Article

Revolution in the Afterlife

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Abstract: The idea of an afterlife is formative of modern social scientific enquiry into the normative fabrics of human sociality. The idea also indicates how societies come to terms with their destructive past. Focusing on the legacies of the Vietnam War, this essay explores how the historical experience of generalized loss and displacement can radically change the traditional conception of an afterlife.

Keywords: afterlife; displacement; ghosts; hospitality; reciprocity

1. Introduction

In his essay on Chinese popular religions, Arthur Wolf describes several incidents he experienced during his fieldwork in a Taiwanese village. One evening, a villager claimed that he had seen an apparition—a mysterious being floating across the rice fields. Finding that his foreign interlocutor was skeptical of his experience, the villager added that across the field where he had met the ghost, a family had been preparing for an ancestral death-day ceremony at the time of the incident. Reflecting on this episode years later, Wolf concludes that whether a particular spirit is viewed as a ghost or as an ancestor "depends on the point of view of a particular person," and follows with his widely cited statement that "one man's ancestor is another man's ghost" (Wolf 1974). To come to terms with this relativity in the identity of the dead, he argues that "we must shift our perspective" (Wolf 1974).

Despite making this proposition, Wolf does not explain exactly how researchers can put into practice a shifting perspective. Nevertheless, Wolf's insights into the shifting moral identity of the dead have spurred a constructive debate among scholars of Chinese religious culture. As critics note, this field of study has long assumed that patrilineal descent is the backbone of traditional Chinese society and, accordingly, that ancestor worship is a practical expression of the centrality of this lineage paradigm in regulating social relations (Stafford 2000; Watson 1982). Wolf's remark challenges these assumptions by unsettling the categorical stability of ancestors. Taiwanese villagers move in and out of the house where they pay tribute to their ancestors on a regular basis, and they believe that the spirits of the dead can be mobile in their own lifeworld. When people are gathered inside the house to perform a ritualized tribute to their ancestors, the invited spirits of the dead are categorically ancestors. Beyond this domain, the social status of the spirit is uncertain. Whereas the identity of ancestors is changeable and place-specific, observers tend to miss this variable, fluid reality because they typically see things from a static point of view. These were the ideas that Wolf hoped to illustrate with his ghost story—specifically, the disparity between the relativity of social reality and the immobility of social enquiry.

The distinction between ancestors and ghosts has been an important element in the broader tradition of modern social science; especially in Émile Durkheim's theory of social representation. For Durkheim, the category of ancestors is a symbolic expression of human sociality, through which humans can generate a sense of togetherness and a moral imperative of being and living together (Durkheim [1915] 1995). However, this rendering of the ontology and aesthetics of the afterlife tends to constrict itself within a functionalist outlook of social forms. The category of ancestors is a meaningful subject of sociological enquiry, in Durkheim's view, as this category is part of the making and remaking of social order. By contrast, the category of "ghosts" is not, for ghosts are, although existent in cultural

realities, vagabond beings "with no clear-cut responsibility" and play no role in the constitution of a given social and moral order (Durkheim [1915] 1995).

The above discussion is intended to highlight the fact that the idea of an afterlife has been far from marginal to the tradition of modern social theory—even if it may have little space in the spirituality of modern secular society. In this tradition, the afterlife is a thoroughly sociological concept in that the very existential fact of sharing life with other humans necessitates the projection of a form of life that continues after death and which is larger than the life of an individual (Bloch and Parry 1982). In this light, the idea of afterlife, in its very constitutive origin, addresses a social and public phenomenon. Although afterlife is a public concept, it is important to note that the publicness of this concept can vary depending on what types of death it is concerned with. Those who undergo a "good death," a peaceful or natural death surrounded by loved ones and benefitting proper atonement in the form of culturally appropriate mortuary and commemorative rites, do not have the same afterlives as those who suffer a "bad death"—a violent death away from home with no remarkable rite of passage. This hierarchy in the modes of afterlife is widely reported in ethnographic accounts; it is also the subject of the seminal work by one of Durkheim's students and an important member of the early French sociological school, Robert Hertz, whose promising life was tragically cut short by the violence of trench warfare in 1915. Hertz was interested in how society invents a political hierarchy based on a moral hierarchy of afterlife based on the consequences of good death and those of bad death (Hertz 1960).

This essay does not challenge Durkheim's idea that a notion of life after life is constitutive of the structuration of social life, nor does it question Hertz's understanding that embedded in the concept of afterlife is a moral hierarchy that distinguishes a socially assimilated and preeminent ancestral afterlife from a socially marginalized and excluded afterlife. Rather, the main purpose of this study is to relate these social and political conceptions of afterlife to a large-scale historical event. Concentrating on the destruction of the Vietnam War, it asks whether and how the historical experience of mass death and displacement can affect the public perception of life after life, including the age-old moral distinction between placed ancestral spirits and displaced, or unknown, spirits of the dead.

2. The Vietnam War's Displaced Bodies

The Vietnam wars (1945–1975) were astonishingly violent and painfully chaotic, resulting in countless missing persons and deaths away from home villages. When the war was over, the physically and spiritually exhausted survivors returned to begin a new life with what little remained, only to encounter a challenging situation. Their homeland was now dotted with deadly weaponry, but also with the remains of the unknown dead buried in shallow graves. The intrusion of foreign dead, both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese, on the village lands was paralleled with another crisis in the villages' moral landscape: the bodies of numerous close kin were missing for burial in their home villages. This war-induced displacement of human lives long haunted postwar Vietnamese villages, particularly in the south, which were never the same as before despite the restoration of some normality encouraged by the postwar reconstruction efforts. The surviving families faced the reality of missing persons and missing bodies with great anxiety and pain, regardless of the postwar state authority's efforts to motivate the people to look forward with hope rather than look back at the ruins of history.

Within this milieu, the postwar Vietnamese state had its own, highly focused interest in death commemoration. A cemetery was built at the center of every village, where the village's fallen war heroes were laid to rest according to the disciplinary and geometrically ordered burial tradition of modern war cemeteries. The state encouraged the villagers to treat the cemetery as the most sacred place within the locale and to distinguish the sacredness of this place from the sacredness customarily associated with their ancestral graves and altars. The state also undertook the laborious work of locating and recovering the still-missing war heroes. It allocated considerable administrative resources to the search for the missing heroes of the war against America (1961–1975), sending joint army and party search teams to the remote highlands and other areas. Within their communal and domestic lives, however, the citizens of postwar Vietnam were discouraged from dwelling on the missing members of

their community, especially when these missing individuals fought and died on the opposite side of the revolutionary war.

Much of this has changed since. After the economic crisis in the 1980s and the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, which forced the Vietnamese state to change its course in relation to the outside world, Vietnamese communities became increasingly free to commemorate their dead in ways they felt appropriate and began to do so in often less secular ways than previously allowed. Today, the commemoration of the dead is also more inclusive than before, in that it has become increasingly open to the memory of the dead who fell on the "wrong" side of the civil war.

An incident involving a homecoming spirit illustrates these recent changes in Vietnam's commemorative landscape: A journalist working for the official newspaper of a central Vietnamese town recently set out to investigate a rumor in which a man encountered the spirit of his late brother. He was swiftly reprimanded by his superiors, and the rumor subsequently grew in popularity among the townspeople because of the sanctioning. There was nothing extraordinary about the rumor, and such incidents are commonly discussed in Vietnamese towns. In this particular incident, however, the man who encountered the apparition was an acting official in the provincial Communist Party, and his elder brother had been killed in action as a soldier of the former South Vietnam. The following is a summary of what the townspeople said about the official's family (Kwon 2008a).

The official became mysteriously ill, and the family, after failing to receive a satisfactory explanation for the illness, decided to consult with a local spirit medium. In a seance, the spirit of the missing soldier demanded a formal apology from his younger brother in front of the entire family. The spirit was furious and pointed out that the official had been unsympathetic to their mother's wishes. For years after the liberation, the official's mother had been preoccupied with finding her missing son, which had provoked a series of conflicts within the family, in particular with the official, the missing man's younger brother. It was known among the locals that the younger brother, obsessed with the postwar economic reconstruction, had argued with his mother that the family, like the nation, should look forward rather than dwell on the past. Against his wishes and those of her other children, his mother had continued her search privately. She had also wanted to build a family altar upon which she could lay the photograph of her dead son and, thus, clashed with her other children, who disapproved (in the house of an acting official of the Communist party, her wish for an altar was unacceptable in the immediate postwar period, particularly because it concerned a politically impure death). Against this public accusation from his elder brother, the official had to admit his misdeed in the presence of his younger siblings.

These instances of extraordinary encounters, which people in the town refer to as instances in which "the spirit enters the body," contributed to breaking the political barriers regarding remembrance of the dead. When people experienced what they understood to be a face-to-face encounter with the spirit of a missing person, it became practically impossible to ignore its existence, even if the spirit was politically undesirable. The intrusion of a spirit—in the form of an apparition, in a dream, or as a result of a spirit-related illness—was typically interpreted as the spirit claiming the right to be properly remembered. In this situation, there was a shared cultural understanding that people were justified in accommodating the intrusive spirits regardless of the latter's political backgrounds during their lives because the initiative to do so was not necessarily their own but originated from the missing dead. These dramas involving intrusive ghosts of war were by no means unusual in Vietnamese communities, and they occasionally led to efforts to seek out and repatriate physical remains. This was the case in the official's family, who later succeeded in finding the remains of the missing soldier in a remote region of the central highlands with help from a local religious specialist. The spirit's intrusion also altered the domestic ritual space. This change typically involved the incorporation of the missing or forgotten dead into the household's ancestral shrine and ritual commemoration.

3. Displaced Afterlife

The Vietnamese concept of *xac* is instructive for understanding these dramas. This concept is special among the several Vietnamese terms that refer to the human body. The word means "corpse"; however, the term's meaning incorporates not only the material condition of a body that is lifeless and immobile, but also the related yet opposite condition of a soul that is free and full of life. When the body dies, according to a common popular Vietnamese belief, the soul becomes free and can move between the place of death and burial, as well as among other places with historical attachment and where the soul's historical identity is remembered—such as the family's domestic ancestral altar. The mobile soul of the dead may appear in different places simultaneously, which is recognized as a sign of the soul's power and vigor. The Vietnamese describe this condition with the concept of *linh*, meaning "vital" or "efficacious." When a spirit intrudes into someone's body in what is commonly referred to as spirit possession, this mode of communication is called *xac* (or *nhap xac*), which, in this context, entails that "the spirit enters the body." In central Vietnamese regions, the term is also a colloquial reference to spirit mediums, meaning "people who are capable of inviting spirits to their bodies."

Just as there are two opposite conditions of *xac*, so are there two different ways to relate to death in Vietnamese mortuary culture. One is the elaborate tradition of dealing with the lifeless body. In this tradition, the corporeal integrity of the deceased is of great importance, and a proper ritual preparation of the body for internment is considered of supreme importance for the welfare of the deceased person and for a harmonious relationship between the dead and the living. This explains why people who went missing due to the war are the object of pity and concern and why different institutions, from the family to the state, made efforts to find the remains of these missing individuals after the war was over. At the other end of the spectrum, the idea of *xac* indicates that the presence of the dead can be permeable, unmarked, and unspecified, and that it may be widely diffused within the place of the living. It is believed that the spirits of the dead may wander freely about the village: in the ditches and sand dunes, old prison camps and police stations, school buildings, and household kitchen areas, particularly at dusk. On the fifteenth day of each lunar month, the number and intensity of travelling spirits is thought to increase drastically. In popular conceptualization, the dead who are properly entombed at an appropriate site according to ritual propriety are less inclined to roam the streets than those who are not properly buried and remembered. These un-mourned, hungry, and unclothed spirits make up the majority of the lost and wandering ghosts believed to exist in contemporary Vietnamese communities.

Therefore, the concept of *xac* denotes both a particular condition of the body, which is immobile and lifeless, and a related, specific condition of the soul, which is mobile and vital. Following Durkheim, we may think of the dual referential reality of *xac* as the freedom of the soul from the prison of the body (Durkheim [1915] 1995). In traditional Vietnamese understanding, moreover, the human soul is a duplex entity, consisting of the spiritual soul of *hon* and the material soul called *via*. Due to this duality, the spirit of a deceased person is believed to be able to feel cold or hungry through its material soul and to transform this sensation into self-pity or indignation through its spiritual counterpart. The Jesuit priest and eminent French scholar of Vietnamese religious culture, Léopold Cadière, calls *hon* and *via* the superior and the inferior principles of vitality (Cadière 1957). Some vital forces are placed and settled through appropriate rites; others are made loose without a place to anchor. Some are honored and treated well; others are unwanted and feared. According to Cadière, learning to relate to these multiple spirits in their various modes of afterlife and in a moral hierarchy of settled spirits against loose spirits is central to Vietnamese religious practices.

4. "Death in the Street"

The condition of having a displaced afterlife, missing from one place and unknown in another, relates to another important concept in Vietnamese mortuary culture, *chet duong* ("death in the street"). This concept coexists with the antithetical concept of "death in the house" or "death at home" (*chet nha*). The conceptual scheme broadly relates to the contrast between "good death" and "bad death" that

was elaborated by Hertz in his seminal oeuvre on the moral hierarchy of death. "To die a good death," it is argued, is "to die in the house and home," implying that the good death takes place in the presence of kindred who will ritually appropriate the death to a benevolent ancestor (Middleton 1982). In contrast, the "bad death" is a sudden, violent death in a distant and unknown place away from home, which destroys the possibility of ritual appropriation and transformation of the deceased into an ancestral entity.

In the tradition of central Vietnam, this dual, moral, and house-centered conception of death and afterlife places the ritual practice of commemoration between two different surfaces of memory— between the ancestral shrine placed in the interior of the house and the milieu of street-wandering, displaced spirits of the dead. The typical manner in which people in this region conduct their regular ancestral rites is to kowtow to the ancestors and then to walk to the outside and repeat the action toward the imaginary world of wandering ghosts. This two-sided commemorative practice is also found in wider community affairs, such as the opening ceremony of a village communal house or a lineage ancestral temple. The street-side worship is formally on behalf of the unknown and unrelated souls of the dead who exist in the neighborhood or who are assumed to have gathered for the occasion from more distant locations. It is structurally similar to the act of distributing small offerings to the unknown graves found in the vicinity of the ancestral tombs after giving offerings of incense and flowers to the ancestors. Offerings to ancestors acknowledge the exclusive ties of kinship between the donor and the recipient; the distribution of offerings to other graves recognizes the inclusive ties of residence between the ancestral identities and the non-ancestral beings.

In this system, there emerge two distinctive ways to imagine social solidarity. On the house side, we may say, following Durkheim, that the commemorative act affirms the given solidary relations between the living and the dead, thereby generating the sense of mutual belonging and that of a coherent social whole, which can be called genealogical unity or the lineage paradigm (Durkheim [1915] 1995). This affirmation is particularly evident in the regular ceremonies held at the communal house, which are dedicated to the founding ancestors of the village. All family and lineage groups of the village are expected to take part in these occasions or to at least make contributions to them, including people from the village who have relocated to faraway places. The participants listen to speeches about the founding ancestors' legendary history of migration and settlement and then make gestures and offerings of tribute to their memory according to the order of seniority and lineage statuses.

The organization of this village-wide ancestral rite also includes ritualized interactions with wandering spirits. After the house-side worship is over, the participants turn to the opposite direction and make prayers and offerings on behalf of the displaced spirits. These spirits, unlike ancestors who are believed to be settled within the temple, do not have the privilege of having a home. The street-side worship does not follow a strict order of seniority such as that in the house-side worship and, hence, can appear quite chaotic. On certain occasions, the prayer activity for ghosts may also be accompanied by a traditional prayer of spirit invitation and consolation, calling in all tragic or displaced deaths and urging the spirits to receive the villagers' gestures of sympathy and hospitality. Today, these prayers are often improvised versions of the famous classical poem *Van te co hon* ("Calling the Wandering Souls") composed by Nguyen Du, an eminent literary scholar of the eighteenth century (Nguyen 1993).

5. The Power of Sympathy

The revival of these rituals took place in a time of momentous socioeconomic change in the 1990s. In the late 1980s, in the midst of a deep economic crisis aggravated by high inflation and low productivity, Vietnam's political leaders embraced a program of general economic renovation, shifting towards a regulated market economy. The shift in economic ideology involved a growing political tolerance for communal activities, including religious worship. As a result, one of the most notable changes in Vietnamese society during the 1990s was "a nationwide resurgence of religion and ritual," most notably, the revival of ancestral worship (Malarney 2003). In the central region, the revival of ancestral rituals took place in parallel with the reinvigoration of ritual activity intended for displaced

spirits. While the renovation of domestic ancestral shrines and communal ancestral temples was in progress, people expanded the renovations to include shrines for unknown and displaced spirits. This communal development arose in central and southern Vietnam against the enduring wounds of a war still felt in community life, as well as against the background of the postwar politics of memory, which focused exclusively on the legacy of heroic war death. These persistent wounds have found powerful expression in the stories of grievous ghosts of war popular in rural Vietnam. In the part of Quang Ngai Province that came to be known by the international community as My Lai during the Vietnam War, after a tragic mass killing of civilians in March 1968, the residents told many stories of the spirits of the dead in pain. Some of the villagers vividly recalled the lamentations of ghosts in the villages and the cries they had heard coming from the killing sites. Residents in one particular settlement graphically described seeing the ghosts of young women, each walking with a small child in her arms and lamenting over the child's lifeless body. The villagers explained that the mother ghosts were grieving for their dead children.

According to the old village undertaker, the village's invisible neighbors could lament their own physical pain or feel pain when their loved ones suffered pain; they might have grievous feelings about their own tragic, unjust death or they might cry over their children's deaths as if they, themselves, were not yet dead. Their moods and sentiments—and even their forms—fluctuated with the circumstances. The child ghosts appeared dead in their grieving mothers' arms on a moonless night during a rainy season, and yet, these same children could be seen playfully running after their mothers on a pleasant evening before the anniversary day. The My Lai villagers regularly held modest rituals at home and outside their homes on behalf of these hidden neighbors—offering incense, food, and sometimes votive money notes at the sites of apparitions and elsewhere—and the villagers explained the condition of these neighbors' lives using the concept of "grievous death" or "unjust death" (*chet oan,* in Vietnamese). In this concept, the agony of a violent, unjust death and the memory of its terror entrap the soul in an agonizing afterlife. The human soul in this condition of postmortem incarceration does not remember the terror as we, the living, would; rather, the soul is believed to relive the violent event, perpetually re-experiencing the terror of violent death. The memory of death for the tragically dead, in other words, is a living memory in its most brutal sense.

The idea that the dead can feel physical pain has a long history in Vietnamese mortuary and religious tradition, and it relates to the notion that the human soul is a duplex entity, as mentioned earlier with reference to Cadière, consisting of the spiritual part of *hon* and the bodily, material part of *via.* The material soul senses and feels; the spiritual soul thinks and imagines. In a "death at home" (as opposed to "death in the street") under peaceful circumstances, surrounded by loved ones and after enjoying longevity, the material soul eventually perishes with the decomposing body. Only the spiritual soul survives a good death (although if the deceased's body is buried in an inappropriate place for entombment, the material soul is reawakened and may feel the discomfort of improper burial). It is believed that the pure and ritually appropriated spirit travels across the imaginary threshold between the world of the living and the world of the dead to eventually join the pure domain of ancestry and ancestor worship. In contrast, the soul of one who experienced a violent death away from home remains largely intact and retains its pre-death dual formation because of the absence of ritual separation. The material soul is believed to linger near the place of death and the place where its decomposing body is buried. It feels the discomfort of improper burial and awakens the spiritual soul to the embodied memory of its violent death. The material soul's bodily pain and the spiritual soul's painful memory communicate, and this communication between the two kinds of souls can generate the undesirable condition of grievous death.

The story of the elder brother introduced earlier involved a soul of grievous death: he had a history of violent death, and his body was missing. He did not receive a proper burial, and his memory was unaccounted for in the ritual milieu of kinship. The mass deaths such as those suffered at My Lai, though they took place "at home" (and thus, may not be "death in the street," strictly speaking), nevertheless constitute *chet duong.* In this case, the intensity of violence changed the notion of home,

turning it inside out. It also resulted in mass graves in which people unrelated in ties of kinship were buried together, which violates the organizing principle of the kinship-based, traditional Vietnamese practice of commemoration.

Trapped by the memory of its violent death, the soul experiencing grievous death is unable to depart to the other world until the situation is corrected by the intervention of an external power. This perpetual re-experience is described as "incarceration" (*nguc*), which means that the souls of the dead are trapped in the mortal terror and traumatic experience of violent death. The grievance of *oan* and the self-imprisonment of *nguc* describe the same phenomenon—grievance creates the imaginary prison, whereas the prison captures the grievance and heightens its intensity. The My Lai villagers recalled the names of certain deceased villagers as the most aggrieved victims of the 1968 massacre, and these names belonged to families whose genealogy was decimated by the violence. This devastation provoked the strongest sense of injustice and moral indignation in other Vietnamese communities affected by civilian massacres. A grievous death, in this context, is not only the destruction of innocent lives, but also a crisis in the social foundation of commemoration. According to this culturally specific conceptualization of human rights, the right of the dead to be liberated from the violent history of death is inalienable, and the protection of this right depends on the secular institutions of commemoration.

The work of memory is also a collaborative project between inhabitants of the living world and those of the otherworld, which involves not only acts of outside intervention in the form of death commemoration, but also the soul's strong will for freedom from history. Apparitions, such as those of the mother and child ghosts, are commonly understood as a sign of the growth of self-consciousness and self-determination on the part of the sufferers of grievous historical memory. The same idea applies to the incident in which the party official encountered the spirit of his elder brother. The intrusion of this spirit into the home and body of his younger brother was interpreted by the townspeople as a legitimate action on the part of the intrusive spirit claiming its right to be remembered, but also as a sign of the spirit being *linh*, that is, vigorous and auspiciously powerful.

The concept of grievous death signifies a state of imprisonment within the vexing and mortifying memory of a violent, unjust event, but it also has a progressive connotation that indicates concrete measures that can be taken so that the dead can break free from this captivity. In vernacular Vietnamese language, the liberation from the incarceration of grievous memory is referred to as "disentangling the grievance" (*giai oan*) or "breaking the prison" (*giai nguc*). The work to release a soul from the grievance involves the appropriate intervention of sympathetic individuals: family-based death commemorations and the ritualized hospitality to the "invisible neighbors" are two prominent forms of this moral intervention. The commitment to this work of memory and its demonstration in communal ritual activities were the most prominent changes in Vietnamese villages since the 1990s.

6. Conclusions

Vietnamese villagers believe that spirits of tragic war death abound in their lived environment, and they offer food and drinks to these unknown specters as part of their seasonal and daily routines. According to Cadière's rendering of traditional Vietnamese moral sensibility, this world of displaced spirits and the realm of bad death is best avoided. In Durkheim's understanding of the place of religious concepts in the constitution of social order, with which Cadière, in fact, interacted closely while preparing his oeuvres on Vietnam's religious culture in the beginning of the last century, sociological analysis should concentrate only on the conceptual sphere of afterlife, such as that represented by ancestral spirits (which he calls "true spirits"), which plays a role in such a constitutive process (Durkheim [1915] 1995). Both scholars projected a functional differentiation between ancestors and ghosts, or between the realm of good death and that of bad death. However, the experience of generalized displacement and loss can affect the moral and hierarchical conception of forms of death and afterlife. The historical experience can generate a sympathetic relationship between the displaced spirits of the dead and the living who remember the pain of displacement. In postwar Vietnam, moreover, the realm of displaced spirits does not discriminate its inhabitants on the grounds of race,

nationality, political ideology, or other secular differences. The spirit of a foreign combatant and that of a Vietnamese village have equal entitlement to gestures of recognition and remembrance offered by the living. In this imaginary yet historically authentic reality, perhaps we can witness how one of the hopeful visions of Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace*, which involves the realization of the rights of strangers and the ethics of universal hospitality, is actualized (Kwon 2008b).

The gesture of hospitality, furthermore, may be seen as an act of reciprocity instead. For example, let's imagine I offer a glass of fresh water and a bowl of rice gruel to a stranger, a refugee in the world of the dead. I am not doing this as anyone but as someone who has lost a close relative to the war's power of destruction and dislocation. It is possible then that when I make these offerings, I do so not merely as a customary gesture of hospitality but hoping that someone in a distant place would do the same to my dearest who is lost. This art of reciprocity is not my own imagination but is a theme that is grounded in the tradition of Vietnamese literary art, going back to at least the seventeenth century. The career and the creative work of Nguyen Du, mentioned briefly earlier, speak to the fact that the living who are displaced from home may not relate to the displaced spirits of the dead in the same way as those individuals who enjoy a secure, settled life. The latter, identifying themselves with their homebound ancestral spirits, typically relate to these spirits as strangers—as feared loose spirits according to Cadière or as vagabond beings contrary to the true spirits of the community according to Durkheim. However, a relationship of sympathy and mutuality may develop between the displaced spirits and the living who undergo a time of displacement. Although this sympathetic relationship is historically rooted in the Vietnamese literary and religious tradition, it is worth noting that its contemporary manifestation in the way described in this essay must be considered in relation to the turbulent historical conditions that people in Vietnam endured in recent decades as part of the nation's revolutionary upheavals, especially the experiences of generalized mass death and displacement. For people of central and southern Vietnam, displacement has been not merely a physical experience, relating to the long and protracted war of mass mobilization and mass destruction, but also a political experience. The last relates to the fact the war in 1961–1975, for them, was a civil war as well as a war of national liberation, which, after the war, resulted in the moral predicament of traces of politically impure and displaced death becoming part of their collective identity. Seen in this light, we may argue that sympathy with displaced spirits is a culturally grounded tradition in the specific sense that it is a religious and moral tradition whose relevance and strength are revived and reinvented at times of historical crisis and its aftermaths. When this sympathy arises on the horizon, moreover, its collective manifestation can challenge the existing order of the afterlife, bringing about a revolutionary change in the moral and hierarchical relationship between what Durkheim calls "true spirits" and the displaced spirits of the dead.

The generalized crisis of human displacement, in life and in death, which people of Vietnam endured for much of the twentieth century and beyond, has been part of a much larger crisis of a global scale. In his important book *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, Peter Gatrell writes that the mid-twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented mass population displacement in both scale and intensity, caused by "the collapse of multinational empires, the emergence of the modern state with a bounded citizenship, the spread of totalizing ideologies that hounded internal enemies, and the internationalization of responses to refugee crisis" (Gatrell 2013). Mass human displacement continued in the following eras and throughout the Cold War despite the claim that the bipolar world, according to some observers of Cold War history, was an exceptionally peaceful time in international history.

Today, the UNHCR reports that there is once again an "unprecedented" humanitarian crisis in modern history, highlighting the terrible plights of refugees of the Syrian Civil War. Even if we cannot do much to remove the politics of mass population displacement from the face of the earth, and even if we feel powerless in relation to the plight of displaced people, what ordinary people in Vietnam do today proves that we can do something for the displaced dead. Key to their ethical practice is the awareness that the experience of displacement is constitutive of moral and historical selfhood. If we can do this for the dead, we can, in principle, do the same for the living. One of the important legacies

of modern social science, especially that of Durkheim, is the notion that what we do for the dead is actually about what we aspire to become and how we envision our society to be.

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