

Bones of contention:

Situating the dead of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war

ABSTRACT

Postcolonial Vietnam is characterized by the interplay between necropolitics and necrosociality, as practiced respectively by the militarized state and a society that traditionally maintains relations with the dead. This interplay is key to understanding conflicts in Vietnam over the bones of unidentified war dead. On the one hand, such bones can challenge the state's sovereignty when it assumes the responsibility of taking care of them. On the other hand, they exert strong power over the living, prompting quests to place them in the right kinship and sociopolitical orders—or to erase their memory. This was made dramatically evident in 2011 by one set of human remains, allegedly belonging to a fallen soldier of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war—a conflict that both sides' governments prefer to forget. These remains illuminated the contention in the governing of war dead in postwar Vietnam. Moreover, they made evident the tension in anthropological inquiry about the ontology of human remains. [*human bones, unidentified war dead, Sino-Vietnamese border war, necropolitics, necrosociality, Vietnam*]

Việt Nam thời hậu thuộc địa được đặc trưng bởi sự tương tác ràng buộc giữa chủ nghĩa chính trị “độc quyền sinh sát” của một chính thể quân sự hóa và một xã hội có truyền thống nhấn mạnh mối quan hệ giữa người âm với người dương. Sự tương tác này là mấu chốt quan trọng để làm rõ những mâu thuẫn xung quanh vấn đề hài cốt vô danh do chiến tranh để lại. Một mặt, những bộ hài cốt này, nếu thuộc về liệt sĩ, có thể thách thức chủ quyền quốc gia khi chính thể cầm quyền thực hiện trách nhiệm chăm sóc chúng. Mặt khác, những bộ hài cốt vô danh mang theo chúng một sức mạnh tiềm ẩn khiến người sống phải lập tức thực hiện nghĩa vụ định danh và định phận theo đúng trật tự quan hệ huyết thống, họ hàng và chính trị xã hội—hoặc phải tìm cách xóa bỏ những ký ức về chúng. Năm 2011, những nghịch lý này được làm sáng tỏ qua câu chuyện về một bộ hài cốt tại Yên Bái được cho là thuộc về một người lính tử trận trong cuộc chiến tranh biên giới Việt-Trung năm 1979, một cuộc chiến mà cả chính quyền Trung Quốc và chính quyền Việt Nam đều muốn quên đi. Không chỉ tiêu biểu cho những tranh chấp chính trị và xã hội thường xảy ra trong việc quản lý tử sĩ ở Việt Nam trong thời hậu chiến, trường hợp của bộ hài cốt này còn là một ví dụ điển hình cho mối mâu thuẫn trong lý luận nhân học về bản thể học của hài cốt con người. [*hài cốt, hài cốt vô danh do chiến tranh để lại, chiến tranh biên giới Việt Trung, chính trị độc quyền sinh sát, quan hệ ràng buộc giữa người sống và người đã mất, Việt Nam*]

In 2011 the Vietnamese news media went into a frenzy over a set of unidentified human remains. The remains supposedly belonged to a fallen soldier of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war, and they were said to have been stolen on a train in 1989. After the thief abandoned them, they were buried in an unmarked grave in the town of Yên Bái. Lying 100 kilometers south of the Sino-Vietnamese border and 180 kilometers north of Hanoi (see Figure 1), Yên Bái was a major resettlement area for Vietnamese refugees fleeing border towns and villages during the war and the period of border tension (1979–89). The story of these remains, which I stumbled on while surfing the Internet, startled me because my maternal grandparents were among the refugees who had settled in Yên Bái. Not only that, they had lived very close to the train station from 1980 to 1997, and their garden plot had contained a grave with unidentified remains (*bộ hài cốt vô danh*). I immediately called my grandfather, who confirmed most of the story's details—and his part in it. He added that although he and my grandmother had buried the abandoned bones in their garden, he did not know what had happened to them since 1997, when he and my grandmother left the town.

Having many questions that neither my grandfather nor the media could answer, I finally managed to go to Yên Bái in June 2012, accompanied by my mother. We stayed with her younger sister, my aunt Thắng, for two weeks.¹ When we arrived, however, we learned that the bones had been exhumed and the grave markers removed nearly half a year earlier (see Figures 2 and 3). At first, many local people we tried to speak with distrusted me and my desire to know more about the bones' story, suspecting me of being a journalist or part of the crowds that had overrun their town. But after recognizing my mother and her sister and remembering my grandparents, they opened up to us. It turned out that the national media sensation had thrown the town into chaos. Before 2009, when Sino-Vietnamese relations again deteriorated, people sporadically claimed to be “contacted” by the bones' spirit. Many more people

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Figure 1. Map of North Vietnam, showing the city of Yên Bái, between Lào Cai and Hanoi. (Adapted from Alexchris, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Provinces_of_vietnam-blank_map.svg) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

thereafter said they were possessed by this spirit. Fortune-telling and worship services were organized daily, drawing growing crowds to the gravesite. Soon, hundreds of journalists, military officials, spirit mediums, and telepaths from all over Vietnam flooded this sleepy town, digging up stories about the bones. In early spring 2012, Yên Bái's municipal authorities, allegedly fed up with the constant intrusions and the chaos that had grown around the grave, secretly had the bones exhumed and buried elsewhere. After that, the spirit joined the army of marginalized, unrecognized spirits, popping up only as a minor spirit in larger séances in the area.

My unexpected encounter with the bones' story on the Internet, the uncovering of their social life and spirit, and, perhaps most of all, my family's role in this story—all this has left a deep impression on me. In the years after my trip to Yên Bái, I have continued to research the memory politics of the 1979 war and to investigate the nationwide movement to find, identify, and in many cases return to their hometowns the remains of soldiers who died in this most recent of Vietnam's 20th-century wars.² In undertaking this

research, I began with the question, What was so special about the bones in Yên Bái? After all, Vietnam is filled with millions of unidentified human bones, many of which are thought to belong to fallen soldiers. Why did these bones in particular stir up so much political and social activity, far beyond the locality where they appeared?

To answer these questions, we must map the bones' transformation from "matter out of place" (Douglas 2000, 36) into a powerful symbol of subversive memory. Doing so illuminates not only a tension in anthropological inquiry about the ontology of human remains but also the contentious process of governing war dead in postwar Vietnam. As the remains of a person who once lived, the bones in Yên Bái possess what scholars have called an "emotive materiality and affective presence" (Krmptich, Fontein, and Harries 2010, 371)—a capacity to evoke emotional reactions, including empathy and devotion. The bones' material presence led to spiritual possession—another manifestation of the past—that did not end after the bones were removed. This shows that while their materiality is essential, so too is the spiritual resonance that the bones provoked. The bones



Figure 2. The unmarked grave at the foot of the traffic light near Yên Bái railway station, February 17, 2011. (Nguyễn Tuấn Hợp, pen name Hồng Ngân) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

thus have a dual ontology, material and spiritual, and this explains their “excessive alterity or indeterminacy” (Filippucci et al. 2012, 211) and their “excessive potentialities” (Fontein 2014, 115) to provoke political reactions and to evade the state’s will to marginalize them (see also Arensen 2017; Krmpotich, Fontein, and Harries 2010). The bones are a part that metonymically refers to the spiritual and material whole of the dead. Known as *linh cốt* (lit. “spirit bone”), they are the essence of a person’s totality. Thus, in dealing with the war dead in Vietnam and the interplay of bones and spirit, we must address the continuity of the spiritual and the material. Only in this way can we understand the social volatility of unidentified human remains in Vietnam.

Unlike most remains in postwar Vietnam, the Yên Bái bones powerfully reminded many people of the deadly 1979 war. Especially in the context of renewed Sino-Vietnamese tensions after 2009, the bones’ “affective presence”—their social life and their spirit—animated the war’s contentious memory politics. The latter are especially sensitive given that the 1979 war took place between two close, brotherly communist countries.³ After signing a treaty to normalize relations in 1991, China and Vietnam agreed not to mention the war again. Popular remembrance efforts were thus deemed anti-state and were suppressed, sometimes

violently, in both countries. This changed after April 2009, when China’s state-owned *Phoenix Weekly* magazine published a special issue to commemorate the war’s 30th anniversary. Many Vietnamese angrily viewed this as a violation of the deal and a prelude to the Chinese territorial aggression that soon followed. In May 2009, China unilaterally declared sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea, which is also claimed by Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Taiwan (MacLean 2010; Thayer 2010). In 2010, Vietnamese authorities responded by lifting the ban on discussing the war and its impact on Vietnam, but they quickly reinstated it, because it soon led to critiques of the state’s control of the war’s memory politics in past decades (Vũ 2014). With this renewed censorship, popular demands to publicly commemorate the war became one of Vietnam’s most contentious issues.

When I interviewed my grandfather, his former neighbors, and local cadres in Yên Bái in 2011–12, they were clearly well aware of the changing currents in Sino-Vietnamese relations and of the Vietnamese state’s renewed ban on discussing the 1979 war. The narratives they shared with me were therefore as much about their memories of the war as they were about the bones. The bones were unidentified and abandoned, and their location unknown to their family, so they were in principle no different from those of millions of other missing soldiers and civilians who died in the anti-colonial Vietnam-Indochina wars, which likewise haunt the living where they appear, demand ritual care, and inspire political action (Kwon 2008; Lincoln and Lincoln 2015). But while the bones of other wars, however contentious they might be, could find a place in Vietnam’s elaborate system of war commemoration, the bones of the 1979 war were deprived of that, because the authorities preferred not to commemorate this war. But the official silencing had an unintended consequence: the dead began to speak up. In the bones of the fallen, the war’s survivors found a powerful medium through which to defy this silencing and what they consider the desecration of their own and the dead’s memory.

Governing the dead in postwar Vietnam

The “ultimate expression of sovereignty,” the social theorist Achille Mbembe (2003, 11) argues, “resides in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.” As he defines it, necropolitics concerns “those figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but *the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*” (14; italics in original). This perspective helps us understand that sovereignty is rooted not in rational choice and collective will but in violence. It allows us to see that war, for instance, is “as much a means of achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill” (12).



Figure 3. The former grave of the Yên Bái bones, June 14, 2012. The government had exhumed the bones earlier that year and moved them to a cemetery. (Tâm T. T. Ngô) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

Imagining politics as a form of war, Mbembe urges us to ask, “What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)?” (12). While the concept of necropolitics is not beyond critique for its tendency to naturalize sovereignty, it is useful for comparing modalities of power in the production and management of both live and dead bodies (Ferrándiz and Robben 2015; Stepputat 2014).

In societies in transition, such as those of eastern Europe, scholars of necropolitics should attend

to political symbolism; to death rituals and beliefs, such as ideas about what constitutes a “proper burial”; to the connections between the particular corpses being manipulated and the wider national and international contexts of their manipulation; and to reassessing or rewriting the past and creating or retrieving “memory.” (Verdery 1999, 3)

This is also the case in Vietnam. Like its counterparts around the world (e.g., Bacigalupo 2018; Ferrándiz 2013; Gal 1991; Robben 2017; Verdery 1999; Watson 1994; Winter 2017), the modern Vietnamese state rests its sovereignty on, among other things, warfare and the management of dead bodies. Vietnam is particular, however: only recently did it wrest statehood from imperial powers (first France, then the United States), and in the years since, its

society—including both the living and the dead—has been thoroughly militarized. The Vietnamese state’s governing of the dead entails sacralizing fallen Vietnamese soldiers, criminalizing enemy dead, and marginalizing the dead outside these two categories. This has produced a population that is deeply invested in the memory of war and engaged in what Jieun Kim (2016) calls “necrosociality,” an enduring, intense, and intimate relationship with the dead, particularly war dead. This interplay, between the state’s governing of and the people’s caring for the dead, characterizes and helps produce both the nationalist agenda and the social fabric of postwar Vietnam.

The Vietnamese state honors 1.2 million soldiers who died fighting for its establishment and preservation with the title martyr (*liệt sĩ*). Their death is hailed as the most sacred, ultimate, and heroic sacrifice; the state vows to remember them “forever” and to reward the remains of the dead with “utmost care.” The cult of fallen soldiers started early in this postcolonial nation’s history. In 1947, two years after declaring the independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam and as the first Indochina War begun, Ho Chi Minh made July 27 the nation’s annual War Invalids and Martyrs Day. Memorial holidays, public ceremonies, commemorative rituals, and statues have been common ways to focus attention on these sacrifices and to inscribe them in the national landscape (Bayly 2013; Kwon 2015). Since the bodies of nearly half these 1.2 million martyrs are either unidentified or

missing from state-designated cemeteries, both families and the state have made ceaseless efforts to find, identify, and rebury them (sending them home when necessary).

Several million more Vietnamese were killed in the three successive Indochina wars that Vietnam fought in the 20th century. The bodies of these dead, if they are lucky enough not to be counted as enemy soldiers, are relegated to the care of their surviving kin or their bereaved home communities. In the wake of warfare and in the face of missing remains and unattended graves, Vietnam has seen the proliferation of dynamic forms of spiritual reciprocity and localized ritual care for the dead (Bayly 2013; DiGregorio and Saleminck 2007; Kwon 2008, 2015; Leshkowich 2008; Malarney 2002; Schwenkel 2008; Sorrentino 2017). Much of the population shares the state's desire to locate, identify, and send home the bones of martyrs, yet it reminds many others of the neglect, if not outright banishing, of many other Vietnamese remains. Many Vietnamese have become more assertive in carrying out rituals for the dead, including the widely practiced burial-and-reburial custom, to which bones are central. In this they are driven by deeply ingrained beliefs about the necessity of these rituals (Shohet 2018), especially for those who suffered a bad death. They carry them out even when it sometimes contradicts the state's will.⁴

The economic and political reform (Đổi Mới) set in motion in 1986 led to further changes in commemorative politics. Symbolic gestures honoring war dead began to appear empty as the state inadequately responded to families' requests to find and retrieve the remains of their loved ones from the former battlefields. Other people started to question the state's arbitrary control of the bodies. Since the 1990s citizens have taken matters into their own hands with private bone-finding missions all over Vietnam. According to traditional Vietnamese belief, the dead can be contacted through spirit possession and soul calling. These practices, which the state considers superstition and anti-science, were banned, but calls for their legalization followed the early-1990s success of spirit mediums who discreetly helped needy families locate the remains of their missing relatives. Under these pressures, the Vietnamese state shifted its position, allowing spirit mediums to search for its own missing soldiers (Sorrentino 2017). To officialize the state's employment of religious actors, the Center for Research into Human Capabilities (CRHC) was established in 1996 under the indirect administration of the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Environment. To soften the contradiction between its official atheist secularism policy and such toleration of spirit mediums, the state has renamed them persons with special abilities and specialists "in extrasensory perception" (Schlecker and Endres 2011, 3). Traditional methods of contacting souls and searching for bones have likewise been granted scientific legitimacy with the adoption of the foreign terms "extrasensory" (*ngoại cảm*), "telepathy" (*thần giao cách cảm*), and "para-

psychology" (*cận tâm lý*), via Russian New Age writings that blur the line between science and pseudoscience. The official recognition of the CRHC's contribution opened a niche for many grave finders in the country. This soon gave birth to spiritual forensics, defined as the science of finding and identifying the dead through spiritual means (Viện Khoa Học Hình Sự 2011). This sanctioning of the marriage between science and (traditional) religion, while similar to developments in other communist countries (Palmer 2007; Yurchak 2015), plunged Vietnamese society into a feverish telepathic search for bones and spirits connected to all the dead throughout the country's history.

Although deeply ambivalent toward this telepathic fever, the postwar Vietnamese state is serious about finding and identifying the remains of its missing soldiers, as evidenced by its recent massive investment in DNA-based forensics to pursue this goal (Abbott 2016). Officials see this not only as the state's moral duty to the men and women who sacrificed their lives for it but also as a central aspect of the state's practice of sovereignty. Nevertheless, the effort dug up many touchy issues in the politics of postwar reconciliation, especially between the North and South. The Communist Party of Vietnam prides itself on and derives political legitimacy from its exclusive claim to leadership in the resistance wars against foreign invaders. Any voice that challenges this claim is suppressed, and it prohibits any commemoration of people or events that are anathema to the state and the party. For instance, Vietnamese authorities have consistently punished anyone who dares challenge the official discourse on what Americans call the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese state calls the Resistance War against America (1955–75). While soldiers of the Northern Liberation Army and the southern partisans are memorialized as heroes, the fallen soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam are dismissed as traitors and officially banned from receiving any consoling ritual. According to Heonik Kwon (2008), after these rituals brought this war's ghosts, both its "heroes" and "traitors," back to the familiar and familial, the earlier polarization between North and South Vietnam disappeared. Formerly divided communities were unified once past politics and divisions no longer mattered. This describes the reconciliation in communities in central Vietnam that are the subject of Kwon's study, yet it is too optimistic a narrative for other places in Vietnam. Kwon himself admits that the state's rendering of national unity as spiritual unity between the living and the dead does not extend to the horizon of "enemy" ghosts.

Not much has changed even today. The fallen soldiers of the Republic of South Vietnam are still categorized as "dead enemies," and their burial grounds are often considered "dead zones," which the living prefer to avoid (Robert 2014), since the enemies' lives are deemed "ungrievable" (Butler 2004, 36) and thus unworthy of ritual and forensic care. Nonetheless, their bodies remain potent sources of

political and ritual actions, locally and transnationally. In an interview in Ho Chi Minh City in December 2019, a Catholic priest told me that as long as the bodies of fallen soldiers of the Army of Republic of Vietnam continue to be neglected, the North and the South may be unified but will never be reconciled.⁵ To move beyond such nationalism (and nationalist preparation for war), the Vietnamese American literary scholar Việt Thanh Nguyễn (2016, 17) argues for creating a “just memory,” in which people remember their own dead as well as that of the enemy, and remember them in both their humane and inhumane aspects. But such a “just memory” is precisely what the Vietnamese state sees as weakening its hold on the people. While the political and ideological context does not allow truth seeking or personal narratives of the past, Vietnamese people focus on searching for the bones of the dead and listening to voices from the grave. The peculiar memory politics of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war have further complicated the interplay between governing and caring for the dead in Vietnam. This interplay has been the inexhaustible source of the Yên Bái bones’ political power.

For the people I spoke with in Yên Bái, the bones’ materiality and spirituality are central to how they explain the bones’ capacity to evoke their empathy, connection, and reverence, as well as their ability to evade state’s control. Their descriptions are reminiscent of what Mbembe (2003, 12) calls the necropolitical tension between, on the one hand, bones’ “petrification” and “strange coolness” and, on the other, “their stubborn will to mean, to signifying something.” The excessive, simultaneous alterity and affective intimacy of human remains, however, go beyond politics and render unstable their categorization as friend or foe. According to Finn Stepputat (2014, 26), “Human remains are more metonymic than metaphorical,” since they signal “presence” more readily than any meaning. Processes of turning human remains into metaphors, such as “the dead,” are therefore often “contingent and contested.” This is indeed the most striking aspect of the bones of Yên Bái, since they represent the deceased in both material and spiritual form. They refuse to be marginalized as unidentifiable remains. They show their desire to be included among the “martyrs,” the recognized heroes of Vietnam’s wars, but that inclusion would bring up the repressed memory of a war that the state wants to forget. Just as slippery as the memory of the 1979 war, they have been very difficult to pin down.

When the bones showed up at the edge of my grandparents’ garden, locals’ sympathy was aroused by their fragility and vulnerability, their shape and size, and their pitiful and almost painful history of having been stolen on the way home. Thus began the efforts to protect and care for them. This is the necrosociality that I referred to earlier; it is of crucial significance in Vietnamese society, and it differs from the necropolitics of the state. These bones’ arrival in Yên Bái in 1989 animated social processes of mourning and

remembering the war and its dead, memories that had been kept in the private domain until then, as the state dictated the erasure of the war’s memory and silenced its population to prepare for a normalization of relations with China. In the decades that followed, the bones and their spirit were never simply a blank canvas for political agendas—they defied various attempts at definition and identification while people continued to treat them as objects of care and devotion. Following these bones and the multiple roles they have played reveals various modes of interaction between the living and the dead, between the state and its citizens, and between subjects and objects (Wagner 2013, 2015). In the few accounts of Vietnam’s recovery of war dead (Kwon 2008; Sorrentino 2017), the focus is on the spiritual organizations that conduct the searches rather than on the agency of the bones themselves. But one needs the bones to call up the spirit because the bones have power, spiritual efficacy (*linh thiêng*). There is no sharp line at which the materiality of the bones ends and the spirit begins. This intertwining makes possible the connection to the war that produced these dead, whose bodies may be absent but whose spirits are vividly present. Bones may regenerate life and reproduce societies (Bloch and Parry 1982), but in post-war Vietnam, they are acting objects that actualize human relations (Mueggler 2017, 6). This relationship between the living and the dead can be intense and personal, as in daily ritual or interactions with ghosts. And it can have wider effects that are so subversive and destabilizing that they even threaten the sovereign nation’s founding myths and transform the lives of the living, sometimes against their wishes.

The biography of the Yên Bái bones and the social life of their spirit

It was a late afternoon in spring 1989 when my grandmother found a new travel bag abandoned at the edge of her garden plot, which was next to a traffic light at the northern gate of the Yên Bái train station. Inside it, she found a small, old, green cotton blanket, typical of the Vietnamese People’s Army, and a red cloth in which were wrapped a human skull and a few arm and leg bones. At the bottom of the bag were a small knife and a small porcelain bowl. She immediately connected this discovery to an incident that had occurred a few days earlier, when the cries of an old man in the middle of the main Yên Bái railway station had caught the attention of other passengers. As my grandfather recalled, the man had told a number of people around the station that he was a poor farmer from a faraway province who had withdrawn years of savings to make this trip to the Sino-Vietnamese border to retrieve the remains of his son, who had died in the first battle of the 1979 war. In Vietnam, the dead (whether as fresh corpses or just bones) cannot legally travel by public transportation without a special permit, which is obtainable usually only after a lengthy and

costly bureaucratic process.⁶ Without the necessary time, money, and connections, the father decided to take the train home with his son's bones carefully wrapped in a travel bag that he had purchased in a border market.

The bag's expensive look and the father's possessive guarding of it must have given some thief the idea that he was onto something really valuable. After half a day's ride, just before the train entered Yên Bái's central station, the father went to the toilet. When he returned, the bag was gone. Desperate, he walked up and down the train crying for help, without success. When the train stopped, people advised him to stay in Yên Bái to search for the bag because the thief must have gotten off there and might have disposed of it somewhere in town once he discovered what was inside. Because the father had illegally brought his son's bones onto the train, he did not dare file a police report. After two days of fruitless searching, he had no choice but to go home, not knowing that on the very same day my grandmother found the bones, abandoned by the thief at the edge of her garden.

For understandable reasons, my grandmother was extremely sensitive about human remains. This may have something to do with her father's purple and blue swollen corpse, which on a humid morning in August 1953 she found hanging in the middle of the family's main house, then occupied by a revolutionary unit that was directing a campaign against local landlords, starting with her family. But it certainly had something to do with her family's experience of the 1979 war. They had fled the horror of the war by rafting down the Red River, as had thousands of other residents of Lào Cai, a town on the border with China where my grandmother settled with my grandfather to raise their young family in 1953. When hundreds of floating corpses began to catch up with their raft, they stopped their journey and settled in a village near Yên Bái. From their temporary house on the riverbank, they continued to watch countless corpses, both Chinese and Vietnamese, bloated and half decomposed, float by from the ongoing battles upstream. There was a whirlpool by the wharf near their house, where many corpses washed ashore. My grandma's family and other villagers would collect and bury the dead, until eventually these corpses, with their faces half-eaten by fish, their broken skulls, their missing legs or arms, and the smell of their decayed flesh, became the stuff of her nightmares. In 1983 the family packed up and settled in Yên Bái township. At the end of the 1980s, my grandma finally found a way to bring some peace to her turbulent life. As political control over religious practice relaxed, she set up a shrine in her home to worship the Mother Goddess and other deities of the Four Palace tradition whom she believed could protect the wandering souls of her relatives and of those she had helped bury a decade earlier.

Not knowing that the poor father had already left, my grandparents sent word to town about the discovery, hoping that he would hear it, and placed the bones, carefully

rewrapped in the bag, on a small table that they put at the edge of the garden where the bones had been found. A couple of nearby neighbors helped assemble a simple set of offerings, and they lit incense to pray for the bones' spirit. This was an act of ritual comfort for a homeless dead person (Kim 2016), but in the night, the wind must have fanned the fire from the burning incense, spreading it to the bag of bones. The next morning, my grandparents came back to the site and found a smoldering fire. To their horror, they could save only some of the bones, which they buried right away. In the next three days, they brought the best of what they could afford as offerings to the grave, as if it belonged to a deceased relative of theirs. From then on, on the first and 15th days of each lunar calendar month, as Vietnamese ritual dictates, they lit incense on the grave. Later, after learning that the father might have been from Thanh Hóa or Hà Nam, my grandparents never missed an opportunity to recount their story to travelers heading to those provinces, hoping that word would eventually reach a relative of the deceased whose bones they tended. In 1997 my grandparents moved back to the newly reestablished Lào Cai city, where they reclaimed some of their old lands and where most of their children lived. My grandma soon passed away, and thereafter my grandpa hardly ever returned to Yên Bái.

When my grandparents moved away, Aunt Thắng was supposed to tend the grave, a duty that she increasingly neglected and stopped entirely in 2002, owing to her relocation and busy family life. But the bones left lying in their desolate grave were not lonely for long. In the mid-2000s, as telepathic fever swept Vietnam, more and more people in the town were possessed by a spirit that claimed that it was a fallen soldier of the 1979 war and that its bones were lying in the grave near the train station. Apparently, the story had traveled around the town in bits and pieces. Very soon, the grave was frequented by people seeking healing magic, lottery numbers, and advice about family, love, and social problems. A family living opposite the grave had a brick-and-mortar tomb built for the spirit, as their token of gratitude for his part in their succession of prosperous years. In early summer 2007, a young woman returned from Ho Chi Minh City, where she had worked for two years in a textile sweatshop and claimed to be his fiancée. As her mother tearfully recalled during our visit to her home in the western end of Yên Bái township, the young woman cried for him at the gravesite for three days, then went home and hanged herself.⁷

In the same year of this tragic event, a woman named Ngọc who lived near the grave admitted that it was her (now ex-) husband who had stolen the bones in 1989, a secret she had kept ever since. Ngọc's coming clean was prompted by the spirit's possession of her daughter. As these episodes became more frequent and the worship around the grave grew frenzied, Ngọc's confession revealed to the public her problematic but close and personal tie to the bones. This made

her the spirit's new patron. With her daughter as its vessel and voice, the spirit came into her home, and so did the crowd. When the spirit threatened to harm her daughter, not long after the soldier's purported fiancée killed herself, Ngọc was in a hurry to appease it and vowed, by way of making amends, to conduct a ceremony to send it to a suitable location.

Whenever people cannot deal with a spirit, they ask Buddhist monks to tame it and admit it to their temple. Other times, spirits themselves ask to be admitted to a temple because they want an education and future promotion in the underworld (Kwon 2008). At first, the spirit agreed to Ngọc's offer to send it to the nearby Buddhist temple. But the temple authority told her she would have to wait because the Hall for Homeless Spirits was under construction, so Ngọc suggested the Shrine of the Seventh Prince (a famous Mother Goddess shrine 50 kilometers north of Yên Bái). The spirit also liked this idea, but as the crowd moved from the grave to her house and donated money for each consultation, it changed its mind and wanted Ngọc to rebuild her house into a shrine to itself, to be named the Shrine for the Young Master from the Traffic Light Pole (Điện Cậu Bé Đèn Ghi).

The negotiations between them changed the status of both Ngọc and the spirit. For Ngọc, after almost 20 years as a mortified accomplice, coming to terms with her past crime allowed her to free herself of its moral haunting by seeking and accomplishing rectification, and finally owning up to it. At first, she feared the spirit (*vong, hồn*) as a ghost (*con ma*) and tried to get rid of it. But as soon as she believed he was a powerful being (a young master, *cậu ông mãnh*) who could bless, protect, or punish, she wanted to build a shrine, worship him, and profit from his blessing. For the spirit, his sacred efficacy made Ngọc and others devoted to him, and their acts of devotion turned him into a god. This status promotion recalls the ghost-to-god transformation common in popular East Asian religion, in which ghosts are pacified and some are eventually given a place in a pantheon acceptable to the state (Weller 1987). But because the spirit in our case was tied to the memory of the 1979 war, the Vietnamese state refused to sanction its promotion. As a result, the spirit remained ambiguous and potentially dangerous.

Unclaimed war and unclaimed remains

Of the last three wars that Vietnam fought in the 20th century, the French war (1945–54) and the American war (1955–75) have monumental places in Vietnamese historiography, while the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war is hardly mentioned. The first two are the main subjects of at least four of the 15 volumes of *The History of Vietnam* (Viện Sử Học 2017), the 9,086-page, 24-kilogram omnibus published by the Vietnam Institute of History. The 1979 war, in contrast, is given 131 words (vol. 14, p. 355). This war

is not only a repressed topic but also the cause of major political contentions in contemporary Vietnam: every year on February 17, the anniversary of its outbreak, government authorities deploy security forces to shut down any commemoration attempt, on- or offline. The genealogy of heroic resistance wars, a line that connects fallen heroes from ancient victories to the French and American wars, suddenly breaks off when it comes to the 1979 war and its fallen men and women. Forty-one years later, the Vietnamese state still disavows the war.⁸

An unclaimed war produces unclaimed bones, and these threaten the order of things that the Vietnamese and Chinese states both want to maintain. In his 2008 novel *Zhanyou chongfeng* (Reunion of comrades-in-arms; translated into Vietnamese as *Ma Chiến Hữu*; Mo 2008), Mo Yan, the Chinese Nobel laureate in literature, describes an outburst of painful cries from the ghosts of Chinese soldiers killed in the 1979 war when they hear of the signing of the 1991 normalization treaty. Left lying in war cemeteries along the Sino-Vietnamese border on the orders of their government, far from home, these ghosts lament the waste of their lives in a war whose purpose they did not understand, while the forgetting of their bodies on this frontier causes them great bitterness (*chi ku*; “eating bitterness,” a stock Chinese metaphor for suffering). Except for the absurdity of the heroism that took them from school to the battlefield, the ghosts remember their lives before death only blurily, because there isn't much worth recalling: they barely lived at all. Their cries became more bitter when they learned that their living relatives were struggling to survive, as the state's compensation for the soldiers' deaths was too meager to mean anything in China's inflated economy. Echoing their cries are those of the many Chinese militias composed of ethnic minorities living along the border. Several Tày and Hmong people who now live in both China and Vietnam told me that after each battle, the Chinese army collected the bodies of its soldiers (men in uniform), but not those of the militias that fought alongside of them. The bodies of Chinese militias were buried in shallow graves or simply left where they fell, to rot on the cease-fire ground in Vietnam or to float down the Red River. They also said that every year, different groups of Chinese army and militia veterans cross into Vietnam to pay tribute to and commemorate their fellow combatants who were left behind. In Lào Cai former members of Vietnamese militias gave daunting accounts of encounters with and years-long hauntings by the ghosts of abandoned Chinese corpses.

The ghosts of this war also spoke up in Vietnamese literature, albeit briefly. In 2008, at about the same time that a Vietnamese translation of *Zhanyou chongfeng* appeared in Vietnam, Đà Nẵng Publishing House released a collection of short stories titled *Rồng đá* (Stone dragon), by Vũ Ngọc Tiến and Lê Mai (Vũ and Mai 2008). While

Mo Yan's book has circulated widely up to today since the Vietnamese authorities considered it Chinese literature that is critical of China, *Rồng đá* was banned in 2010 once censors realized that three of its stories are about the 1979 war and its wandering ghosts. The publisher was also shut down for a period and its editor-in-chief sacked. Ever since, the Vietnamese state censorship regime has effectively silenced the literary voice of the 1979 war's ghosts.

In another cultural area, however, the dead of the 1979 war were encouraged to speak up. During my fieldwork in 2012, 2014, and 2016 in Lào Cai and Hanoi, I was told of many apparitions of 1979 war ghosts. They used to be mute and could speak only with their sad eyes. But spirit mediums and newly emerged telepaths in Lào Cai said that since the mid-2000s they had been working on methods to "unlock [the] mouths" (*khai khẩu*) of these spirits. As Kwon's (2008) study explains, the ghosts of the American war are outspoken in their demands to return to their ancestral realms but are silenced by state authorities—just like those who call for reconciliation between the South and North. The muteness of the 1979 war's ghosts is instead connected to the unease of the living, whose government forces them to reconcile with a former enemy that again threatens their safety today.

Reflecting this situation, the spirit that resided in the Yên Bái bones was rather quiet from 1989 to 2002. There is no record of any apparition on its part in that period. Instead, it was the bones themselves that spoke to the emotions of the living. When they were found near the railway station, clearly the remains of an outsider with no ties to the community, they embodied potential danger. My grandparents and their neighbors buried the bones and made offerings to the spirit that they believed inhabited the bones. By doing so, they established a connection to this spirit. But more importantly, the year that the bones showed up, the decade of border tension officially ended and the state started to silence public discussions of the 1979 war in preparation for the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations. In that context, the bones were powerful reminders of the war's deadliness, and they connected many in Yên Bái who had suffered during the war to the darkest pages of the region's recent history. These connections are very personal and painful. As my grandfather explained, the bones reminded his family of their traumatic experience of fleeing the war. By burying the bones with as much care and respect as possible and tending the grave unconditionally for years, they appeased the spirit and made peace with their past of suffering. In local perception, so long as a grave is adequately cared for, its spirit has no reason to alarm or harm the living people around it. This ongoing responsibility and care form a necrosociality between the living and the dead (Kim 2016; Langford 2009; Wagner 2015), highlighting bones' powerful capacity to create such an important social tie.

Among the earliest worshippers of the bones in Yên Bái was a couple whose second son was killed in 1982, during the first year of his post at the border. The war was officially over then, but the entire border region was militarized, and cross-border ambushes and fire exchanges continued. The couple's son and two other soldiers were ambushed while away from their post to get supplies for their whole squad. Their superiors did not recognize their deaths as directly in line of service. Because the son was not deemed a martyr, his body was kept in a militarized area and released for retrieval by his family only many years later. When the bones were found in Yên Bái, the couple were among those who attended their burial in my grandparents' garden. The wife recalled holding the skull in her hands and weeping. It was perhaps the size of her son's head, she said. For months afterward, they went to the grave to pray and ask the spirit to guide their son home. During my visit to their house in 2012, they encouraged me to light three incense sticks on their son's altar, in the living room, and three others on the altar for wandering spirits (*các cô hồn vãng lai*) that they had set up next to a betel nut tree in their front yard in 1999, when they found their son's remains in a cemetery near the border and brought them home (see Figures 4 and 5). After burying them and inviting his spirit to reside in the indoor altar, the family went to the grave in my grandparents' garden with a small offering and invited its spirit to visit their outdoor altar.

After my grandparents moved away, few people then in Yên Bái had ever seen the bones in person. In 2000, the area around the grave was gentrified, attracting more and more people who came from elsewhere and had little or no knowledge of the grave's story. When Aunt Thắng neglected the grave, it fell to the mercy of a community of strangers. Whereas the bones' relationship with people like my grandparents and their neighbors was personal and primarily based on mutual care and assistance, the one with their new living neighbors still needed to be figured out. Elsewhere in postwar Vietnamese necrosociality, the bones and spirits of war dead, especially the unidentified and unclaimed, have acquired a host of meanings and engaged with the living population directly, inspiring dread and guilt. This also happened in Yên Bái after the bones were abandoned by my grandparents and their new neighbors arrived: the depersonalized nature of the new relationship allowed more living people to claim a connection to the spirit, via possession or devotion. The spirit's apparitions thus became more frequent, and its perceived spiritual efficacy lay the foundation for its cult.

Any spirit can be worshipped as an abstract symbol while retaining its original practical spiritual efficacies. This is where our spirit ran into trouble and his bones became bones of contention. In 2009 a young man from Yên Bái told journalists in Hanoi the saga of the bones, emphasizing that they were the stolen remains of a fallen hero of the



Figure 4. Altar for the fallen soldier, whom the Vietnamese government did not recognize as a martyr, at his parents' house, close to Yên Bái station, June 14, 2012. (Tâm T. T. Ngô) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

1979 war. The tension with China at that time bolstered the story, and the bones were newly reincarnated as a symbol of resistance to Chinese invaders. It spread like wildfire. In the next two years, the bones became nationally famous. Local authorities in Yên Bái had been troubled for some time by the growing crowds around the grave and had tried but failed to disperse them. In early spring 2012, fed up with the chaos around the grave and the endless inquiries from journalists and telepaths about the bones' identity, provincial authorities had them secretly exhumed. The excavation was done at midnight, under the supervision of a Buddhist monk, and it was barricaded from the curious public by soldiers and police. The bones were then reburied in the People's Cemetery of Yên Bái Township (Nghĩa trang nhân dân thị xã Yên Bái), under a gravestone officially inscribed "Unknown," instead of in the town's Cemetery for War Martyrs (see Figure 6).

Before the story of the bones went national, they could be interpreted both as a political symbol and as having sacred power—the one did not interfere with the other. The bones, with their emotive materiality and affective presence, came to mediate the relationship between grieving relatives and their missing loved one. The state accepted this therapeutic role of the bones until the media appropriated the story in the context of rising tensions between Vietnam and China. The removal of the bones is thus an example of how the state extends necropolitical control

to necrosocial relations in Vietnam. The state denied the bones entry into the order of recognized war dead, and this prevented the bones from being identified, since all graves in martyr cemeteries with unidentified remains are part of Vietnam's ongoing identification program. Before the authorities' intention to spirit the bones away became clear, Ngọc did not deny seeing a number of items in the bag her husband had brought home 20 years earlier that could connect them to a dead soldier. But soon she changed her account: she played down and gradually entirely omitted any details that would indicate the bones' identity as those of a war martyr. When I interviewed her, she emphasized that the skull was very small, unlikely to be that of a soldier.

The clandestine reburial of the bones opened up many questions among the public. Why was the exhumation carried out so secretly? What exactly was found in the ground? What was the physical state of the bones? If the bones did not belong to a war martyr, why were there so many politicians, military officials, and police present, and why had the abbot of Yên Bái's biggest Buddhist pagoda presided over the event? But if the bones were indeed those of a war martyr, why did the government not attempt to identify them before so haphazardly reburying them in a people's graveyard? Heated debates about the bones were still ongoing when I visited Yên Bái in June 2012. A sense of restlessness lingered in the air as most of my interlocutors continued



Figure 5. The shrine for wandering spirits in the garden of the unrecognized fallen soldier's home, Yên Bái, June 14, 2012. (Tâm T. T. Ngô) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

to question the bones' identity and the appropriateness of how they were now interred.

Meanwhile, diplomatic solutions to Sino-Vietnamese tensions appeared to be far away. Chinese politicians and military officials gave aggressive speeches, and large military exercises were held in both countries. The threat of war unnerved the Vietnamese public and further spurred commemorations of the 1979 war. Because the Vietnamese state quickly reinstated the ban on discussing this war, after having briefly lifted it in 2010, the commemorations became protests against the state. The 1979 war and its memory became a significant bone of contention. This produced so tense a political atmosphere that it affected not only those who had direct experience of the war but also society at large. It made the dead turn over in their graves and speak up, and it pushed the living to connect to the dead. In autumn 2012, late spring 2013, and winter 2014, I was invited to join many spiritual events, such as spirit possessions, Buddhist requiems (*cầu siêu*), and spiritual warfare. These events, some of which I have described elsewhere (Ngo 2020), were conducted by spirit mediums, Buddhist monks, and telepaths to appease the spirits of Vietnamese



Figure 6. The new grave for the bones, set up by the government in the People's Cemetery of Yên Bái township, June 15, 2012. (Tâm T. T. Ngô) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

dead and to aid them in their continuing fight with Chinese ghost soldiers (*âm binh*) in the underworld.

This exuberance of spiritual activities seems to have persuaded Vietnamese authorities to regain control over the dead of the 1979 war and to make at least one grand gesture to pacify their critics. Of the tens of thousands of Vietnamese who died during the 1979 war, Lê Đình Chinh was singled out for political recognition. On August 26, 1978, he was killed by a group of Chinese invaders during a series of border clashes that preceded the war, making him the war's first Vietnamese casualty. His death immediately became a national symbol: songs were written about him, and his name was used as a slogan for the draft. For 35 years, his body lay in Cao Lộc cemetery in the border province of Lạng Sơn without drawing any public attention. On January 6, 2013, one day before the Vietnamese People's Army carried out its largest field exercise since 1975, Lê Đình Chinh's bones were suddenly exhumed and sent to his home province's Cemetery of Martyrs. These events were nationally televised and embellished with a full set of official ceremonies for the decorated fallen hero. One could call this a veneration of a Known Soldier, an inversion of the

well-known state cult of the Unknown Soldier, who stands for the anonymous collective of the nation's war dead (Anderson 1999; Wagner 2013). In this case, all the unidentified soldiers of the Sino-Vietnamese border war were memorialized by one Known Soldier.

By making Lê Đình Chinh an exception, the state exercised its sovereignty. None of the war's other dead bodies ever made it anywhere on the postwar political stage. On the contrary, whenever any of them attempted to make a move, the authorities would not only quiet it but also, if it resisted, take away whatever it had (e.g., worship, remembrance). Unlike the bones of other wars in Vietnam, the 1979 war bones have been constantly restricted or repressed by the state whenever they appear potentially efficacious. That was exactly the fate of the Yên Bái bones.

The impossibility of silencing bones

In his study of the exhumed bodies of the Spanish Civil War, Francisco Ferrándiz (2013) argues that every society must confront the most disquieting elements of its past head-on. Political strategies that sweep painful histories under the rug, he adds, can be effective for a limited period, but they may be destabilizing in the long run. In a good example of confronting the past, Spanish civil society groups have for several decades used exhumations and DNA identification to decenter fascist interpretations of Spanish history. Recently, in October 2019, the new socialist government of Spain decided to remove General Franco's body from the Valley of the Fallen, a basilica built by prisoners of the civil war (BBC 2019; Iturriaga 2019). New kinds of accountability claims for crimes of the past may well be inevitable as part of what Alexander Hinton (2011, 9) calls "transitional frictions"—the tensions and discrepancies around handling social and political struggles in a postconflict context (see also Hayner 2002; Wilson 2003). In Vietnam's case, however, transitional frictions are limited because the state's authority remains intact and sovereignty there still depends on the state's power to manage not just the living but especially the dead. It is precisely because dealing with the war dead is so important that the Vietnamese state constantly comes up against necrosociality, the enduring relations between the living and the dead in Vietnamese society.

Beyond the struggle between the state and the people to give meaning to the past, there is an excessive and untamable element in the travails of bones and ghosts. Both locally and nationally, the contention around the Yên Bái bones originates in a desire to situate them in the cultural and memorial landscape that the living can relate to and make sense of. Crucial is the bones' contested identification as the remains of a martyr of the 1979 war, a war with a lasting but repressed and controversial impact on contemporary Vietnam. The bones were subjected to various forms of violence—being stolen and then abandoned in an

unclaimed grave at the side of the road until the state secretly but forcefully shoved them into yet another anonymous grave. All this happened, moreover, at the hands of the living in a society that attributes the utmost importance and meaning to human bones. They thus generated immense interest beyond their immediate locality. When they showed up in Yên Bái in 1989 and in the media in 2011, the bones, with their "emotive materiality" and "affective presence," exposed bare truths about the 1979 war: both its deadliness and the state's deliberate concealment of the losses it entailed. Their spiritual quality persists despite the state's relentless effort to marginalize them, and the bones possess extraordinary powers that place them beyond any attempts to frame them in one pacifying story. Being more metonymic than metaphoric (Filippucci et al. 2012; Stepputat 2014), they continue to challenge the state's sovereign power to give its warfare meaning. Locally, they can heal the afflicted, give solace to the bereaved, and challenge those who want to appropriate their spirit for personal gain. In the context of the tensions between Vietnam and China, their spirit continues to pop up in increasingly frequent séances in the region. The bones' renewed potency makes evident the unsolved legacy of the 1979 border war. In its wake, the bones also show the volatility of relations between authorities and common people.

Notes

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1. All personal names in this article, except those of my relatives, are altered to ensure confidentiality.

2. Since 2010, I have interviewed and otherwise interacted with nearly 100 people in both Vietnam and China, using a combination of participant observation and oral history techniques, to gain an understanding of how people directly involved in the 1979 war

remember it and how changing currents in Sino-Vietnamese relations have influenced its memory, especially in the past decade.

For this project, I have been working with veterans' associations, telepathic societies, spiritual activists, bloggers and other writers, families of missing soldiers, and, since 2015, forensic scientists involved in the massive state-sponsored program to identify war dead using DNA.

3. China's human toll is estimated to have been 25,000 killed and 37,000 wounded (Chen 1987), while China claims to have killed and wounded 57,000 Vietnamese troops (Zhang 2005). Vietnam never released an official count, but the Vietnam Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs has records for 105,627 martyrs who died in the Wars to Protect the Fatherland, a catchall name for the period of Sino-Vietnamese border tension (1979–89) and the Cambodian-Vietnamese War (1978–91). All these counts exclude civilians.

4. In a centuries-old mortuary ritual practiced by most in the North and many in the South, the deceased is buried twice so as to ensure a safe passage to the afterworld and good reincarnation in a new life cycle. The first burial (*hung táng* or *địa táng*) leaves the dead in an unsafe condition, but this is spiritually necessary for transiting from this world to the next. This condition must be made safe by the second burial (*cát táng*). About three years after the first burial, the bones are dug up, cleaned with alcohol, counted, examined for any unusual conditions, carefully placed in an urn in anatomical order, and then reburied in a permanent grave. The reopening of the casket and the bones' placement in the urn are very poignant moments because they represent a last farewell to the deceased. People who cannot perform the secondary burial in a timely fashion often feel anxious and guilty for not having fulfilled all their responsibilities to the deceased. Secondary burial is such an important cultural practice that the state never banned it, even during the most intense anti-superstition campaigns, in the 1960s and 1970s (Malarney 2001).

5. The priest is one of the leaders of an underground initiative to care for the wounded and the dead of the former Republic of South Vietnam.

6. The official grounds for the prohibition are legal and medical, but even human remains (whether bodies, bones, or ashes) with proper documentation are commonly known to be refused transportation by public drivers and conductors in Vietnam, for fear of bad luck.

7. It is not uncommon for young women in Vietnam to fall into a state of mental disturbance, believing that they are possessed by a male spirit who wants to "marry" them by kidnapping them into the underworld. One can negotiate with the spirit to delay the "consummation" of the marriage by making offerings to a votive figure (*giri hình nhân thể mạng*) or by asking an exorcist to carry out a spiritual divorce (*lễ cắt tiền duyên*). In this tragic case, the mother regretted that she did not recognize the seriousness of the situation and get her daughter the needed help in time.

8. One exception occurred in 2014, when China anchored its oil-exploration rig HD-981 just 150 miles off the coast of Vietnam, provoking a standoff. For the first time, Vietnamese state media were allowed to publish a limited number of articles about the 1979 war. This unprecedented coverage included the views and opinions of several state officials and military personnel, all of whom were retired.

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