**The Trauma of the Dead**

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In the introduction to *Rethinking the Trauma of War*, a book issued by the Save the Children Fund in 1998, Patrick Bracken and Celia Petty observe that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the world’s major relief agencies changed their approach to the victims of war.[[1]](#footnote-2) They argue that before the end of the 1980s, international relief work in war-afflicted regions focused mainly on providing food, shelter and primary health facilities. In the first half of the 1990s, however, according to them, a new type of relief work emerged, which has since quickly become a major field of activity. Calling this work the "trauma project," the authors put forward a strong criticism of the increasing focus on the psychological wounds of war and psychotherapeutic counseling in the contemporary international humanitarian engagement with the effects of war in the developing world.

The book’s criticism of the "trauma project" is twofold. On one hand, Bracken and Petty argue that the emphasis on psychological recovery diverts public attention from really important issues of postwar social recovery, such as the provision of security and a functioning economy, which often are much more costly than works aimed at psychological recovery, and without which the latter may be unworkable. On the other hand, the authors observe that existing trauma projects lack an awareness of local cultural traditions, noting that although the wounds modern warfare inflicts on societies have many common (often brutal) features across societies, the effective ways to attend to these wounds may vary significantly among them.

In my view, *Rethinking the Trauma of War* raises a set of important questions worthy of consideration. One of them concerns the timing of the international trauma project's rise. The beginning of the 1990s was, of course, when the global political structure underwent a momentous transformation, which we habitually call the end of the Cold War. So the question arises, "How did the bipolar era's end affect the psychological turn in the international humanitarian activity?" Here, it is worth remembering that a very powerful trauma project already existed during the time of the global Cold War and, in fact, at the height of its crisis. According to Allan Young, after the Vietnam War, the phenomenon we now call post-traumatic stress disorder came to occupy a firm place in US social knowledge and institutional practice.[[2]](#footnote-3) If PTSD is a historical product, as Young argues (and this does not mean, as I understand it, that post-traumatic disorders are not real),[[3]](#footnote-4) how does the current development mentioned by Bracken and Petty relate to the earlier interest in traumatic memories of war that arose from the experience of the Vietnam War? The Vietnam War was a turbulent and agonizing experience for people in the United States, but it was a much more destructive and painful event for people in Vietnam. Considering this fact, and also Bracken's and Petty’s point about diversity, the legitimate question that follows is, "How did the Vietnamese come to terms with the war's destruction after the war was over?" Was there a similar development in Vietnam after the war—the eruption of an institutional and public interest in traumatic memories?

The answer to the last question is negative. Postwar Vietnamese society was mobilized to focus its attention on the forward-looking revolutionary vision for a prosperous political community and a collective optimism based on "revolutionary sentiment" and "love of labour." Crucial to this process was the empowerment of a heroic memory of war and related civic morality of commemoration. This process materialized through cemeteries of revolutionary war martyrs and memorials dedicated to their memory, erected in the immediate postwar years at the centre of the community’s public space throughout the central and southern regions of Vietnam. The state-instituted centrality of the heroic memory of war in postwar Vietnamese society also changed the domestic space. Here the memorabilia of revolutionary martyrs and party leaders replaced the tablets of family ancestors as households' most sacred objects.

Recent accounts from prominent Vietnamese writers show how the construction of a heroic national memory contributed to excluding and stigmatizing the expressions of pains and wounds during the postwar era, not only in the public realm, but also in the intimate spheres of communal lives. These accounts also demonstrate that since the early 1990s, individuals and communities have begun to forcefully assert their liberty to express and attend to these war-induced pains and wounds. Their assertions involve, most crucially, the revival of traditional commemorative rituals and the related change in commemoration from a conventional postwar practice focused exclusively on the category of heroic sacrifice, to a more inclusive practice that is open to other diverse casualties of war. In the material culture of commemoration, the change was manifested in the form of new domestic ancestral shrines, family ancestral temples and community ancestral halls, which mushroomed across Vietnam during the 1990s. In many areas, this development, called "commemorative fever" by some observers, included an equivalent process on the categorically opposite side of ancestor worship in Vietnamese religious tradition, which is the milieu of alien spirits of the dead unrelated to the commemorator in ties of kinship. As a result, in the communities of central Vietnam where I studied the local history of war during the second half of the 1990s, a number of new or newly refurbished ancestral shrines were built within the domestic space during the period, and many shrines for ghosts were built in the exterior space.

In the area of central Vietnam that the international community came to know as My Lai during the Vietnam War, after a tragic mass killing of civilians in 1968, the residents told me many stories of the spirits of the dead in pain. Some of them vividly recalled the villages' ghosts' lamentations, which they had heard coming from the killing sites. Residents in one particular settlement claimed that they had seen old women ghosts licking and sucking the arms and legs of small child ghosts; they interpreted this scene as an effort by the elderly victims to ease the wounded children's pain. Some people in another settlement graphically described young women ghosts, each walking with a small child in her arms and lamenting the child’s lifeless body. The mother ghosts were grieving, the villagers explained, for their dead children. One family living along the dirt road that leads to the seashore claimed that they had seen a group of child ghosts trailing faithfully behind a group of young mother ghosts. According to this family, this happened a night or two before the massacre's anniversary. On this occasion, they could hear the ghosts conversing jovially among themselves.[[4]](#footnote-5)

According to the old village undertaker I often spoke with, the village’s "invisible neighbours," as he often referred to these ghosts, 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 (*chet oan*, in Vietnamese) or 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 mother’s arms on a moonless night during a rainy season; these same children could be seen playfully running after their mothers on a pleasant evening before the anniversary day. It appeared to me that My Lai's ghosts led lives with their own ups and downs, and that the fluctuations in their lives were intertwined with the rhythms of life among their neighbours.

The Vietnamese villagers periodically hold modest rituals at home or outside on behalf of their "invisible neighbours"—offering them incense, food and sometimes votive money notes—and they express the condition of these invisible neighbours' lives as "grievous death," in which the agony of a violent, unjust death and the memory of its terror entrap the soul. The human soul in this condition of self-imprisonment does not remember the terror as we, the living, normally would; but relives the violent experience repeatedly. A memory of death for the tragically dead, in other words, is a living memory in its most brutal sense. This perpetual re-experiencing is conveyed by the idea of "incarceration" (*nguc*) within the mortal historical drama. In Vietnamese conception, the liberation from the incarceration of grievous memory—referred to as "disentangling the grievance" (*giai oan*) or "breaking the prison" (*giai nguc*)—should be a collaborative work. It ought to involve not only the appropriate intervention of sympathetic outsiders (such as the provision of ritual offerings from the visible to the invisible neighbours), but also the fateful inmate’s strong will for freedom from history. Apparitions such as those of the mother and child ghosts mentioned above 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.

That the souls of the dead can suffer from the enduring effects of a traumatic historical experience is an established, legitimate idea in Vietnamese moral and cultural tradition, and this idea is firmly present in the eruption of "commemorative fever" mentioned earlier and in the related ritual revival. The idea is bound up with everyday Vietnamese ritual commemorative practices, which paint the world as a place that the living must share with the dead. In this milieu of interaction with the past, the apparitions in My Lai are more than history's ruins or uncanny traces. These ghosts are, rather, vital witnesses to war's destruction, testifying to the war’s unjust destruction of human life, with broken lives but unbreakable spirits. I have no means to know whether the sufferings endured by My Lai's ghosts are the same as those we gloss over as traumatic memory. I know only that their collective existence reflects the historical trauma the community suffered; this brings us back to the question I raised earlier about the trauma of war in Vietnamese society.

I described above how the political authority of postwar Vietnam sought to come to terms with the destruction of war with a forward-looking spirit and mobilized the heroism of patriotic and revolutionary sacrifice for that purpose. Then I described how, in recent years, the focus of commemoration has shifted from the centrality of heroic memory to the plurality of historical memory. The latter, in practice, is based on the notions that the spirits of the dead can suffer from traumatic memories and that the living have an ethical responsibility to help free them from their confinement in a historical trauma. What we learn from this development is, first, that the constitution of political reality is intimately related to the trauma of war; that is, to the question of whether the trauma is publicly recognized. To understand this relationship, moreover, it is important to recognize that the trauma of war can have different loci and different ways of being dealt with. Allan Young notes, with reference to the reality of PTSD in post-Vietnam War US society, that he intends "not to deny its reality but to explain how it and its traumatic memory have been *made* real." I will say the same as to the ghosts of war in Vietnam. I do not know whether the spirits of the dead can indeed suffer from the trauma of a violent, unjust death. But I can say for sure that this idea—the trauma of the dead—has helped to form the momentous changes that Vietnamese society underwent after the Vietnam War.

1. Patrick J. Bracken and Celia Petty (eds.) *Rethinking the Trauma of War* (London: Free Association Books, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Allan Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Young says, ‘My job as an ethnographer of PTSD is not to deny its reality but to explain how it and its traumatic memory have been *made* real, to describe the mechanisms through these phenomena penetrate people’s life worlds, acquire facticity, and shape the self-knowledge of patients, clinicians, and researchers. It is not doubt about the reality of PTSD that separates me from the psychiatric insider. It is our divergent ideas about the *origins* of this reality and its universality’. Ibid., 5-6 (original emphasis). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)