Vietnam

Heonik Kwon. ***After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai***

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This ethnography explores a particular legacy of the Cold War: civilian massacres in central Vietnam that occurred during the so-called Vietnam War. Based on fieldwork conducted in 1994, 1997, and between 2000 and 2001, Heonik Kwon analyzes the domestic ritual practices of villagers in Ha My and My Lai, where some of the worst civilian massacres were carried out by Korean and American troops. Kwon examines how survivors and their descendents must ritually negotiate ghosts and ancestors who have become comingled because of their unusual deaths and mass burials. The improper burials and broken lineages resulting from the massacres disrupted the traditional ritual cycle and prevented families and communities from properly caring for the spirits of the victims, putting them at risk of "perpetual liminality" (12). Using rich stories and examples, Kwon illustrates how villagers tried to accommodate the unusual mass deaths. For example, as so many of the victims were children who died without descendents to carry on their ancestral rites, they were sometimes installed in ancillary altars by their surviving siblings or distant relations instead of being mediated by their own (nonexistent) children. In other cases, ghosts of parents and children who were killed together seemed reluctant to join the family altar inside the home and ate at the altar for hungry ghosts because they were seeking the spirits of other family members who were also victims of the massacres.

In spite of the conceptualization of the conflict as a "people's war," the state considered massacre victims to be "civilian casualties" and, as such, were not allowed into the postwar, state-sponsored "command economy of memory" (137) with its rituals, memorial sites, and assigned identity of war martyr (*liệt sĩ*). The widespread destruction of communal houses and temples perpetrated during the war, followed by the postwar campaigns to eradicate "superstitious practices," restricted ritual specialists and appropriated communal sacred spaces for secular purposes in the name of socialism, further complicating villagers' attempts to cope with the spiritual legacies of the massacres. Finally, following the economic reforms initiated in 1986 with "Renovation" or *Đổi mới*, restrictions on rituals were loosened in the 1990s, and *After the Massacre* shows how villagers now regularly consult with ritual specialists to placate and resolve the liminal positions of the massacre victims.

The book contains eight chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. The introduction describes the central incidents with some background to Vietnam, while chapter one posits the theoretical framework, including Hertz's idea of death symbolism. The second chapter gives a brief history of the villages and the massacres,

drawing on survivors' stories, previously unpublished villagers' personal accounts and archives, and secondary sources on the war. This chapter reminds us that the massacres were part of a systematic strategy of US forces and their allies, including troops from the Republic of Korea. Subsequent chapters provide the bulk of the ethnography and flow nicely. In these chapters Kwon describes the rituals for remembering family victims of massacres and outlines the state's selective interest in the war dead in constructing national memory. Kwon recounts stories that illustrate the concepts of good death (*chết nhà*) and bad death (*chết đường*) and how this "duality of death is manifested in Vietnamese ritual organization" (90). Kwon skillfully illustrates how "war martyr" became a new category of death associated with the rise of the modern state thus contributing to new national identities.

This ethnography makes an important, empirically grounded contribution to the study of how new nations create and recreate new identities. Here, the state incorporates the legacy of war death with rituals that support its legitimacy, but which do not necessarily provide solace for the descendents or communities of the deceased. Individuals then negotiate their own subject positions accordingly. Kwon incorporates relevant perspectives from anthropology, political science, and history to illustrate important issues of nationalism and national identity. Thus this study provides strong ethnographic insight into these concerns, standing alongside studies such as VERDERY's (1999) examination of death in post-socialist Europe and WATSON's (1988) similar work in China.

This book makes two important contributions to English-language scholarship on Vietnam. First, it provides a window into villagers' experiences of the war in the central region of Vietnam, thus offering a new perspective. As a side note, I wondered about the collective memory of Korea's role in the Vietnam War in Korea today, and whether Kwon had published any of his work in Korean, or whether his work is read in Korea or elsewhere in Asia, since the book also brings to light the strategy of civilian massacres, which was acted out by American and allied forces, and Republic of Korean forces—a fact that may already have been forgotten by the American and Korean public. Most readers will be shocked to read more evidence of the systematic strategy of civilian massacres as portrayed here.

Second, the book provides a detailed analysis of the "dual" nature of ancestor worship between ghosts and ancestors in the Vietnamese context. Kwon's book provides details regarding rituals in village communities and brings to light these experiences for central Vietnam in a unique manner while other ethnographies have focused on the northern Red River delta (ENDRES 2001, KLEINEN 1999, MALARNEY 2002, PHAM 2009) or the southern Mekong delta (TAYLOR 2004). *After the Massacre,* along with the collection of fine-grained ethnographic studies on sacred objects in a recent special issue of *Asian Ethnology* (KENDALL 2008), contributes to the growing literature on the revitalization of Vietnamese popular religion and ritual life, which has been revived in both practice and in the attention from scholars both inside and outside of Vietnam over the past decade.

After the Massacre is the most recent book in the UC Press series "Asia: Local Studies/Global Themes" and provides a historically informed, richly-illustrated ethnography on the problem of how memory has shaped modern Vietnamese

national identity. In this sense, the ethnography offers a fully-developed case study of this problem that was addressed by several papers in the volume edited by Tai (2001), a previous volume in this series. *After the Massacre* provides a deeper exploration of the problematic nature for villagers in commemorating civilian victims of massacres. As evidenced by both Kwon's ethnography and the earlier collection, the topic of war memory in Vietnam has attracted a new generation of scholars interested in how the people and the nation of Vietnam have dealt with the past.

An ethnography of mass death and its legacies does not make for pleasant reading, but Kwon brings these harsh realities to light with sensitivity and respect. His efforts have thus produced not a bitter polemic but a carefully crafted ethnography. The depth to which Kwon was able to probe is a testament to his success as a fieldworker in this extremely delicate situation. The anecdotes and specific examples that Kwon provides are strong and illustrate his points well. In particular, the vivid ghost stories in the book are unsettlingly realistic. More stories and examples, as well as photographs, could be included to illustrate the story more fully, particularly for readers who are unfamiliar with Vietnam. An extensive index and notes are very helpful but do not compensate for the absence of a bibliography.

In the preface, Kwon traces his original interest in Vietnam to his childhood in South Korea when schoolchildren recited songs for the Korean troops sent to the war in Vietnam. At the height of the anti-communist Cold War, he recalled a world of anti-communist messages in which he won the national children's contest for best anti-communist slogan, thus linking nicely his own background and Korean society of the 1960s. It would have been interesting to hear more about how negotiation of his own identity affected his fieldwork experiences in Vietnam. As a Korean anthropologist, did the villagers identify him with the Korean troops who had participated in some of the massacres? He does cite one example in which villagers led him to a pond in which there was a "non-Vietnamese Asian ghost in an American-like military uniform" and it seems the villagers wanted to see whether the spirit would be able to respond to him (173). Furthermore, it might have been insightful to hear how villagers felt about Kwon's presence, and how telling him their stories affected them.

This is a book that would be useful in a graduate seminar or upper division course on the politics of national identity, the sociology of memory, comparative religion, or symbolic anthropology. Because of its emphasis on theoretical work, this book is perhaps more useful for specialists than for general readers, and should be of particular interest to specialists in anthropology, Asian studies, or religion.

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