultural witness) of war-caused violent death and displacement of human lives, on the one hand, and in view of the active social engagement in today's Vietnam with this particular form of historical testimony on the other. It is true that mass village death such as that in My Lai also creates a form of displacement, for the scale and intensity of violence alienates the memory of victims from the established institutions of commemoration. However, the reverse is also true; as the episodes in this book will demonstrate that the spirit of the displaced dead, unknown and originally foreign to a locale, may eventually invent

close ties akin to kinship relations with the place. This book is therefore about more than war-caused representational crisis in social memory and genealogical history. Its primary focus is rather on a set of inventive wartime and postwar kinship practices, and it explores the horizon of kinship relations primarily in the proactive sense of making and generating them, partly according to how this issue is handled in some of recent anthropological studies of kinship.[19] Chapter 6 will deal with this proactive aspect of human relatedness explicitly and discuss in this light how today some uprooted ghosts of war undergo a forceful symbolic transformation in non-native places to eventually turn into important genius loci there, although the wider horizon of the history of mass displacement developing into new histories in concrete places will be my central concern throughout the book.

The research for this book was mainly based in the wider area of Da Nang, the main commercial center of central Vietnam. Although I use some of the data from my earlier fieldwork in the villages of Ha My (near Da Nang) and My Lai (near the provincial capital of Quang Ngai) conducted between 1996 and 1998, the empirical material introduced in this book mostly comes from separate research conducted between 2001 and 2002, sponsored by the British Academy. The references to the global cold war that I introduce to the analysis were elaborated during my fellowship between 2003 and 2006 at the Economic and Social Research Council. The research for this book somewhat departed from my previous village-focused study and incorporated extensive movement across places: the greater Da Nang, the town of Tam Ky, and the ancient city of Hoi An, which all have been the capital of Quang Nam province in recent history. Tam Ky is the current provincial capital. My travels were mostly to peripheral urban areas, and partly for visiting ghost shrines and collecting stories of apparition. Some of these movements were done informally, meaning without giving detailed reports to the authorities about the identities of people I solicited, especially when they concerned having interviews with a local spirit medium who was rumored to have assimilated a ghost of war to his or her spirit shrine. These visits were often assisted by my close friends in the towns, whom I met regularly and conversed with on every aspect of life that friends normally talk about, and the interviews were conducted mostly during the quiet time of the day and in private homes. Partly as a way to preempt any repercussion from this informal fieldwork practice, I regularly called into the private homes of state officials and party cadres whom I knew, on my way back from an interview or at other times in the evening. Some of these people were well aware of the objective of my research and were at times willing to engage in a spirited debate about the ontology and social imaginings of ghosts.

Of the various places I visited and investigated, the area that I call Cam Re in this book remains special. This crowded residential cluster of flower growers, tangerine farmers, and market women, not far from Da Nang, is seated on a vast old wartime cemetery. Virtually every household of Cam Re keeps no less than a dozen graves within its domain of garden plots. This is where I experienced the coexistence of a history of death with the vitality of life activities, a material symbol of the duality of life, and learned profound normative attitudes to and creative social imaginings about the dead. This place is also the home of some of the most imaginative oral histories of transforming war ghosts that I have ever encountered in the Quang Nam – Da Nang region. I frequented this place, took on the task of compiling and classifying each household collection of graves, met the residents through this extended tomb survey, which in time led to my introduction to two important informants whose complex encounters with ghosts of war are featured in chapter 6 and chapter 7.

Ghosts are, in Vietnamese conception, the categorical opposite of ancestors, and as such they become strangers to the local community when this community enacts a ritual unity with its ancestral memory. Chapter 1 advances an analytical framework for the phenomenon of ghosts drawing upon Durkheim's sociology of religion and Simmel's essay on strangers as a distinctive sociological category. It argues that ghosts and ancestors are relational, mutually constitutive categories, and raises objections in this light to Durkheim's conceptualization of the sacred that is narrowly focused on ancestral spirits, excluding ghosts from the domain of social structure and the spirituality of social imagination. Chapter 1 also outlines the general historical and social backgrounds to the contemporary ritual revival for ancestors and ghosts, and the meaning of the important native category, *chet duong* ("death in the street"). Chapter 2 and chapter 3 together deal with two inter-related aspects of displaced war death: the situation of having many improperly buried unknown dead in the locality on the one hand, and, on the other, the opposite condition of having the remains of many kinsmen missing from the locale. We will explore these war-caused ritual crises in the light of the recently increasing ritual interactions with the displaced spirits of the dead as well as the enduring public interest in the repatriation of dead bodies to their ancestral lands.

Examples of apparition and reburial introduced in chapter 2 and chapter 3 also have relevance for reviewing the grassroots communal experience of the Vietnam–American War. Chapter 4 explores the wartime history of a peripheral urban community seized under the forces of bipolar political and military confrontation. This chapter foregrounds the popular experience of making networks of intimate interpersonal

relations with and amongst strangers in the midst of generalized mass human displacement from their traditional locales. As such, it serves as a broad historical introduction to chapter 5, where I attempt to put together the historical background of mass displacement of human lives and the contemporary ritual revival for ancestors and ghosts in an integrated interpretative framework. Chapter 5 deals with the relationship between forms of historical experience and those of religious imagination, and it argues, among other things, that ritual interactions with ghosts can be seen as an alternative kinship practice rather than a conceptual opposite to ancestor worship. In pursuit of this argument, I introduce the two-sided structure of Vietnamese commemorative ritual, consisting of placed gods and ancestors on the one side and displaced ghosts of tragic death on the other, and explore how their everyday ritual actions strive to reconcile the given order of genealogical memory with the history of displacement.

One issue that connects all the chapters up to this point is a proactive notion of kinship as a web of relations in the making, contrasted to the genealogical ideology of predetermined, exclusive relatedness. In ritual relationship with displaced spirits of the dead, this issue is expressed particularly prominently through the transformation of ghosts to community deities and other important tutelary spirits. Chapter 6 explores how this symbolic transition from *animus loci* to *genius loci* involves the practical actions to incorporate categorical outsiders into the domain of kinship. Chapter 7 continues this discussion and looks into the phenomenon in the light of one important instrument of contemporary ritual action, which is money. This chapter considers the act of offering money to gods, ancestors, and ghosts according to Simmel's theory of money. It will review the empowerment of ghosts in terms of money's instrumentality to destabilize prescriptive social hierarchy and to enable the pursuit of personal liberty. Whereas chapter 6 and chapter 7 may appear to contradict each other in orientation – one dealing with the role of intimate adoptive kinship in religious transformation and the other focusing on the magical instrumentality of such powerful symbols of social anonymity as money – they actually address two sides of the same symbolic process. These two chapters, although they continue the main interest of this book which is the social consequence of mass death and displacement, somewhat depart from the rest of the book in terms of how I pursue this interest. In them, I shift from the relatively more distant and analytic gaze maintained in the earlier chapters to a descriptive strategy that I hope can do some justice to the extraordinary, sometimes incredible esthetics of life after life depicted in the social dramas about transforming ghosts. It is always a difficult decision for anthropologists to strike a balance in their descriptive project between the evocative power of extraordinary cultural

symbols and the need to contain it within an intelligible interpretive or explanatory scheme. Although I hope to maintain this balance throughout the book, the reader may find that in the chapters about transforming ghosts this balance is slightly inclined in favor of the exposition of evocative power, partly along the orientation called radical empiricism in ethnographic tradition or perhaps that called magical realism in literary criticism.[20]

The concluding chapter will bring the issues of the moral symbolic polarity of death to some of the critical questions in comparative political history of the global cold war mentioned earlier, particularly the importance of recognizing the traces of mass human death and suffering from this history. This chapter will review the ritual actions conducted on behalf of the ghosts of war as a creative cultural practice, which points to an ethical horizon of human solidarity beyond the wounds and pains of bipolar history.

1 Ghosts of war

The Vietnamese call what we in the outside world call the Vietnam War "the American War," and many of them believe that the ghosts of violent and tragic death from this war abound in their living environment. Those who do so are likely to regularly offer incense, food, and votive money to these "invisible neighbors" and can tell stories about the actions of these hidden historical identities. The following is one of the commonplace stories of apparition from a rural settlement in the central region once known as My Lai.

A man saw his late wife and children in the early morning on his way to the paddy field. This was in the spring of 1993, and by this time, some villagers in this settlement had begun to remove the remains of their relatives from their shallow wartime graves to sumptuously prepared new family graveyards. The apparition was at the site of the man's old house that had been burned down on the day of the village massacre in the beginning of 1968, which had destroyed his family. His wife was seated on a stone and greeted him somewhat scornfully. The three children were hidden behind her back, afraid that their parents might start arguing.

The meaning of the apparition was immediately clear to the man: he must rebury the remains of his lost family without further delay. If he had no means to do so, according to the local interpretation of the apparition, the spirits would help him find a way. The man decided to spend the small sum of money that he had saved for the past years selling coconuts and was negotiating with a neighbor on the possibility of taking a loan from her. At that moment, a wealthy businesswoman who was a relative of his wife arrived from a distant city and told the man that she was willing to share the cost of reburial. On the day of the reburial, the woman told the visitors how the family of spirits had appeared in her dream and urged her to pay a visit to their home.

Whereas these apparitions are common in villages and towns of Vietnam, their stories seldom appear in the public media. Like any modern nation-state, the state apparatus of Vietnam looks down on them as remnants of old superstitions and a sign of cultural backwardness and moral