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What is shared and what is not: How the Cold War era in northeastern Thailand is remembered on social media

Vatthana Pholsena

This article investigates memories of the Cold War era in Thailand, through online practices on Facebook pages administered by residents of a borderland province in the Northeast that was a key front line during the conflict. The possibilities for greater access to, and dissemination of, information afforded by digital media technologies have created a new environment for the production of shared knowledge about the past. However, on these pages, instead of converging plural memories, participatory online culture and the use of the language of memory have enabled the creation of distinct and separated memory spaces. This article calls attention in particular to what is silenced and absent in what people are sharing online. It argues that the deep-seated ethnic politics of the Cold War have an afterlife in Thai society—especially in the country's 'margins' where the conflict was most violent—that is reflected as much by what is not said as by what is said online.

The Western-centric definition of the Cold War—namely, the state of tension, hostility and confrontation between the West and the Soviet bloc in the post-Second World War period—has sustained a misleading impression of a distinct Cold War experience: specifically, that of the Western (or Euro-American) world wherein the conflict was in fact 'a long peace'[1]—albeit filled with anxiety and clouded by uncertainty—that ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Elsewhere, the Cold War was extraordinarily murderous. In Southeast Asia, for example, this period was scarred by the 1965–66 massacres of suspected Communists in Indonesia, the US air force's bombing of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, and the 1975–79 Khmer Rouge genocide.[2] The afterlife of Cold War violence lingers on in Southeast Asia in myriad

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1 John Lewis Gaddis, *The long peace: Inquiries into the history of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

2 The Cold War did not reduce Southeast Asians to being solely victims. A 'cultural turn' in Southeast Asian Cold War studies, for instance, has enriched the field by emphasising the importance of Southeast Asians' autonomous search for cultural expression, national identity, and modernity in those decades impacted by the international conflict. See Tony Day and Maya H.T. Liem, eds, *Cultures at war: The Cold War and cultural expression in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2010).

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ways. It is inscribed on mutilated bodies and hazardous and haunted physical landscapes;[3] it is manifested through enduring social violence.[4] Heonik Kwon writes that 'the Cold War as a social and communal history long outlives the Cold War as an international and diplomatic history; its local history is as meaningful as its diplomatic history for understanding the global conflict.'[5] The concluding of the Cold War, in other words, is an ongoing process and to investigate it only through the lenses of geopolitics, diplomatic manoeuvres and policies is to miss 'the radical diversity in human communal experience of bipolar history'.[6]

This article adopts an alternative approach to that focused on capitals and major urban centres, policy-makers and government leaders, in an endeavour to contribute to a multicentred study of the aftermath of the Cold War in Southeast Asia and in Thailand, in particular.[7] It focuses on the northeastern Thai province of Nakhon Phanom, which was a key front line during the global conflict. A large US military airbase was set up in 1963 outside Nakhon Phanom town—the provincial capital located on the Mekong River opposite the Lao province of Khammuan—from which operations were conducted over Laos and Vietnam; the Communist Party of Thailand's (CPT) insurgency against the state began in 1965 in one of the province's districts, subsequent to which the province became the site of a government counter-insurgency campaign. The province was, in addition, the location of Vietnamese revolutionary activities.[8] Some areas of the countryside, as in other parts of *Isan* (as northeastern Thailand is known), were branded by the authorities as communist 'hot spots'. In contrast, Nakhon Phanom town prospered thanks to the presence of thousands of US miliary personnel and the massive expansion of the US air base. Not all the town's inhabitants benefited equally from the economic boom, however; some, like the Việt Kiều (overseas Vietnamese) who fled Laos after the return of the French to Indochina in 1946, suffered repression at the hands of the authorities, accused of colluding with the Communist regime established in the north of Vietnam in 1945.[9]

3 See, for instance, Vatthana Pholsena and Oliver Tappe, eds, *Interactions with a violent past: Reading post-conflict landscapes in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013); Katharine McGregor, Jess Melvin and Annie Pohlman, eds, *The Indonesian Genocide of 1965: Causes, dynamics and legacies* (Cham: Palgrave McMillan, 2017).

4 See Eve Monique Zucker, *Forest of struggle: Moralities of remembrance in upland Cambodia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013).

5 Heonik Kwon, 'Author's response', *H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews* XIII, 6 (17 Oct. 2011): 18.

6 Heonik Kwon, *The other Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) p. 7. See also the special issue 'Beyond the Cold War in Southeast Asia', ed. Eva Hansson and Meredith L. Weiss, *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 26 (2019).

7 Ang Cheng Guan notes that '[w]hat is still very much lacking in the historiography [of the Cold War and the Vietnam War] is the non-communist Southeast Asian dimension—Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.' Ang Cheng Guan, 'The Cold War in Southeast Asia', *The Oxford handbook of the Cold War*, ed. Richard H. Immerman and Petra Goedde (online edn: Oxford Academic, 2013), p. 7 of 19.

8 Christopher Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian networks of the Vietnamese Revolution (1885–1954)* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999).

9 In 2019 Nakhon Phanom Town Municipality (*thesaban muang*) had a population of 26,263 individuals, officially distributed across a number of ethnic groups such as the Lao, Saek, So, Phutai, Chinese and Vietnamese. Nakhon Phanom Town Municipality Website, http://www.lovenkp.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/general-Information111.pdf.

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Digital memories are one way of capturing the complex legacy of the Cold War era among ordinary citizens. In the early 2000s, when speaking of the 'memory boom', memory expert Andreas Huyssen declared that '[w]e cannot discuss personal, generational, or public memory separately from the enormous influence of the new media as carriers of all forms of memory'.[10] Social network sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, offer an interactive environment in which people can participate in and produce 'their own multi-media memories that are personal and collectively shared'.[11] Facebook usage in Thailand is pervasive: in 2019, the number of Facebook users in the country reached around 48.5 million; given that there were 50.3 million Internet users in Thailand in 2019, it is clear that the vast majority of them were using Facebook.[12] Facebook is therefore an appropriate form of social media for exploring online memory practices, including those related to the Cold War era, in Thailand.

We have selected as case studies three public Facebook pages administered by residents of Nakhon Phanom town. The first Facebook group, called 'Amateur historians of Nakhon Phanom', shares photographs and other visual materials in a free-spirited approach to produce knowledge about their town and province's local history. The second Facebook page, titled 'Returning Wind', is run by a resident of Nakhon Phanom town, of Chinese descent, and takes the form of an autobiographical journal, followed by thousands of fans. The third Facebook page is administered by the Thai-Vietnamese Association of Nakhon Phanom (*Hội Thái-Việt Nakhon Phanôm*), and for this third case study we have focused on a specific event: the 60th anniversary of the construction of a clock tower built by the town's Vietnamese community in the context of the voluntary repatriation campaign for Vietnamese citizens and Thai people of Vietnamese descent.

All three Facebook pages exhibit participatory memory practices whereby individuals have access both to a public space and authorship by leaving their traces in the forms of photographs, comments, and stories.[13] Amidst the multitude of digital memories, some things '[get] not said' on the three pages, too.[14] In this article, we are as interested in what is *not* shared as in what *is* shared on Facebook. The apparent absence of discourse in public spaces about some issues no longer attests to a lack of relevance.[15] Indeed, silence has become 'a legitimate, productive, and promising area of inquiry in its own right'.[16] Silence differs in type between the three Facebook pages. Enforced

10 Andreas Huyssen, *Present pasts: Urban palimpsests and the politics of memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 18.

11 Joanne Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins and Anna Reading, 'Introduction', in *Save as… digital memories*, ed. Joanne Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins and Anna Reading (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 7.

12 https://www.statista.com/statistics/490467/number-of-thailand-facebook-users/ (accessed 26 June 2021). The number of Facebook users in Thailand increased to nearly 52 million out of 57 million Internet users in the country in 2022; https://www.statista.com/statistics/490467/number-of-thailand-facebook-users/ (accessed 11 Nov. 2023).

13 Garde-Hansen et al., 'Introduction', p. 6.

14 Melani Schröter and Charlotte Taylor, 'Introduction', in *Exploring silence and absence in discourse: Empirical approaches*, ed. Melani Schröter and Charlotte Taylor (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 5.

15 Robin E. Sheriff, 'Exposing silence as cultural citizenship: A Brazilian case', *American Anthropologist* 102, 1 (2000): 114.

16 Amy Jo Murray and Kevin Durrheim, 'Introduction: A turn to silence', in *Qualitative studies of silence: The unsaid as social action*, ed. Amy Jo Murray and Kevin Durrheim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 7.

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through self-censorship on the first, it shapes private experience on the second and enables community action on the third. As Robin Sheriff notes, '[w]hile silence tends to penetrate social boundaries it is not seamless; different groups, whether constituted by class, ethnicity, racialized identities, gender, or language, have markedly divergent interests at stake in the suppression of discourse'.[17] This article seeks to demonstrate that an examination of what is shared and what is not shared on the Facebook pages can elucidate the enduring and varied impact of the Cold War on communities in this peripheral but strategic area of Northeast Thailand. The article will next present an overview of the history of insurgency and counter-insurgency during the Cold War in Thailand (with a particular focus on Nakhon Phanom province), then provide a short introduction to online memory practices and the concept of silence. The second half of the article will be devoted to the study of the three aforementioned Facebook pages created by residents of Nakhon Phanom in the early-to-mid 2010s.

Insurgency and counter-insurgency in Cold War Thailand

The recognition of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, established on 2 September 1945, by the Chinese and Soviet regimes in January 1950 marked the arrival of the Cold War in Southeast Asia for the United States and its Western allies. As part of their resolve to stop Communism at the southern border of China in the wake of the establishment of the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949, the Americans were determined to prevent a Communist takeover of Vietnam. To this effect, they began building alliances with non-communist regimes in mainland Southeast Asia, namely, Laos, South Vietnam and Thailand.

Thai leaders initially favoured a more neutral foreign policy for fear of antagonising their neighbours, especially China (the Communist regime's influence over the Chinese community in the kingdom was a significant factor in Thai considerations).[18] By the turn of the 1950s, however, the nationalist Thai prime minister Phibun Songkhram (in office 1938–44, 1947–57) increasingly valued US military support as a way of suppressing his regime's enemies, Communist and non-Communist alike, and opportunistically used Cold War rhetoric to the same end.[19] Indeed, in Southeast Asia both government leaders and Communist insurgents, far from being mere pawns of Washington, Moscow or Beijing, also pursued their own political agendas.[20] The early 1950s thus saw the repression of political opponents and civil society activists in Thailand, including the deportation of ethnic Chinese suspected of involvement in political activities related to mainland China's politics, as well as the repression of ethnic Vietnamese and the arrest and assassination by the military of several leftist leaders in the Northeast.[21]

From their onset in the early 1930s until the 1950s, communist activities in Thailand were chiefly urban-based and centred in Bangkok, involving mostly Chinese

17 Sheriff, 'Exposing silence', p. 114.

18 Daniel Fineman, *A special relationship: The United States and military government in Thailand, 1947–1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), pp. 99–100.

19 Ibid.

20 See, for example, 'Asian Cold War Symposium', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, 3 (2009): 441–565; Malcom H. Murfett, *Cold War Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2012).

21 Charles Keyes, *Finding their voice: North-eastern villagers and the Thai state* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2014), pp. 115–16.

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and Vietnamese workers together with a few Thai nationals.[22] The Communist Party of Thailand at the time had a few thousand members, most of whom were immigrants, and its activities in the countryside were limited.[23] Police harassment and repression in Bangkok prompted the CPT to concentrate its efforts in rural areas outside the capital and the provincial cities from the 1960s, thus following the Maoist strategy of mobilising the peasantry. The Northeast, owing to its history of resistance against the centralisation of power by Bangkok and to its progressive, left-leaning civilian politics, provided thousands of supporters to the CPT.[24]

By 1969, 35 of the country's 71 provinces were labelled by Thai authorities as 'communist-infested sensitive areas.'[25] In the northeast region, insurgent activities were centred in the Phu Phan mountain range. They also spread to the north in hill areas adjacent to Laos, to the west near the Burmese border, and to the south on the Malaysian border. In addition, CPT fighters benefited from the support of the Chinese, Lao and Vietnamese Communist Parties. Yet the CPT's armed forces remained modest in size and hardly constituted a military threat to the Thai regime. In the mid-1970s, the CPT expanded significantly with the influx of some 2,000–3,000 students from Bangkok, as well as workers, peasant leaders and other activists who fled the regime's repression following the student massacre on 6 October 1976 at Thammasat University in the capital.[26] This bloody event was the culmination of a process of political polarisation that had been ongoing since the 14 October 1973 uprising that provoked the resignation of the incumbent military government. By 1977, the CPT had an estimated 6,000–8,000 to 12,000–14,000 armed members.[27]

The response from the government to the communist insurgency was brutal. Repression, arrests, rapes, and murders crushed politicians, combatants and civilians who opposed successive Thai authoritarian military regimes.[28] In parallel, Thai–US military cooperation increased exponentially, mirroring the escalation of the Vietnam War (in which Thailand became increasingly involved through the commitment of troops) and the growth in CPT resistance that was perceived by the Thai government and its US ally as a special threat to 'national security'. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker provide staggering figures on US military assistance: 'From 1951 to 1972, total US military assistance amounted to US$1,147 million, an average of around US$52 million a year, and equivalent to 54 per cent of the total Thai defence budget. […] Over two decades, the total military budget from both US and local sources increased [by] 17 times.'[29] The United States spent a total of approximately US$2.5 billion (or the equivalent of approximately $25.5 billion in today's currency) on both its own military presence in the kingdom and the Thai armed forces between 1951 and 1975.[30]

22 Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian networks*, pp. 77–9, 88–96.
23 Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and politics*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 309.
24 Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand*, p. 310; Keyes, *Finding their voice*, pp. 79–89.
25 Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand*, p. 312.
26 Ibid., p. 329.
27 Keyes, *Finding their voice*, p. 121.
28 Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand*, p. 312.
29 Ibid., p. 296.
30 Ibid., p. 130.

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In parallel, a huge influx of non-military US funding (the equivalent of about $6.5 billion in today's currency) gave the Thai state a new impetus in advancing its nation-building project, with much greater means than in previous decades and armed with a new justification of 'national security'. It was able to expand the government bureaucracy and improve public infrastructure (such as all-weather roads, health services, and irrigation systems) alongside the continuing inculcation of a homogenous Thai national identity via the expansion of primary schooling (centred on Central Thai language and history), thereby strengthening both the presence of the Thai state across the country as well as linguistic and cultural uniformity.[31]

In Nakhon Phanom province, a new United States Air Force base, located in the vicinity of the existing Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Navy base, opened in 1963 as part of the US effort to support the governments of South Vietnam and Laos against communist insurgencies in those countries. The subsequent massive expansion of the air base and the arrival of more than 8,000 US military personnel set off an unprecedented economic boom in the town of Nakhon Phanom that lasted over a decade. The construction and agricultural sectors expanded thanks to the US base's demand for construction materials and workers, as well as food supplies. New sectors and occupations emerged to meet the urban needs of the servicemen: bars and nightclubs opened; taxi drivers, singers and prostitutes established themselves in town.[32] Other towns in the Northeast located near other US bases experienced similar changes, while between 1965 and 1972, US soldiers spent an estimated US$111 million (equivalent to around US$950 million today) in Bangkok and other locations under the Rest and Recreation programme for personnel serving in Vietnam.[33]

Nakhon Phanom province, as with much of the rest of Isan, experienced communist insurgency and the Thai military's counter-insurgency campaign. In fact, insurgents and the army clashed for the first time in Thailand in an armed confrontation on 7 August 1965 in a village in Nakhon Phanom province, resulting in the death of one local militant. Because this violent clash set off the communist armed insurrection in the country, the event—known as the 'Day When Gunfire Rang Out' (**วันเสียงปืนแตก**)—is often mentioned in Thai and foreign language history books on the Cold War in Thailand.

The province was also a haven for Vietnamese revolutionaries until the mid-1930s, with a brief revival in the aftermath of the Second World War. From the early years of the twentieth century, a growing number of Vietnamese were migrating to Siam,[34] driven out of Vietnam by political factors (French repression of anti-colonial resistance) rather than the economic or religious imperatives that

31 Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A history of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 175.

32 Ninlawadee Promphakping, Buapun Promphakping, Kritsada Prajanay, et al., **รายงานวิจัยฉบับสมบูรณ์ เรื่อง: การกาเนิดและพัฒนาการของตลาดสด และผู้ค้ารายย่อยเมืองนครพนม** [Research report on the origin and evolution of fresh markets and petty traders in Nakhon Phanom province], Research Group on Wellbeing and Sustainable Development (WeSD) (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University, 2018), pp. 29–30.

33 Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand*, p. 297.

34 Siam was renamed Thailand in 1939 by the Thai military regime under Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram.

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had predominated in previous centuries. By the mid-1920s, revolutionary bases had been established in several northeastern provinces where they served as contact points and links between upper northeast Siam and the central Vietnamese provinces. In March 1946, violent armed clashes erupted in Thakhek—the Lao town sitting opposite Nakhon Phanom on the Mekong River—between Lao and Vietnamese revolutionary combatants on one side and the French army on the other. The battle sent insurgent fighters and thousands of Vietnamese and Lao residents across the Mekong to northeastern Thailand in dramatic circumstances.[35] At the time, the Thai government headed by Prime Minister Pridi Banomyong was sympathetic to the Vietnamese and Lao insurgents' independence cause and provided substantial assistance to refugees from Thakhek.[36]

However, over the next few years the situation worsened considerably for the Vietnamese in Thailand, as the Cold War set in in Southeast Asia. Christopher Goscha explains: 'At this point the Thai government reversed its earlier, sympathetic view of the Vietnamese as anticolonial, nationalist "brothers" (…) in order to vilify the Việt Kiều[37] with the increasingly pejorative term, "Yuon"[38]: a national security threat to all that was 'Thai'.'[39] From 1951, the Vietnamese flag, slogans, and language, as well as the display of portraits of Hồ Chí Minh in public and private places, were outlawed; Vietnamese schools were shut down. Between 1960 and 1964, around 40,000 Việt Kiều in Thailand (including from Nakhon Phanom)—roughly 50 per cent of the registered population in the country—returned to the DRV by means of an official repatriation programme.[40] The repatriation was stopped in 1964 due to unsafe travel conditions caused by the intensification of the war in Vietnam. Life for Việt Kiều who stayed behind in Nakhon Phanom (and elsewhere in Isan) remained precarious, restricted in their mobility by a travel ban and to a limited number of economic activities, under police surveillance and facing the hostility of certain sections of the population.[41]

A combination of factors eventually led to the gradual decline of Communist insurgency in the 1980s. The new civilian government launched in 1980 a counter-insurgency strategy, outlined by Order of the Office of the Prime Minister No. 66/2523, often known simply as Order 66/2523 or Order 66/23, which combined

35 The Vietnamese would become Viet Mai or Thai Mai, meaning 'new Vietnamese' or 'new Thai', in contrast with the Viet Kao ('old Vietnamese'), the Vietnamese migrants who had settled in Siam before the Second World War and acquired Thai citizenship.

36 Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian networks*, pp. 155–6.

37 The term Việt Kiều refers to Vietnamese people who live outside Vietnam.

38 'Yuon' is a term referring to Vietnamese people used in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. It can have a derogatory meaning depending on the context and the person who uses it.

39 Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian networks*, p. 325.

40 Andrew Hardy, 'People in-between: Exile and memory among the Vietnamese in Thailand. Research note', in *Monde du Viêt Nam: Vietnam world. Hommage à Nguyên Thê Anh*, ed. Frédéric Mantienne and Keith W. Taylor (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2008), p. 278.

41 Sripana Thanyathip, 'Les "Việt kiều" du Nord-Est de la Thaïlande dans le contexte des relations entre la Thaïlande et le Viêtnam au cours de la seconde moitié du XXe siècle', *Aséanie* 9 (2002): 61–73; Ninlawadee Promphakping, Buapun Promphakping, Kritsada Phatchaney, Patchanee Muangsri and Woranuch Juntaboon, 'The evolution of wet markets in a Thai-Lao border town', *Journal of Mekong Societies* 16, 2 (2020): 72–95.

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military and political methods (for instance, the government offered an amnesty to insurgents). This proved effective. The strategy was further aided by geopolitical shifts in the late 1970s: the CPT lost Vietnamese support and its bases in Laos as a result of the war between China and Vietnam in 1979 (the CPT leadership sided with Beijing). Chinese aid also declined following secret negotiations between the Thai and Chinese governments. Ideological disputes between left-wing students and CPT leaders compounded the Communist movement's crisis, and it eventually split into pro-Chinese and pro-Vietnamese camps. By the mid-1980s, the CPT could rely on only a few hundred partisans, and then Thai Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhawan famously declared in 1988 his ambition to turn Indochina 'from a battlefield to a marketplace'.[42] By the early 1990s, trade and investment replaced ideological antagonisms and armed conflict following the collapse of the Soviet Union and communism as a counter-ideology to capitalism.[43]

Online memory practices: Between presence and absence

In the early 2000s, media technologies played a major role in the 'memory turn' with respect to the representation of the past. Facebook was launched in 2004 and opened to the public two years later. Unlike broadcast media and cinema, which produced and defined content that was passively received by the public, digital technologies appeared remarkably democratised, offering wide and cheap access to data and encouraging (mostly) unrestricted participation in the creation and dissemination of memories. As Manuel Castells noted, 'we do not watch the Internet as we watch television. We live with the Internet and in the Internet'.[44] Since then, memory practices have only become more complex and dispersed as the top-down logic of (a few) providers and (a mass of identifiable) consumers in traditional media gives way to online peer-to-peer interactions of a 'multitude' of user-producers enabled by inorganic structures.[45] The possibilities for much greater accessibility and wider dissemination of information afforded by digital media technologies, facilitated by participatory online culture and the use of the more equal and open language of memory (rather than the expert language of history), have created 'new conditions for the production of narratives about the past' where 'emplotment', explanation', and 'representation' have been replaced by terms like 'interactivity', 'accessibility',

42 Balázs Szalontai, 'From battlefield into marketplace: The end of the Cold War in Indochina, 1985–1989', in *The end of the Cold War in the Third World: New perspectives on regional conflict*, ed. Artemy Kalinovsky and Sergey Radchenko (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 155.

43 An event that is commonly accepted as marking the end of the Cold War as a geopolitical and military conflict in Southeast Asia is the resolution of the Cambodian conflict (1979–90) and the signing of the Paris Agreements in October 1991 (see Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), especially chap. 6). However, in everyday life, the Cold War as an era of hostilities against suspected leftists lingered for longer; for example, ethnic Vietnamese people in the northeast region faced discrimination by Thai authorities up until the late 1990s (see below).

44 Manuel Castells, *Comunicación y poder* (Madrid: Alianza, 2009), p. 64. Quoted from Manual Alcántara-Plá and Ana Ruiz-Sánchez, 'Not for Twitter: Migration as a silenced topic in the 2015 Spanish General Election', in Schröter and Taylor, *Exploring silence and absence in discourse*, p. 30.

45 Andrew Hoskins, 'Memory of the multitude: The end of collective memory', in *Digital memory studies: Media pasts in transition*, ed. Andrew Hoskins (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 86.

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'distributed authorship' and 'dynamics'.[46] Online memories are not only shared and circulated, but also and especially 'produced by the audience and [. . .] creatively constructed', thus generating new modes of digital storytelling.[47] The participatory features of the Internet yield 'a new hybrid form of public and private memory'.[48] In essence, the new modes of securing, storing, presenting and sharing data are shaping the way the past is recalled, reconstructed and represented.

In this study, we are as interested in what is *not* shared as in what *is* shared on Facebook. Silence is no longer understudied in academic research, and the apparent absence of discourse in public spaces about some issues no longer attests to a lack of relevance. Discourse, in other words, is not the only index of meaningfulness and impact.[49] Studies of silence point to two levels of analysis, individual and collective. We all practice silence—or omission—in our daily conversations, for example, to avoid problematic topics or embarrassing situations; in these contexts, silence is seen as a 'code choice' and as a 'communicative act'.[50] In qualitative research, on the other hand, silence is studied as a social phenomenon deriving from a collectively shared understanding of what should be actively avoided in conversations. Unlike the act of speech that requires one person, silence is a collective endeavour, for it 'requires the cooperation of all to produce silence'.[51] Silence involves intentionality and a degree of choice, although it is predetermined by the cultural, social and political contexts, as well as circumscribed by the discursive contexts, in which individual speakers find themselves 'when they choose to say nothing, but instead could have said something'.[52]

The most well-known form of silence is that imposed and enforced in authoritarian regimes by agents of power and authority (usually the state and its representatives). Silence can also be inflicted upon certain groups who are muted or not heard because they are unrecognised, oppressed or unrepresented, including in democratic societies (for example, ethnic minorities, homeless people). In this article, we pay attention to the type of silence that demands collaboration. However, like Robin Sheriff, we argue that this form of socially constructed silence is not necessarily always coerced and enforced by authority, although, it is undoubtedly circumscribed by the interests of the dominant power.[53] In two of our case studies in particular, silence is an important force in shaping private experience in one case and determining collective action in the other. In light of our research, we would therefore agree with Amy Jo Murray and Kevin Durrheim's observation that 'the constructive powers of what is said are matched by the power of what is not said'.[54]

46 Ann Rigney, 'When the monograph is no longer the medium: Historical narrative in the online age', *History and Theory* 49 (2010): 116.
47 Garde-Hansen et al., 'Introduction', p. 12.
48 Ibid., p. 6.
49 Murray and Durrheim, 'Introduction', p. 7.
50 Sheriff, 'Exposing silence as cultural citizenship', p. 117.
51 Eviatar Zerubavel, 'The social sound of silence: Toward a sociology of denial', in *Shadows of War: A social history of silence in the twentieth century*, ed. Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, Ruth Ginio and Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 36.
52 Schröter and Taylor, 'Introduction', p. 7.
53 Sheriff, 'Exposing silence', pp. 114–32.
54 Murray and Durrheim, 'Introduction', p. 7.

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How is the Cold War era remembered in northeastern Thailand, and in Nakhon Phanom province in particular, today? We have followed three Facebook pages since 2018 (created between 2013 and 2015). The first two pages were selected according to the criteria of pertinence and of popularity.[55] We conducted a survey of the posts over five months between January and May 2021 (a total of 188 posts) for the Facebook group 'Amateur historians of Nakhon Phanom' (นักประวัติศาสตร์สมัครเล่น นครพนม), and we have collected all the posts up to and including the month of May 2021 (348 posts) since the creation of the autobiographical Facebook page entitled 'Returning Wind' (ลมหวน) in 2015.[56] We have classified the posts from both Facebook pages chronologically and thematically. We have also used the Facebook 'Search' and 'Filter' tools to narrow down our search to relevant Thai words (for example, words meaning 'communist': คอมมิวนิสต์, 'GI', 'Vietnam' [เวียดนาม][57]). In addition, we have selected and followed users who regularly contribute to, or have posted several times on, these Facebook pages. The most popular and/or pertinent posts, as well as their comments, were converted into PDF/Word documents or captured in screen-shots. The pictures and videos that accompanied the posts were also saved. The third Facebook group, the Thai-Vietnamese Association of Nakhon Phanom (Hội Thái-Việt Nakhon Phanôm), was selected in order to study a specific event: the 60th anniversary of the construction of an important landmark in the town of Nakhon Phanom, a clock tower built in 1960 by the Vietnamese community in the context of the voluntary repatriation campaign for Vietnamese citizens and Thai people of Vietnamese descent. We have also met the administrators of the 'Amateur historians of Nakhon Phanom' and 'Returning Wind' Facebook pages during our visits to Nakhon Phanom and informed them of our research project (we are also a member of their Facebook pages).[58]

The study of silence presents methodological and analytical challenges. Silence is ubiquitous, yet it is hard to define. Silence has 'no clear boundaries, no hard analytical edges of definition'.[59] It is harder to notice things that are 'non-occurrences' than it is to notice things that are there.[60] Silence, or absence in speech, can be even more difficult to detect on SNSs due to the absence of interlocutors' body language and facial expression, although the main challenge in evaluating a Facebook 'document' lies in its ever-growing volume rather than in the content itself.[61] We find the concept of absence as explained by Melani Schröter and Charlotte Taylor useful here; they suggest that 'only when we can hold non-occurrence of speech against the possibility

55 As of April 2024, these Facebook pages had 7,670 and around 9,200 members, respectively.

56 The 'Amateur Historians' page involves multiple contributors posting a large volume of material, and time constraints limited us to surveying five months of posts. On the 'Returning Wind' page, however, the fact that the page's posts have been contributed by only the page's creator means that the volume of posts is much smaller and hence it was practical for us to survey the entire contents of the page.

57 The origin of the use of the abbreviation 'GI' to refer to US servicemen is unclear and highly debated (see, for example, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/gi).

58 In Facebook terminology the creator of the page is known as the administrator.

59 Lisa A. Mazzei, 'Inhabited silences: In pursuit of a muffled subtext', *Qualitative Inquiry* 9, 3 (2003): 355.

60 Eviatar Zerubavel, *The elephant in the room: Silence and denial in everyday life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 13.

61 Steffen Dalsgaard, 'The ethnographic use of Facebook in everyday life', *Anthropological Forum* 26, 1 (2016): 111.

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of occurring and only when we can hold something that gets not said against the possibility of saying it, are we dealing with epistemologically salient cases of absence'.[62] Thus, absence is epistemologically meaningful when what is not said could be there. In most cases, we noticed 'something that gets not said' on Facebook by drawing on our offline investigation (interviews, everyday observations, analysis of documents, such as academic books, memoirs and newspaper articles) which showed us 'an alternative presence that [could] be spelled out'.[63] In other words, we relied on both online data and offline material to identify what *is* shared and what is *not* on these three Facebook pages.

Home-grown communist insurgency: Indifference or avoidance?

The Facebook history group 'Amateur historians of Nakhon Phanom' was created in 2013.[64] Judging by the content of the posts, comments and replies, a majority of members live or have lived in the town of Nakhon Phanom or are from other provinces of northeastern Thailand. Contributions are written in Thai and not infrequently include Lao vocabulary. Contributors are mostly male and middle-aged, born around the 1950s and 1960s, though we have identified younger and female participants as well. The Facebook page is first and foremost visual. The group shares photographs and other visual materials obtained from various sources, such as library books, local and foreign archives, the Internet, personal collections, and family albums. Pictures are usually posted with a descriptive text or a query, or both.

There are no specific rules by which members should abide, except for a tacit understanding that data—texts, photographs, videos—posted on the platform should contribute to the knowledge of Nakhon Phanom's history; as the Facebook page's administrator candidly explained in an early comment:

> this is the fun of the word 'amateur'. It makes us learn together, help each other to express our views. It doesn't matter whether it's right or wrong. It's not so big a deal as to make one lose face. Let's help each other to learn as amateurs.
>
> [24 September 2013]

This free-spirited approach is reflected in the very diverse range of posts and topics available on the platform. For example, in the month of January 2021, users shared, among other visual items: a 1920s photograph extracted from a government publication on Phra That Phanom (one of Thailand's most sacred religious sites, located some 50 km from the town of Nakhon Phanom); a picture of an F-4 US air force plane at the former Nakhon Phanom US airbase; and a 1963 photograph of a 'Phutai boy'—the Phutai are one of the province's largest ethnic minority groups—standing on the veranda of a traditional house on stilts. Furthermore, hundreds of photographs taken by US soldiers who were stationed at Nakhon Phanom airbase during the Vietnam War between 1963 and 1975 have been uploaded by group members onto the social platform. Such eclecticism is not an uncommon practice among

62 Schröter and Taylor, 'Introduction', p. 5.
63 Ibid., pp. 5–6.
64 https://www.facebook.com/groups/375554179243657.

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online groups, as 'accumulation is easier than sorting and selecting [and] deletion is less common than accretion'.[65]

These 'amateur historians' endeavour to produce historical knowledge in a collaborative way; as one of them declared, 'I would like to make these photographs accessible (…) for young people to view them as a source of knowledge'. [10 December 2018]. As Clare Veal noted, 'a key transformation that has accompanied the development of digital archives has been the establishment of the importance of (photographic) images as historical sources'.[66] The amateur historians' investigation of the past mirrors the historiographic trend that emerged in the late 1970s in Thailand. Scholars and local intellectuals at the time viewed 'local history' (**ประวัติศาสตร์ท้องถิ่น**) as a history 'from below', distinct from Bangkok-centred historical knowledge and focused on the culture and history of the provincial centres and their inhabitants.[67] The page's moderator has this motto attached to some of his posts: 'remember, save, develop, conserve' (**จดจำ รักษา พัฒนา อนุรักษ์**). For him and other members who share his concerns, the social media platform helps them to resist the loss of local historical knowledge and material culture.

The honourable principles of open data sharing and collaborative investigation do not apply uniformly on this Facebook page, though. A member (User 2), who is a native of Nakhon Phanom and of Vietnamese descent,[68] shared a link to a video clip showing the celebration of the birthday of Hồ Chí Minh, the Vietnamese revolutionary leader and statesman, by the Thai-Vietnamese community in Nakhon Phanom in 2021; below is the exchange that accompanies the post (no other comments were posted):

> **User 1:** For what?
>
> **User 2 (the author of the post):** May I have more details on your question so that I can explain in detail?
>
> **User 2 (again):** Do you mean what is the post for? Am I right or not?

[19 May 2021]

User 1 queries User 2 for sharing this link. User 2 asks User 1 to clarify his or her question (twice) and receives no response. Her willingness to clarify possible misunderstanding is met by silence, effectively ending the exchange. Another illustration is the terse exchange that occurred between two users regarding a picture of two US air force aircrew posing in front of their F-4 plane at Nakhon Phanom US air force base:

> **User 1:** They should have been shot, shouldn't they? These superpowers like to harass small countries.

65 C.C. Marshall, 'Rethinking personal digital archiving, part 1: Four challenges from the field', DLib Magazine 14, 3/4 (2008). Quoted from Nancy Van House and Elizabeth F. Churchill, 'Technologies of memory: Key issues and critical perspectives', *Memory Studies* 1, 3 (2008): 301.

66 Clare Veal, 'Nostalgia and nationalism: Facebook "archives" and the constitution of Thai photographic histories', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 51, 3 (2020): 375.

67 Thongchai Winichakul, 'The changing landscape of the past: New histories in Thailand since 1973', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26, 1 (1995): 113.

68 A friend of User 2 told us that she is of Vietnamese descent.

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User 2: If you understood world politics, you would understand why Thailand didn't lose WWII despite siding with Japan and why Thailand allowed America to set up an army in Thailand. Because Thailand was scared of communism. Had we damned the Americans, we would have been part of a communist country, like Vietnam, by now for sure.

[9 January 2021]

The first user did not respond to the second user's comment. User 2's blunt reaction reflects the contemporary narrative whereby (1) the communist (that is, Vietnamese) threat was existential to the Thai identity and way of life and (2) Thailand would have become a communist regime had it not been for the support of the United States. 'Communism was declared to be un-Thai [during the Cold War]', writes Thai scholar Pavin Chachavalpongpun, 'unnatural to the Thai social fabric, and thus merited exclusion from the national community'.[69] In reality, although the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) supplied the Communist Party of Thailand with weapons until the late 1970s, its aid never reached the level of assistance it provided to the Cambodian and especially Lao revolutionary movements.[70] Yet, the narrative of communism's existential threat to Thailand and the country's survival remains in the minds of Thai citizens.

It is possible that User 1's[71] unresponsiveness in both exchanges was due to indifference. Or, they simply did not bother to respond since they had no obligation to do so. It is also plausible to suggest that the subject of 'Communism' on the social platform is a fraught one, that is, both individuals referred to as User 1 avoided, by not responding, a potentially argumentative discussion on a sensitive topic. In another interesting example, the social media platform's administrator shared five links on the '7 August 1965 event' (the aforementioned first clash between insurgents and the Thai military) and, more broadly, the communist insurgency in northeast Thailand in 2016, 2017, twice in 2020 and again in 2022. None of these posts received any comments. Again, there are various possible explanations for this absence of reaction, such as indifference, ignorance or—I would suggest—the avoidance of the issue of home-grown communist insurgency. Ignorance seems an unlikely explanation, as this event is featured in Thai history books and is particularly well-known in Isan. Indifference also seems an unlikely reason, given that a clear majority of posts on the site, including posts on the US military presence in Nakhon Phanom (which typically elicit lively comments), receive at least some responses; it is therefore unusual for five separate posts on the same topic to receive no comments whatsoever, suggesting that another factor is at play. I would therefore argue that the wish to *avoid* discussing the issue of home-grown insurgency is a highly credible reason for the

69 Pavin Chachavalpongpun, 'The necessity of enemies in Thailand's troubled politics', *Asian Survey* 51, 6 (2011): 1024.

70 Christopher Goscha, 'The Revolutionary Laos of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: The making of a transnational "Pathet Lao Solution" (1954–1956)', in *L'échec de la paix? L'Indochine entre les deux accords de Genève (1954–1962)*, ed. Christopher Goscha and Karine Laplante (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2010), pp. 61–84.

71 The term 'User 1' of course refers to a different individual in each case.

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absence of comments about the 'Day When Gunfire Rang Out' and, more generally, about the province's revolutionary past. The absence of response to these posts corresponds to a deliberate and collective kind of silence, in the sense that 'people collectively ignore something of which each one of them is personally aware', to avoid exacerbating what is better left unspoken.[72] I will substantiate my argument—that is, that the 7 August 1965 event is known but unspoken about on the Facebook page—through a brief history of the annual celebration of '*7 Singha*' ('7 August'), as the event is also called locally.

Since 2002, the 7 August 1965 clash has been commemorated every year in Ban Nabua, the village where it happened. After the Anti-Communist Act was rescinded in 2000, the village's Communist veterans began to attend Memorial Day ceremonies organised by their fellow comrades in the former Southern and Southeastern Liberated Regions to commemorate the sacrifices they all made in their struggle against the Thai state. The creation of the 7th August commemoration ceremony in Ban Nabua was directly inspired by these initiatives. For the first decade or so, the '7th August remembrance ceremony' (**งานรำลึก7 สิงหาคม**) involved the village's inhabitants and the network of ex-CPT members from other parts of the country, featuring political debates, lectures and cultural performances. The commemoration ceremony was included in the sub-district (*tambon*) administration's development plans in 2012 and promoted as a historical, cultural and touristic attraction, even offering a sound and light show and organising reenactments of skirmishes between insurgents and the Thai army. In recent years, however, the commemorations have been much more subdued at the request of the Thai authorities, who seek to neutralise the message of the remembrance ceremony which honours 'all heroes who sacrificed their lives for the people's struggle' and which had begun to attract visitors—including students—from all over the country.[73] On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the 'Day Gunshots Rang Out' in 2015, military officials asked villagers to keep the event 'small' and banned any political conversation.[74] 'This is the second year we were not allowed to have a big celebration and our funding was cut', Comrade Tang, a Communist veteran and resident of Ban Nabua, lamented in an interview with *Isaan Record*. 'In the past, the military would join in to celebrate our shared political history, but now they are coming in to control us'.[75]

What can be represented and celebrated in Ban Nabua each August has clearly varied according to Thailand's shifting political landscape. The military regime led by army commander General Prayut Chan-o-cha between 2014 and 2023 repressed dissent and tightened state control over Thai media and civil society, using the Computer-Related Crimes Act and Article 112 of the Criminal Code on *lèse-majesté* to prosecute perceived opponents of the monarchy and the government.[76]

72 Zerubavel, 'The social sound of silence', p. 32.

73 Interview with an ex-Communist fighter, Ban Nabua, 26 Jan. 2019.

74 'From rice field to rebellion: Untold stories of North-eastern Thailand's armed struggle (Part II)', isaanrecord.com, 8 Aug. 2016; https://isaanrecord.com/2016/08/08/part-ii-from-rice-fields-to-rebellion-untold-stories-of-north-eastern-thailands-armed-struggle/ (accessed 14 June 2019), p. 5.

75 Ibid.

76 The Computer-Related Crimes Act was initially enacted in 2007 (and amended in 2016) to deal with online scams and pornography. It is now primarily used to prosecute those who post on social media platforms or import in a computer system 'forged or false computer data'. Janjira Sombatpoonsiri and Dien Nguyen An Luong, 'Justifying digital repression via "fighting fake news"', *Trends in Southeast*

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Civic engagement of ex-Communist fighters in commemoration ceremonies and activities has likewise not been tolerated by the regime, despite former insurgents no longer constituting a military threat. In light of government censorship of the well-known and (once) popular *7 Singha* commemoration ceremony, active silence—in the sense of 'the things we are silent about are in fact actively avoided'[77] - amongst some users on the Amateur Historians Facebook page should thus be considered a highly credible explanation of their apparent lack of reaction to the administrator's *7 Singha* posts.

The next section will show through the study of another Facebook page that what is *not* there is epistemologically relevant, revealing the intricacies of Cold War memories; specifically, the 'Returning Wind' Facebook page underpins a certain vision of the past, namely, a Cold War era remembered through the prism of nostalgia, ethnicity, and absence.

Exiled in space and time

The Facebook page 'Returning Wind' was created in 2015.[78] It has attracted an impressive number of followers, amounting to more than 9,000 members, some of whom have become 'top fans'.[79] The Thai-Chinese administrator's posts have generated throughout the years a solid base of followers, who often express their gratitude to the page's administrator for sharing and saving from oblivion images, sounds, and flavours of a past they can identify with and which at times they enrich with their own reminiscences. The administrator in turn regularly thanks them for their comments and compliments. The administrator is prolific and has written more than 300 posts over the course of six years (2016–21). His style of writing, imagination and eye for detail are regularly praised by the members. For instance, his meticulous recollections of his grandmother's and mother's Teochew[80] cooking regularly delight his readers, who in turn offer their recollections and even share recipes and cooking tips in their comments. This is a digital autobiography composed of quasi-ethnographic vignettes narrating the administrator's childhood in Nakhon Phanom town in the 1970s. The topics of the posts are eclectic and intimate, on family and food, popular culture and 'comfort' objects, urban and natural landscapes. The writing is evocative, full of details, and often moving. The page is candidly nostalgic and the administrator consistently begins his posts with the following words 'when I was a child …'.

The Facebook page administrator frequently takes his audience for strolls to his favourite places as a child: his relatives' shops, the streets of the old town, the Mekong River bank, the market, the cinemas and the stores. These places—long since

Asia 11 (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022), p. 10, quoting Royal Gazette, no. 124, sect. 27 kor, 18 June 2007, p. 4.

77 Zerubavel, 'The social sound of silence', p 33.

78 https://www.facebook.com/%E0%B8%A5-%E0%B8%A1-%E0%B8%AB-%E0%B8%A7-%E0%B8%99-773198446159347.

79 Facebook defines a 'top fan' as follows: 'People can become eligible for a top fan badge on the page by being one of the most active followers of the page, which can include liking or reacting to content, and commenting on or sharing posts.' https://www.facebook.com/help/340991076472172.

80 Teochew people originate from Chaozhou prefecture (today's Chaoshan region) of eastern Guangdong province in China. Significant Teochew populations live outside China, including in Southeast Asia.

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Figure 1. The Thai Samakhee café today (photo taken by the author on 12 December 2022)

transformed (the river bank, the old town, the market) or vanished (the cinemas, the shops)—are the landmarks of his nostalgia, to which he returns constantly in his cognitive journeys to produce, revive and sustain memories of a milieu that no longer exists. Philippe Gervais-Lambony characterised this nostalgia of vanished territories as 'that lived by the exiled' in time and space.[81] One site in particular—the Thai Samakhee (ไทยสามัคคี) café—spatially embodies the exiled nostalgia of the administrator (fig. 1). The Thai Samakhee was a Chinese-owned café and guesthouse situated in the old town. The building (still extant) sits at a junction where two roads running parallel through the southern half of town merge into one that continues north along the bank of the Mekong. It overlooks a small square that is one of the focal points of the town, given that it is also the site of the clock tower (of which more below). Above the door of the two-storey building hangs an old sign reading 'Thai Samakhee' in Thai in faded gold letters, followed by the Chinese name 'Hua Pheng' in Chinese characters. A more recent blue plastic sign beneath reads 'Thai Samakhee' in English. The ground floor of the building features a series of wide entrances closed by folding grey wooden doors like those found in shophouses. The interior is bare, save for a few empty shelves and old ceiling fans. It was a very

81 Philippe Gervais-Lambony, 'Nostalgies citadines en Afrique Sud', *EspacesTemps.net* (2012), p. 4.

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popular eating place during the administrator's childhood. His memories morph the derelict place into a memory site par excellence, slowing down the passage of time as he imagines himself strolling to the site and enjoying the smell of cooking breakfasts:

> I always remember how good that first plate of pork rice stir-fry with the little bowl of chili fish sauce was. […] Across Sunthon Vichit Street is the side of the cafe where, 40 years ago, civil servants, junior and senior, used to come every morning to sit down for coffee and a boiled egg. The image one sees in the morning is the smoke coming out of the oven where water is boiled, smoke trailing in contact with the morning sun; and one smells the pleasant smell of coffee carried by the breeze floating in the air.
>
> [9 December 2015]

His post generated more than 70 comments, from the usual 'thank you' and 'missing it so much' messages to followers' own fond memories of breakfast and lunch ordered at this café. His stories of a boy who grew up in a small provincial town have created empathy and emotional bonds amongst strangers, in part because a number of his 'friends' can relive their experiences through his writings. For instance, one middle-aged user, encouraged by the administrator's autobiographical tone and other users' comments, drew on her childhood memories to convey a vivid sense of place, people and food from a day's trip to Thai Samakhee:

> When we were children and studying in Khon Kaen, during school vacations, mom and dad would bring us to visit Auntie [the user uses the Teochew term: 'A-ee'] Wan at [her] Seng Peng Hotel, located in an open space next to the small Thai pastry shop on Feuang Nakhon Street. (…) Dad takes the coffee and a boiled egg. For us it is Ovaltine, also with boiled eggs in two small glasses with tapered bottom. There is also a glass of tea. Dad has put on a little Maggi sauce and pepper, and makes us swallow the two eggs at once, straight from the shell, so we don't smell them. Today I still think about the eggs at Samakhee restaurant, the atmosphere of Dad's conversation with his Chinese merchant friends. We sit watching these uncles ['A-jek', in Teochew] coming and going, and then touching the cheek of the chubby child with the name of Puu, a name received from Daddy's own friends. The conversation ends, we part ways.
>
> [9 December 2015]

The ways of remembering demonstrated by the 'Returning Wind' page's administrator and his followers are determined by the social, political, historical and cultural contexts in which they have lived their lives; that is, more specifically, a framework that is bounded by the language of ethnicity (that is, Teochew food and vocabulary) and class (civil servants, traders and small-scale business owners).

Equally important is the absence—that is, what is not said—which *also* constitutes this collective nostalgia. For example, personal recollections of the Vietnam War on the platform are few and far between despite the fact that the administrator and a number of users (on the basis of their comments) grew up in the 1960s and 1970s. In the administrator's words: 'we lived in a multi-cultural community, Thai, Chinese and Vietnamese, where there were small cultural exchanges. We lived in peace and

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tranquillity' [5 October 2020]. This narrative frame, though, is problematic for other local populations, such as the Vietnamese who fled Laos and settled in Nakhon Phanom town in 1946 and suffered from racial discrimination, police repression and economic restrictions for decades afterwards. The absence of stories of others in the narrative, however, should not be reduced to indifference and cannot be explained by ignorance. On this Facebook page, remembering the past through the lens of selective memory helps to create the impression that the town of Nakhon Phanom was largely peaceful and pleasant with a benign American presence (fig. 2. The administrator recalls:

> I grew up during the waning days of the GIs. The war was over. But there were still American soldiers, waiting for the successive withdrawals of their troops.
>
> Dad opened a small clothing shop, located just behind the Thai Samakhee restaurant and adjoining the Tai Fa store. He sold second-hand clothes: jeans, belts, etc. His customers were locals, junior civil servants and GIs.
>
> Dad told me he had a GI friend by the name of 'Charlie' who often came to see him at the store and with whom he had frequent conversations, so much so that he had become a close friend to Dad. When he visited, he gave him chocolate, Budweiser beer and magazines he picked up from the camp to leave with Dad.
>
> [31 August 2016]

Figure 2. The old town of Nakhon Phanom in 1970–71. The Thai Samakhee building is in the background behind the clock tower (photo by Gary Daugherty, Task Force Alpha 1970–71)

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The Facebook page 'Returning Wind'—primarily an archive of the self, storing digital materials of an autobiography—has engendered through the production of 'an archive of human relationships' social nostalgia amongst its followers, that is, a collective nostalgia that expresses regret for a lost society. [82] Every community benefited economically from the US military presence, though to varying degrees; the ethnic Chinese did better than most, capitalising on their decades-old dominant economic position in town. Chinese traders came to Nakhon Phanom in the first quarter of the twentieth century as part of the immigration wave from southwestern China to Siam. They soon expanded the small-scale cross-border trade across the Mekong River that had existed for centuries. They settled in and opened rows of shops on Sunthon Vichit Road along the Mekong River bank, transforming the area into the town's commercial centre.[83] A *raison d'être* of the Facebook page 'Returning Wind' lies in the sense of loss of the Thai-Chinese community's social and economic standing, a standing founded to some extent on economic gains derived from the Cold War. The shops of the Facebook page administrator's grandparents, father and aunt closed down a long time ago—like many others, following the departure of the US servicemen in 1975[84]—and the administrator's own family moved further inland, away from the Mekong River bank where they had first settled. In a sorrowful tone, the administrator explained to me when we met in his office in February 2020 that 'the hierarchy between the communities in Nakhon Phanom used to be the Chinese on top, then the Vietnamese, and last the Thai. Now, it's the Vietnamese first, the Chinese second, the Thai third.' His nostalgia (as well as that of his followers) is 'modern', defined as being born out of a perception of irrepressible social and economic change, of events over which individuals have seemingly lost control. The past thus becomes 'a necessary form of compensation.'[85]

This silence about others—that is, 'the absence of people from contexts where they are present in reality'[86]—has an effect because it consolidates the legitimacy of the Thai-Chinese narrative that reframes the past (and the present) according to a certain chronology—or, to borrow Schröter and Taylor's words, 'a certain order of discourse'[87]—culminating in the 'prosperous and peaceful' era from which they benefited the most, and leaving out darker events that afflicted others. Thus, social nostalgia as written and performed by a large majority of members on this Facebook page shines a light on one group of people—the Thai-Chinese—and in so doing eclipses the others, denying their historicity (that is, their place in history) and thereby heightening the

82 Kathleen Richardson and Sue Hessey, 'Archiving the self? Facebook as biography of social and relational memory', *Journal of Information, Communication & Ethics in Society* 7, 1 (2009): 25.

83 Ninlawadee Promphakping et al., **รายงานวิจัยฉบับสมบูรณ์ เรื่อง: การกาเนิดและพัฒนาการของตลาดสดและผู้ค้ารายย่อยเมืองนครพนม** [Research report on the origin and evolution of fresh markets and petty traders in Nakhon Phanom province], p. 26.

84 The number of US military personnel in Thailand dropped from 27,000 in March 1975 to less than 250 in July 1976. United States General Accounting Office, Report to the Congress, Withdrawal of US Forces from Thailand: Ways to Improve Future Withdrawal Operations, 1 Nov. 1977, p. i.

85 Tobias Becker, 'The meanings of nostalgia: Genealogy and critique', *History and Theory* 57, 2 (2018): 245.

86 Sameera Durrani, 'Absence in visual narratives: The story of Iran and Pakistan across time', in Schröter and Taylor, *Exploring Silence and absence in discourse*, p. 85.

87 Schröter and Taylor, 'Introduction', p. 7.

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majority's own. In other words, the idealised memories of the Cold War past posted by Thai-Chinese members on the Facebook page are revived as much by what is *not* said as by what *is* said.

The final section of this article will be about a different kind of silence, namely 'virtuous silence', a Buddhist notion that we borrow, in turn, from Thongchai Winichakul.[88] It has enabled a representation of another past—and a vision of the future—among the Việt Kiều in Nakhon Phanom town.

Virtuous silence and public amnesia

Tensions between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam[89] and Thailand began to ease gradually from the late 1980s. In 1992, following reciprocal visits by the Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiêt to Bangkok in October 1991 and his counterpart, Anand Panyarachun, to Hanoi in January 1992, the Thai government agreed to grant Thai citizenship to children and grandchildren of the Vietnamese people that settled in Thailand in the mid-1940s. Five years later, the first generation of Vietnamese refugees were in turn allowed to apply for Thai citizenship.[90] The economic situation of the Vietnamese refugees who had remained in Thailand significantly improved after securing Thai citizenship. Residents of Vietnamese descent in Nakhon Phanom town became more confident in investing in local businesses, such as restaurants, hotels, and tourism companies, as well as in car and motorbike repair shops and concessions.[91] They used the capital they had accumulated in the few occupations (for example, food sellers, manual workers, hairdressers, clothing sellers) they had been allowed to follow under the Thai government's restrictions in previous decades. They could also rely on the support of longer-established Vietnamese families through marriages and friendship ties. In addition, they cultivated good relationships with local civil servants and formed partnerships with members of the Thai-Chinese business community.[92]

The socioeconomic integration of the Vietnamese community reached a high point with the Thai-Vietnamese Association's participation in the building of the Hồ Chí Minh Memorial complex (*anusorn sathan*) in the village of Najok near Nakhon Phanom town in 2016. In 1928, Hồ Chí Minh arrived in Siam with the goal of expanding revolutionary bases with the help of Vietnamese migrants in the northeast of the country. His journeys across this region have become material for commemorative monuments in places where he is believed to have stayed;[93] the

88 Thongchai Winichakul, *Moments of silence: The unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020), pp. 19–20.

89 On 2 July 1976, North and South Vietnam" were merged to form the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam.

90 Sripana, 'Les "Việt kiều" du Nord-Est de la Thaïlande', pp. 68–71. Thaksin Shinawatra's government further expanded the programme of granting citizenship to Việt kiều in northeastern Thailand in the early 2000s.

91 Ninlawadee et al., 'The evolution of wet markets in a Thai-Lao border town', p. 85.

92 Sarinya Sukaree, **ไทยใหม่: จากชาวเวียดนามอพยพสู่ชนชั้นนาใหม่ในเมืองนครพนม** [Thai Mai: The transformation of the Vietnamese diaspora into a new and privileged class of Nakhon Phanom], *Journal of Human Sciences* 17, 1 (2015): 26–8.

93 Nguyen Quoc Tan, 'Ho Chi Minh sites in Thailand: Their significance and potential problems for Thai-Vietnamese relations', *Journal of Mekong Societies* 5, 1 (2009): 77–96.

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Memorial complex is one such site. The Vietnamese government supervised and funded it, with the support of local and national Thai authorities.[94]

Clearly the era of hostilities, confrontations and violence that played out in domestic politics and on the international stage would not fit the narrative infusing the memorial site, which is one of unity, cooperation, and friendship. For instance, the complex's photo gallery refers to a historical period (the first half of the twentieth century) that is positive for both the relationship between the Thai and Vietnamese governments and the history of the Thai and Vietnamese nation-states, covering as it does a time when the two countries fought against the same enemy—France—and for the same cause—national sovereignty. (For the Vietnamese, the stakes were of course significantly higher as they fought for their independence. The Siamese on their part were involved in a bitter struggle with France over parts of Laos and Cambodia.) On the other hand, the Vietnam War and the Cold War are absent from the Memorial's exhibitions. This absence is significant because these events certainly could be reflected there, since Hồ Chí Minh also fought against the United States and thereby achieved—albeit posthumously—probably his greatest triumph: the reunification of Vietnam.

This is 'the correct history' (**ประวัติศาสตร์ที่ถูกต้อง**), as an elderly member of the Thai-Vietnamese association and resident of Ban Najok put it to me as we talked about the photo gallery.[95] Not everyone agrees. A young historian of Vietnamese descent (himself a member of the association) whom I met in Nakhon Phanom town lamented that 'here [at the memorial] there are pictures of Vietnamese laws, the Vietnamese Constitution, Viet Kiêu gatherings around the world…But in the end, we [the Thai-Vietnamese of Nakhon Phanom] have no story (**ไม่มี เรื่อง ราว**) in there.'[96] In what follows, I elaborate on what the young man meant by 'no story' by questioning another 'correct' account, that of a Việt Kiều memorial site in downtown Nakhon Phanom. However, these two 'correct' accounts should not necessarily be considered as the product of political censorship, that is, imposed by Vietnamese and Thai authorities. Rather, a subtler interpretation would be that these two accounts primarily serve the interests of the Việt Kiều community.

A clock tower stands in a small square, surrounded by old shophouses and in front of the aforementioned Thai Samakhee building (fig. 3). A prominent site in the memory-scape of Nakhon Phanom, the pinkish-grey tower is about 15 m high and is topped with a structure resembling a small portico. An inscription on the front of the tower reads 'Memorial to the Vietnamese who returned to the Fatherland' (**ชาวเวียดนามอนุสรณ์คราวย้ายกลับปิตุภูมิ**) in Thai and, below this, 'Việt Kiều Memorial on the occasion of repatriation 2503' (*Việt Kiều Lưu Niệm dịp Hội Hướng 2503*) in Vietnamese. The clock tower is one of the monuments that were erected in the early 1960s in every northeastern town where a significant population of Vietnamese lived (for example, Udon Thani, Nongkhai, Tha Bo, Sakorn Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom).[97] The structures were built on the initiative of Việt Kiều

94 Conversations with staff at the Memorial Complex and members of the Thai-Vietnamese association; fieldwork, Dec. 2019 and Feb. 2020.

95 Fieldwork, Feb. 2020.

96 Fieldwork, Feb. 2020.

97 Hardy, 'People in-between', p. 278.

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Figure 3. The Clock Tower today, with the Thai Samakhee building in the background (photo taken by the author on 19 December 2022)

representatives and associations, and funded with donations from members of the Việt Kiều communities. They were conceived of at a time of détente in Thai-Vietnamese relations and aimed to leave a permanent token of the refugees' gratitude and goodwill at the end of their temporary stay in Isan. Historian Andrew Hardy explains that, crucially, 'the memorials were intended to be *left behind* by parting refugees. […] After the monuments' construction, their architects and builders were not

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supposed to stay in Thailand.'[98] Events turned out very differently, as the abovementioned halt to the repatriation programme left tens of thousands of Việt Kiều in Isan.

On 23 December 2020, the Thai-Vietnamese Association of Nakhon Phanom, with the support of the municipality, organised a spectacular celebration of the 60th anniversary of the construction of the clock tower. The anniversary celebrations reached a peak in the evening, when surrounding streets were closed to traffic so they could become host to a lively, crowded night market selling clothes, food and drink, amongst many other items. The clock tower itself was floodlit for the occasion, with the small pavilion behind it as well as the Thai Samakhee building being decorated with chains of red lanterns. Notables, including the Ambassador of Vietnam to Thailand, posed for photographs in front of the tower, all dressed in their finest: the men in jackets and ties or Thai-style silk shirts, the women in *áo dài*. On a stage erected for the occasion, speeches were made and musical performances—both traditional and contemporary—given. VIPs ate dinner at large circular tables arrayed before the stage, while a large crowd of spectators filled the square in front of the clock tower.

How is it that the building of a memorial to mark the anticipated and dramatic end of the Việt Kiều presence in Nakhon Phanom (and Thailand) was lavishly celebrated six decades later by the same community? The Association posted on its Facebook page a telling comment (in Vietnamese) on the event several days before the ceremony, a portion of which is translated below:

> In light of our 60-year-journey, this is an event for us, our children and our grandchildren to express our deepest respect and gratitude to the king, the government and the people of Thailand. They are the people with very hospitable manners, who welcomed us, sharing food and clothes for our diasporic community and facilitating the conditions for our children and grandchildren to work and live peacefully and legally on this land. Moreover, we must not forget to express our gratitude to our ancestors and forefathers, those who have died, who have been repatriated, who are still living in Thailand and everyone who has contributed to erect this clock tower memorial, which is standing tall beside the great Mekong River.
>
> [13 December 2020]

The clock tower's anniversary celebrations stand for a narrative of the past similar to that of the Ho Chi Minh Memorial Complex—that is, gratitude instead of hostility, friendship instead of confrontation. Built as a gesture of gratitude towards the king and the Thai people by the Vietnamese community who should have left, the clock tower has also become a commemoration site for the Vietnamese who *did not leave* and who survived and even thrived in Thailand. The clock tower honours all Vietnamese—both those who returned to the 'homeland' and those who stayed in Thailand—but 'forgets' what caused their separation in the first place. A flyer in Thai and Vietnamese, entitled 'Remembering 60 years. The Vietnamese clock tower memorial, 2503–2563 (1960–2020)', and posted on the Thai-Vietnamese Association of Nakhon Phanom Facebook homepage, is edifying in this respect.

98 Ibid., p. 281.

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The flyer features six visual vignettes distributed in two columns of three apiece. Interestingly, the timeline starts with the 'Day Thakhek Fell' on 21 March 1946 with the escape of Vietnamese people to Nakhon Phanom, then moves to a sequence of four events occurring between 1959 and 1964: first, the Thai and Vietnamese Red Cross organisations' agreement in 1959 allowing volunteers to travel back to Vietnam; second, the construction of the clock tower 'in gratitude to the land and the people of Thailand' in 1959–60; third, the inauguration of the clock tower on 1 June 1961; and fourth, the repatriation of 14,208 Vietnamese people to Vietnam between 1960 and 1964. The timeline ends in 2020 with the Vietnamese community's celebration of the 60th anniversary of the clock tower. This means, astonishingly, that 56 years—including the decades of the Cold War—of the '60-year journey' are missing. The last vignette, the only one in colour, shows a contemporary photo of a group of women—some of whom probably spent their childhood or young adulthood during the Cold War in Thailand—in their colourful *áo dài*, celebrating in front of the clock tower.

A common assumption, as Thongchai Winichakul notes, 'is that silence is not good, is unpleasant, is a condition of something bad, something gone wrong. This is not necessarily so.' The historian usefully evokes the Buddhist notion of 'virtuous silence', which 'offers guidance for how to overcome the painful past in order to live on in the present and move on to the future'.[99] Indeed, a forward-looking narrative of this '60-year journey'—or, the 'correct history', to use the words of the Najok veteran—is only possible *with* absence in the account. The clock tower memorial, thus discursively reframed, is no longer the location where the story of the Việt kiều in Nakhon Phanom should have ended, but where their new identity embracing both the Thai and Vietnamese nations is feted. In essence, the 60th anniversary celebrations of the clock tower and the construction of the Hồ Chí Minh memorial complex have helped cement the Thai-Vietnamese community's successful transformation from an exiled and marginalised group into loyal subjects of Thailand (as Thai citizens) and Vietnam (as members of the diaspora) through the recourse to 'virtuous silence', but at the cost of public amnesia—or having 'no story', to use the words of the aforementioned Thai-Vietnamese historian.

Conclusion

Studies on digital memories generally focus their attention on what people are writing, sharing, and archiving; in essence, on what is present. But less is said about what is not there yet could be. This article has shown that absence on social media platforms is also significant and that silence—and not just discourse—on certain issues confirms their relevance. The 7 August 1965 fighting in the village of Nabua is a well-known historical event in Thailand as it marked the beginning of the armed confrontation between the Communist insurgency and the Thai army. Yet, none of the five separate posts about it on the Facebook page 'Amateur historians of Nakhon Phanom' generated any comments, whereas most posts on the page generate at least some written responses. In light of the censorship imposed on the commemoration of this event by Thai authorities, the absence of reactions is very likely

99 Thongchai, *Moments of silence*, pp. 19–20.

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due to the fact that members would rather leave Communist-related topics buried under the mass of digital data in order to avoid the kind of censorship which ex-insurgents in the village of Nabua and their supporters have struggled with in recent years. Memories of the conflict and ideological tensions continue to influence social behaviours.

Absence on the Thai-Vietnamese Association of Nakhon Phanom Facebook page takes the form of public amnesia. The Thai-Vietnamese community has resolutely striven to align itself with the Thai and Vietnamese states and their vision of 'homogenous time'[100]—that is, linear and continuous, preoccupied with progress and the future. This alignment with national authorities and their narratives has a price, though: the association members deny their community's historicity, at least publicly—or to borrow Michel-Rolph Trouillot's words, they ignore their 'subjective capacity' to be actors and narrators of events[101]—by erasing both the war against the United States and, in the process, their own community's story of survival and resilience during the Cold War. The young Thai-Vietnamese historian's guarded post in response to a picture of the clock tower posted on the Facebook page 'Amateur Historians' is illustrative in this regard:

> In any case, what attracts attention are the conflicting fragments of the Field Marshal [Sarit Thanarat]'s period in power, considered to be an era when the *Kiều Bào* [compatriots abroad] in Siam were under strong pressure. From this perspective the clock tower of Nakhon Phanom, if it kindled in one's heart moments of joy, would also reflect a period of suffering.
>
> [27 March 2017]

The Facebook page 'Returning Wind' also denies the Thai-Vietnamese community's historicity, though in a different way. The participatory feature of the Facebook platform, coupled with a language of memory that is personal as well as public, has contributed to the formation of a collective digital memory that provides a framework in which individual users can reminisce about personal memories in a meaningful fashion. The online community is constructed by way of a rich digital storytelling that also rests on the absence of others. This storytelling draws on what Svetlana Boym calls a 'restorative' nostalgia, aiming at rebuilding a vanished home, imagined here as a peaceful, prosperous utopian ethnic Chinese enclave in the town of Nakhon Phanom.[102]

The study of these Facebook pages, and the connected analogue events and activities in Ban Nabua and Ban Najok, has revealed the process of production of specific narratives built in part on what is shared and not shared, and has unearthed through what is there and not there the contrasting experiences and perceptions of the Cold War amongst the inhabitants of Isan at present. Some remember nostalgically a 'prosperous and peaceful' era; others celebrate Hồ Chí Minh's life; some are

100 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 26.

101 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), p. 24.

102 Svetlana Boym, *The future of nostalgia* (New York: Basic, 2001), p. xviii.

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anti-Communist; and still others actively participated in, and commemorate, the Communist insurgency. The conventional description of the northeast region of Thailand as 'left-leaning' and, later, as 'communist' during the period between the 1940s and the 1970s is therefore rather one-dimensional and should be more nuanced.[103] This issue demands further research, particularly in small towns and rural areas where the conflict was at its most violent.

Thongchai Winichakul notes that it is 'difficult for many to understand the intense antagonism between communism and anticommunism and why it had been pursued to such a deadly extent'.[104] Memories of the conflict and tensions that afflicted the country have had four decades to 'decline, shift and alter through chronopolitics of memory and other conditions'.[105] But as his admirable book on the aftermath of the 'October 6' events shows, and this article also suggests, the conflict's deep-rooted politics are still potent in Thai society today. The possibilities for greater accessibility and dissemination of information afforded by digital media technologies can in theory represent a path to a convergence of plural memories. However, absences and silences on the Facebook pages suggest otherwise: that the various ethnic communities in Nakhon Phanom—Thai/Lao, Vietnamese, Chinese—are not yet ready to come together and share their Cold War memories and experiences, some common, some divergent, online and off-line. Members of these Facebook pages never talk in their posts about the silence surrounding the 7 August 1965 event, the local insurgency, or the discrimination against Việt kiều. This reflects the enduring imprint of the Cold War, which left a gap between communities, each remaining in its own memory space.

103 Kevin Hewison, 'Black site: The Cold War and the shaping of Thailand's politics', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 50, 4 (2020): 15.

104 Thongchai, *Moments of silence,* p. 16.

105 That is, the changes in the political and geopolitical environment that affect the politics of memory. Ibid.

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