

Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006. xiv + 217 pages.

After the Massacre poses what seems to be, at first, a simple question: How do people remember the civilian massacres in central Vietnam a generation later? In this highly attentive ethnographic work, Heonik Kwon (University of Edinburgh) demonstrates how domestic ritual practice in central Vietnam is contributing to the decomposition of the Cold War's bipolar order.

This book is one among several recent studies of ritual practice in Vietnam, but it is one of the few studies situated in central Vietnam. Most people in Vietnam and the United States are familiar with My Lai, the site of a 1968 civilian massacre by the U.S. military. Less familiar is the massacre at Ha My, a village just south of Da Nang, carried out by Republic of Korea Marines in the same year. While other studies have focused primarily on the consequences of economic reform, Kwon frames his study in terms of the bipolar order of the Cold War. Although these reforms are central to the moral economy of ancestor worship, Kwon focuses on the profound discontinuities in people's historical experiences of the war. In the north, volunteer soldiers fought in distant battlefields (p. 160), but in central Vietnam, the distinction between "civilian" and "soldier" collapsed under the weight of total war. During the war, people in central Vietnam were torn between "this side" and the "other side." After the war, civilian deaths were marginalized as the state commemorated dead soldiers as heroes.

Domestic ritual practice, Kwon argues, unsettled the “command economy” of state-sponsored commemoration through the ambidextrous human position.

In ancestor worship, people orient themselves first toward their ancestral altar and then toward an altar dedicated to ghosts. It is this movement from one side to the other that Kwon names as “ambidextrous.” Drawing on fieldwork carried out in central Vietnam between 1994 and 2000, Kwon records sightings of ghosts, speeches by village elders, and testimonies of survivors to demonstrate how civilian deaths were revalued through domestic ritual practice. As people exhumed the dead and made claims on the bones as kin, they contributed to the decomposition of the Cold War. And in commemorating these deaths, people found consolation for the ravages of war.

In chapter 1, Kwon introduces the local system of values that he calls the “bipolarity of death.” This bipolarity is based on the duality of life and death, a structural order that distinguishes a “good death,” when an individual dies at home of old age, from a “bad death” that happens in the streets. Worse yet is a “grievous death” caused by injustice that imprisons the soul, preventing its liberation from human remains. Kwon invokes the work of anthropologist Robert Hertz to argue for an ambidextrous human body. “Right” and “left” signify more than bodily orientation; they also anticipate the bipolar order of the Cold War. This bipolarity did not end in 1975; it was reinforced in state commemorations that privileged the deaths of soldiers or revolutionary martyrs but marginalized civilian deaths.

In chapter 2, Kwon provides a people’s history of the villages and the massacres. Drawing on published reports and testimonies of survivors, he recounts the legendary founding of Ha My, residents’ participation in anti-colonial activities, and the cautious return of villagers from strategic hamlets just weeks before the massacre. The village, located in a highly militarized zone, had a long history of revolutionary activity. But the villagers also had personal relationships with foreign soldiers. Kwon observes that even villagers had difficulty defining their collective historical identity: Were they Vietcong or not Vitecong?

The “zero-sum coherence” of the Cold War, argues Kwon, was challenged as people reappropriated the civilian dead as kin. In chapter 3, Kwon describes the reburial movement of the 1990s, in which people reclaimed dispersed bodies within the “proprietaryship of a kin group” (p. 69). People legitimated their desires for economic prosperity by reconstructing tombs, temples, and houses. These disparate and deeply personalized sites of memory were far more comprehensive than the state’s “command economy” of hero worship. Ancestor worship, or the affirmation of genealogical identity, also revitalized the problem of ghosts. In chapter 4, Kwon asks, “When we commemorate an ancestor who died a tragic death, in which direction do we turn—the ancestral side or the ghost side?” (p. 93). Kwon demonstrates the

intimacy and inventiveness by which survivors reconciled commemoration of these tragic deaths within the structures of ancestor worship.

Scholars have identified how state-sponsored tributes to fallen soldiers in the twentieth century have been central to the production of peoplehood. In chapter 5, Kwon draws on the literature of European mortuary practices following World War I in order to examine why the revival of ancestor worship stirred up political debate. While the Vietnamese government promoted the return of the market, administrators regarded domestic rituals as relics of the past. Kwon presents a compelling interpretation of the Heroic Mother, the Vietnamese citizenry's substitute for dead sons, a practice that only concealed the "conceptual and moral crisis embedded in the political institution of war hero worship" (p. 112). At the village level, the disjuncture between state-sponsored hero worship and ritual practice was even more apparent. State memorials could not be integrated into village ritual practice because people demanded the bodies of soldiers be returned to the domain of kinship (p. 117). By attributing individual biographies to the collective mass, domestic ritual practice worked against the state's efforts to consolidate and contain the meaning of sacrifice.

In chapter 6, Kwon examines a specific controversy over the meaning of "self-sacrifice." Based on detailed recollections and subsequent meetings with survivors, Kwon details how survivors of the Ha Gia massacre, which followed just weeks after the Ha My massacre, demanded that civilians be recognized alongside soldiers, thus challenging the state's classification of dead bodies into "civilian" and "soldier." By doing so, the survivors struggled to find ways to liberate the civilian dead from their "unjust deaths" and thus to resolve the crisis in the social foundation of commemoration (p. 127).

In the 1990s, Vietnamese journalists and a Korean historian brought the event to the public, which ultimately led to a delegation from the Korean Embassy to Ha My (p. 144). Chapter 7 examines the controversies over the Memorial for 135 Victims in Ha My, which had been dedicated by Republic of Korea veterans (p. 143). This event did not precipitate reconciliation. It instead sparked a sharp rebuttal from Korean and Vietnamese government representatives over how the event had been memorialized in stone. Vietnamese government representatives insisted on representations capable of "transcending the tragic past, while not forgetting it" (p. 145). In chapter 8, Kwon returns to his original claim: how Vietnamese domestic ritual practice has contributed to the decomposition of the Cold War. He rightly points out that the postcolonial perspective merely reinforces the hegemony of the Vietnamese state's system of values, which has marginalized civilian deaths and altogether excluded the deaths of South Vietnam veterans. Although ancestor worship is also premised on exclusion, it is precisely this exclusion that makes possible the recognition of others. In

this chapter, Kwon presents an extended example of one such ghost, Ba Ba Linh, with whom people enter into individual contracts.

Although Kwon's analysis acknowledges the processes of exclusion, the inequalities generated by ritual expenditures are not the explicit subject of his study. He describes how villagers whose relatives died in smaller events are like "ghosts" in front of the memorials to the massacres at Ha My. He also mentions murmured criticism that some families can afford to hire ritual specialists to perform reburial ceremonies, but others cannot (p. 135). This dilemma, which might have been the focus of another scholar, was not Kwon's project. He reminds his readers that "the new unity of kinship is not an entirely democratic entity" (p. 163). *After the Massacre's* timely contribution rests in Kwon's careful study of the commemoration of ancestors and ghosts that unsettles the bipolar order of the Cold War. By facing first toward genealogical continuity and then to the fluid yet still place-based, unassimilated others, people who returned to the village disrupted the terrifying logic that contributed to the horrifying civilian massacres.

As is the case with all significant ethnographies, Kwon provides a historically situated study that resonates far beyond the immediacy of the specific locale. His book is a compelling addition to the literature on violence, memorialization, and commemoration. It is a book that should be read by scholars interested in the Cold War, the Vietnam War (or American War), and post-War Vietnam. It offers a timely addition to the fields of comparative religion and war. It also points to the problematic distinctions between "soldier" and "civilians" during war. In *After the Massacre*, Kwon offers a work that is itself a form of commemoration: "all human death—'good death' or 'bad death' and from 'this side' or 'that side'—has the inalienable right to be grieved and consoled" (p. 183).

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