

1 Ghosts of war

The Vietnamese call what we in the outside world call the Vietnam War “the American War,” and many of them believe that the ghosts of violent and tragic death from this war abound in their living environment. Those who do so are likely to regularly offer incense, food, and votive money to these “invisible neighbors” and can tell stories about the actions of these hidden historical identities. The following is one of the commonplace stories of apparition from a rural settlement in the central region once known as My Lai.

A man saw his late wife and children in the early morning on his way to the paddy field. This was in the spring of 1993, and by this time, some villagers in this settlement had begun to remove the remains of their relatives from their shallow wartime graves to sumptuously prepared new family graveyards. The apparition was at the site of the man’s old house that had been burned down on the day of the village massacre in the beginning of 1968, which had destroyed his family. His wife was seated on a stone and greeted him somewhat scornfully. The three children were hidden behind her back, afraid that their parents might start arguing.

The meaning of the apparition was immediately clear to the man: he must rebury the remains of his lost family without further delay. If he had no means to do so, according to the local interpretation of the apparition, the spirits would help him find a way. The man decided to spend the small sum of money that he had saved for the past years selling coconuts and was negotiating with a neighbor on the possibility of taking a loan from her. At that moment, a wealthy businesswoman who was a relative of his wife arrived from a distant city and told the man that she was willing to share the cost of reburial. On the day of the reburial, the woman told the visitors how the family of spirits had appeared in her dream and urged her to pay a visit to their home.

Whereas these apparitions are common in villages and towns of Vietnam, their stories seldom appear in the public media. Like any modern nation-state, the state apparatus of Vietnam looks down on them as remnants of old superstitions and a sign of cultural backwardness and moral

laxity. It took a further step to establish it as a code of law that citizens disengage with such negative traditions.¹ John Law, the mid-nineteenth century English writer, compiled a large number of stories of haunted houses popular at the time in European cities and set out to debunk their credibility case by case. Law hoped to prove through this exercise that the stories resulted from the delusion of the uneducated mind, and advocated that the law and the government should exercise their power to eradicate this “madness of crowds.”² The postcolonial states of Vietnam have made enormous administrative and political efforts to battle against traditional religious beliefs and ritual customs; first in the northern half of the country by the revolutionary communist state after the August Revolution of 1945 and particularly after the 1946–54 Independence War against France,³ and then across the regions after the reunification of the country in 1975.⁴ Perhaps we should include in this stream of aggressive modernization drive the attitude of some of the political elite in the southern half, during the division of the country into two mutually hostile states between 1954 and 1975, who identified religious commitment to Catholicism as part of the anticommunist political struggle.⁵

The early revolutionary cultural campaigns in the northern region focused on substituting the commemoration of heroic war dead (from the armed struggle against French colonial occupation) for the traditional worship of ancestors and other community guardian spirits.⁶ They aimed to build a united ritual community of the nation, and this idea was extended to the liberated southern regions after 1975. The campaigns advocated eradicating the feudal, colonial, and bourgeois legacies from their society; yet some of their assumptions were influenced by the French colonial modernization discourses and the early Vietnamese nationalist ideas of cultural self-enlightenment.⁷ The revolutionary cultural policies particularly disapproved of any ideas and practices to do with ghosts. Until recently, making offerings to ghosts in public space was strongly discouraged and trading votive objects, such as replica money or the portraits of the sea spirits burned for ritual purposes, were considered against the law and indeed occasionally punished if discovered.⁸ Even in recent years when the earlier punitive policy has been moderated and popular ritual activities are becoming increasingly tolerated,⁹ some ghost stories still infuriate the Vietnamese state bureaucracy. Whereas other ghost stories are allowed in print, the literary works that introduce the ghosts of the American War are severely censored.¹⁰ A journalist working for the official news organ of a central province recently heard about a rumor of an apparition and set out to investigate it. He was quickly reprimanded by his superiors. There was nothing extraordinary about the rumor, which was about a man encountering the ghost of his brother,

and such incidents can be widely heard across Vietnamese town neighborhoods. In this particular incident, the man was an acting official in the provincial Communist Party and the apparition happened to be of his elder brother who was killed in action as a soldier of the former South Vietnam.

So it is rather in the Western public media than in the Vietnamese that we hear about “the Vietnam ghost.” At the closing phase of the Gulf War in 1991, there rose a slogan in the US media that the American victory in this war had allegedly kicked away the ghost of the Vietnam War from American memory.¹¹ Christian Appy introduces this hopeful aspiration of the era with the statement widely circulated at the time, “The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula.”¹² Colin Powell took part in both the Vietnam and the Iraq conflicts, and explains in his autobiography how the practice of war can be related to the memory of war. Citing the seventeenth-century military theorist Karl von Clausewitz, Powell notes that the war with Iraq was everything that the war in Vietnam had not been – it was conducted with a clear political objective and on the basis of the unity of the people with the political authority in achieving that objective.¹³ The Gulf War was “anti-Vietnam,” as other observers note, meaning that it was fought against the haunting memory of the Vietnam War as well as against the menacing regime of Saddam Hussein.¹⁴

Despite the above optimism in the aftermath of the Gulf War, however, the Vietnam ghost seems to be an enduring phenomenon. Several prominent commentators noted a decade after the Gulf conflict that the Vietnam ghost was still haunting American society and politics,¹⁵ and I wrote this book amidst the heated debates in Western media regarding the alleged return of this ghost in the wake of a new military conflict in Iraq. News columns mention “the ghost of Vietnam in Iraq,” and a prominent scholar of international history writes of the persistent “ghost of Vietnam” in contemporary US security policies.¹⁶ This rhetorical trend makes one wonder how the course of contemporary history is influenced by the troubled memory of a past event, and why this relationship between history and memory is expressed through the idiom of ghost that the early Enlightenment thinkers believed, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, is contrary to all that is modern.¹⁷

Jean-Claude Schmitt, concluding his investigation of the ghost beliefs in medieval Europe, states that the Vietnam War is one of the collective phantoms of modern times, “ready to surge forth each time history and, in particular, political reason attempt to push them from the memory of the people.”¹⁸ According to Appy, “For three decades American leaders have tried to bury memories of the Vietnam War only to have them pop

up again like indestructible poltergeists.”¹⁹ Michael Bibby, a specialist in American cultural history, believes that “the [Vietnam] war’s dismembered ghosts continue to haunt American culture.”²⁰ If it is true that the “collective phantom” of the Vietnam War is still troubling American culture, what about the ghost of the American War in Vietnamese culture? What are the actions of war ghosts in Vietnam and what troubles, if any, do they cause the society?

The ghosts of the American War

The Vietnamese call the Vietnam–America conflict the American War (1960–75) partly to distinguish it from the previous “French War,”²¹ in a similar way that the Vietnam War (1965–75) is referenced to the war before it in Korea (1950–53) in the history of the cold war. According to Marilyn Young, Americans remember the Vietnam War mainly as a conflict that happened among Americans: “The Vietnam war, in short, was a civil war, but - and this may puzzle Vietnamese, who are currently discovering the extent to which it was a civil war for them - it was an *American* civil war.”²² The radical division of a nation as to the objective and the conduct of a war that it is drawn to fight, as Powell notes, has a lot to do with how the memory of this war turns into a “collective phantom.”²³ Young states,

More divisive than any conflict Americans have engaged in since the Civil War, the Vietnam war raised questions about the nation’s very identity. These questions have not been settled. The battle over interpreting the Vietnam war is a battle over interpreting America and it continues to the present day.²⁴

According to another observer, the war was waged “not only on a distant battlefield, but also ‘in the uncharted depths of the American psyche and in the obscurity of our nation’s soul’.”²⁵ Young points out also that the Vietnamese, a generation after the war formally ended, are now discovering the hitherto unspoken dimension of what has been, in the official discourse, an unambiguous, uncontested struggle of the unified nation against foreign aggression. Following Young, we will see in the following chapters how the recovered civil war dimension of the American War generates an array of interpretative controversies at community level and how these controversies structure some of the ghost narratives told within the community.

The phenomenon of war ghosts is intimately connected, in both Vietnam and America, with the troubled memory of the war. On this matter, Young’s idea that the Vietnam War and the American War were both partly a civil war is worth careful consideration. One must not forget,

however, the fact that death in this doubly civil war took place mainly in the land of Vietnam and that it is the Vietnamese who count the vast majority in the list of the war dead. This simple truth must have some relevance in the stories of war ghosts told in Vietnam and in their being distinct from the idiom of ghost mentioned in American public media. France experienced a proliferation of war ghost narratives in the aftermath of the First World War, according to the historian Jay Winter in his moving work on the role of ghost beliefs in mass grieving,²⁶ but the nation's foreign military ventures in Algeria or Indochina have never produced any remotely comparable corpus of stories in France. It is rather in Vietnam, not in France, that some of France's *ancients combattants* are still half-alive today in the form of a giant, uniformed ghost or in other less intimidating forms of spectral existence. Some of these old ghosts appear in company with those of other racial origins from the time of the French War, whom the locals identify as the colonial conscripts from Algeria or Morocco. This finding applies to American history too. Of the several wars America fought for self-defense or in defense of other nations, no history of war can compete with that of the American Civil War in terms of contribution to the American folkloric and literary tradition of ghost stories.²⁷ War in my home and war in their home seem to be two quite different historical grounds for this particular genre of cultural production.

Death in Vietnam was mainly the death of a soldier in American memory, as evidenced by the central material symbol of this collective memory – the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Arlington, Virginia. Death in the American War was also mainly that of a combatant according to official Vietnamese memorial art. This is materialized in the numerous cemeteries and cenotaphs distributed widely throughout Vietnam that can be easily seen in any rural village or town district. In reality, however, death in the Vietnam–American War was virtually anyone's death for the Vietnamese – young and old, male and female, combatant or non-combatant, partisan or non-partisan, or communist or anticommunist. This was particularly the case in the southern and central regions of Vietnam where the frontiers of battlefield were abominably unclear.²⁸

The war against America was theoretically a “people's war.”²⁹ It aimed to consolidate the army with the people, the soldiers in combat uniforms with the patriotic citizens without uniform, and the combat units with the rural villages.³⁰ The army was the fish, according to a powerful metaphor of the Vietnamese revolutionary war, and the people were the water where the fish would live.³¹ In many villages of southern and central Vietnam, the unity of army and people was far more complex and turbulent than the idyllic image of fish swimming peacefully in the landscaped pond of a

middle-class Vietnamese town house. As the conflict escalated, the “water” was systematically pumped out to expose the “fish.” Often, no “fish” were found in the bottom of the pond, and this frequently led to tragic incidents of civilian killing.³² The dislocated water of people could not survive away from their ancestral land and was also pushed back to their place of origin to harbor the fish of army. The agit-prop activity to encourage war refugees to return to their homeland was intense throughout the refugee camps and strategic hamlets in southern and central Vietnam. As a former highlands tribal leader said, “We were between the hammer and anvil. The Communists tried to resettle us . . . The Americans wanted to get free fire zones with the Montagnards.”³³ Moving hazardingly between the rural homeland and the refugee camp or the urban slum, people in the people’s war left numerous traces of loss and trails of sorrow. Today, shallow graves and collective tombs remain in the sand dune, along the village footpath, and in the household garden; unknown human remains are discovered underneath the mud floor of the house. Some of these improperly buried dead belonged to the revolutionary side, others to the opposite side, and many more to both-and-neither sides. Some of them would belong to soldiers, but these are greatly outnumbered by the remains of the dead who had no war-related professional backgrounds.

It is in this historical landscape of generalized violence and mass displacement that people perceive today the presence of grievous ghosts of war.³⁴ The destruction of war constitutes the backdrop or what archeologists call “the contemporary past” for the phenomenon of war ghosts.³⁵ Against the background of a mass-mobilized total war with heavy foreign intervention, war ghosts in Vietnam are highly diverse in origin and sometimes have a cosmopolitan outlook. In his short story “The billion dollar skeleton,” Phan Huy Dong lists, “men women children old people Viets Laos Khmers Thais Koreans Australians New Zealanders French black white red yellow brown . . . even a few Americans.”³⁶ Many Vietnamese regularly burn incense and pray on behalf of these heterogeneous beings, and these people are from all walks of life; many with the biographical background of marching in “the trail of revolution” (*duong cach mang*). Those who refuse to acknowledge the existence of sorrowful war ghosts in the old fields of mass death are sometimes mocked and subtly criticized – subtly because many of these non-conformists tend to be in positions of power in the Communist Party and other key political organizations.

These heterogeneous ghosts of war do not constitute a “collective phantom.” They are not merely an allegorical device for historical analogy, invoked to deliver the meaning of a new historical event against the

similar or contrasting background of a familiar old one.³⁷ Nor do they merely point to the paradox in modern historical consciousness, addressed by Schmitt, that a dead era appears to walk in the new era at a time of crisis and especially if the new era nurtures an ideology of radical break with the old. This paradox is deeply engrained in the tradition of modern social thought. Karl Marx wrote bitterly in *The eighteenth brumaire* of the ghost of dead generations exercising its invisible hands in the social revolution and thereby distorting its course, whereas Max Weber wrote *The protestant ethic* in terms of how the tradition of medieval monastic asceticism prows the culture of modern capitalist economic order. Drawing upon this intellectual legacy, Mark Schneider argues that apparitions persist in the modern world despite the rise of science, and that their enduring existence is often unrecognized in modern societies because its domain of existence has changed from the natural to the symbolic.³⁸

Ghosts in Vietnam are not “modern” in the above sense and in that their existence is perceived to be a “natural” phenomenon rather than a cultural symbol. There are people in Vietnam who would view the existence of ghosts as a negative mental problem of *ao tuong* (“illusory thinking”) in a similar way to how John Law projected it, but these are greatly outnumbered by those who instead consider it as part of the nature of being and becoming in the world, that is, as an ontological question. Ghosts are called various terms (*ma, hon, hon ma, bong ma, linh hon, oan hon, bach linh*), translated in literature typically as “lost souls” or “wandering souls,”³⁹ but in popular ritual idiom, *co bac*. The term *co bac* is an interpersonal reference meaning “aunts and uncles,” which, in ritual context, is contrasted to the term *ong ba* (“grandfathers and grandmothers”) that is used to address ancestors and gods worshiped in private homes or inside a communal temple.⁴⁰ These “aunts and uncles” are dead, but not really dead in the sense of being settled in the *am* (the world of the dead); they are not alive, but they still have not left the world of the living. They are neither really there in the world of the dead (*am*) nor here in this world (*duong*), and, at once, are in both.⁴¹ The idea of “wandering” in terms of wandering spirits points to the imagined situation that these spirits are obliged to move between the periphery of this world and the fringe of another world. In short, ghosts are a kind of ontological refugees, close to the status of Ernest Bloch’s *das unheimlich*,⁴² who are uprooted from home, which is to them a place where their memory can be settled.

Someone’s real-life encounter with these uprooted, placeless beings does not necessarily raise a question of credulity among his neighbors and instead would generate intense curiosity on the specific identity of the spirit and the practical implications of the apparition. Ghosts are believed

to have wishes and purposes of their own kind, and they partake in the community life with their own particular vitalities. The spirits of the dead desire, in the mind of the living, the goods and facilities that living people require for their living: food and money, clothing and shoes, and sometimes, a house and a bicycle or Honda. The goods offered to the spirits may include a traveler's bag, if the spirit happens to have been an inter-city retailer during her former life. Sharing wealth and worldly pleasures constitutes popular practice, the primary relationship between humans and spirits. Transaction of goods and services between the dead and the living, in turn, contributes to making the spirits appear more familiar and human-like. This is the case irrespective of whether the recipients are ancestral identities worshiped at home or placeless anonymous ghosts imagined to wander in the outside.

Ghosts in Vietnam are also very much public figures. Most private encounters with them inevitably develop into varying forms of social commemoration. Putting incense sticks on the site of the apparition is already a demonstratively public gesture, for as soon as this takes place, the place transforms into a site of consolation. The story of the apparition and its further historical background will also travel quickly in the area to become public knowledge. No one, except an outsider, will walk carelessly on this place. Each time villagers walk by the site, the incense sticks and the lump of ash force them to recall the story and think about that particular apparition. This may last a few months, or a few years, until the story is resigned to oblivion and the site reverts to being an uncharacteristic ditch. The acknowledgement can vary from incense burning to food and money offering, and at times to a full-scale spirit-consolation ceremony superseded by a ritual specialist. In proportion to the intensity of acknowledgement, the ghost becomes an increasingly integral part of the local history.

The residents in Cam Re occasionally strived to push away some excessively troublesome ghosts from their environment, and these included, during my stay, what people believed to be the ghost of an Algerian conscript from the time of the French War. The local ritual specialist *thay phu thuy* hired for this evacuation walked along the ditch reciting an incantation (*cau chu*) where the Algerian ghost was believed to frequent, and later there was a widely circulated rumor that the foreign ghost, which had the naughty habit of touching the shoulder of young women from behind their back, ran away in panic, in fear of the incantation.⁴³ The Cam Re people were also aware that ghosts of war, in the vicissitude of their existence, might occasionally intrude into the body of a living person and cause critical conditions. Some ghosts, however, had recently transformed to become important communal deities of

considerable power and exercised their power to heal these spirit-caused illnesses or for other purposes. In between these two possibilities and realities, the Cam Re residents related to ghosts as part of the order of their everyday life. The living must not kick away ghosts at the door, the ritual specialist once told me, for it is this inhospitality that often triggers the ghost's intrusive actions into the interior space. Yet, people did not invite them into their domestic interior either, for this would confuse them with the ancestors and gods worshiped at home.⁴⁴ It appeared that ghosts in this place were entitled to the right to exist in the social world of the living, and that local ritual practices consisted of constant negotiations over social and ecological space with the ontologically given, socially distinct group of beings.

The identity of ghosts within this "naturalist" milieu of existence, to quote Claude Lévi-Strauss,⁴⁵ is not the same as that of their modern, symbolic counterpart – the menacing collective phantom of the past that makes the living feel conquered by it unless they are able to conquer it. However, this differentiation should not be taken to mean that ghost beliefs in Vietnam represent some kind of pre-conceptual magical thought, such as that imagined by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, dominated by the fear of death and unaware of the differences between the real and the imaginary.⁴⁶ On the contrary, ghosts as a thing out there, unrelated and oblivious to what the living imagine for them, are as unfamiliar in Vietnam as elsewhere.⁴⁷

The Vietnamese discourses about spirits and ghosts are rich with critical historical meanings, and they gain currency precisely because they are able to relate to pressing moral and political issues in contemporary life.⁴⁸ The phenomenon of war ghosts, in other words, is not outside history but rather reflects on the historically constituted human condition, sometimes in close affinity with what may be described as Hegelian *zeitgeist* – the anticipatory spirit of the historical epoch (see chapter 2). For example, the apparition of the party official's brother mentioned above acted upon the absence of his memory in the domain of kinship, and this relates to the legacy of a civil war/cold war, concealed and unaccounted-for in the official paradigm of a unified "people's war" against a common, foreign enemy. The episode of the spirit family was mainly a family affair, but this is also inseparable from the wider social issues such as the disparity between the huge sacrifice of unarmed civilians to the war and the indifference of the structure of power to their memory. This group of mother and children spirits may appear to be closer to the category of ancestors than to that of ghosts, for their deaths are remembered by the surviving member of the family. For complex reasons I have explained elsewhere, however, the victims of an extreme event such as a village massacre and the dead whose death disrupts the

family's genealogical order have many problems to overcome in order to be accepted as categorical ancestors.⁴⁹ Moreover, the difficulties have been exacerbated by the state's intrusive cultural policy that transformed the domestic ritual space into a memorial for heroic war death. In these contexts, the individual apparitions of the dead are reflections on (and reminders of) the predicaments in the collective memory of the living. If the living enact on the apparitions and proceed to change their social and ritual space to a more accountable form, which these incidents typically develop into, the fantastical actions of spectral identities become interwoven with the transformation in the material world, and the stories about them are no longer "just a story," as Sherry Ortner points out with reference to Sherpa religious history in the Himalayas, but part of the social action and take on the structuring force of the patterns of social life.⁵⁰

The last is an important point for the orientation of the following chapters, one of whose consistent aims is to elicit how people assert their moral and political identities through the imaginary actions of war ghosts. In order to understand how ghosts and humans become partners in social action, however, we need first to come to terms with the conceptual structure that separates the two in the first place. Ghosts in Vietnam are supposed to be attentive to the social affairs in the living world, just as the latter are fond of telling stories about their existence. This relationship of reciprocal attention assumes not only an existential proximity between the two groups of beings but also certain formal distance between their habits. In this scheme, ghosts and humans are interested in each other because they are unlike (as well as like) each other.

Dealing with strangers

Ghosts are near and remote at once. They are physically close but distant in relationship. If the spirits of the dead are close to their living neighbors in both physical and relational terms, they are not ghosts but ancestors. Ghosts in Vietnam can associate with the living in various forms such as economic partnership (see chapter 2) and adoptive kinship (chapter 5), and some of them may transform into powerful communal deities or guardian spirits through these associations. In everyday ritual reality, nevertheless, the *co bac* (ghosts) are defined as beings other than the *ong ba* (ancestors and other intimate, placed supernatural identities).

In sociological literature, the identity that is physically close but relationally far is called "the stranger" and this has been an important concept in the theory of objectivity. The rationale of fieldwork method in anthropology is in fact inseparable from this particular notion.⁵¹ The ethnographer, too, typically takes the ambiguous position of being physically close

to a foreign cultural reality but relationally far from it, and he or she claims to draw an objective picture of the reality based on this particular “bifocal” positioning.⁵² Even if the object of inquiry is a seemingly familiar native milieu, certain conceptual distancing towards it on the part of the inquirer’s self-positioning is commonly practiced.⁵³ The “stranger” is an important concept in the anthropological studies of identity and ethnic relations,⁵⁴ and, more broadly, in the tradition of existential philosophy and critical thought.⁵⁵ More recently, the relevance of this concept has been strongly revived among the political theorists of citizenship.⁵⁶

However, it is mainly with the early twentieth-century German social philosopher Georg Simmel that the concept of “stranger” originally took on its full sociological importance. Simmel argues that the main characteristics of the stranger are mobility and diversity, and that it, as a concept, consists of the constellation of being near and remote at the same time.⁵⁷ The social form of stranger generates positive relations, according to Simmel, because

he is not bound by roots to the particular constituents and partisan dispositions of the group, he confronts all of these with a distinctly “objective” attitude, an attitude that does not signify mere detachment and nonparticipation, but is a distinct structure composed of remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement.⁵⁸

In Vietnamese conception, ghosts are the *ngươi ngoài* – their term for strangers or outsiders – in the world of the dead. They are the products of “bad death,” painful and violent death away from home that the Vietnamese call “death in the street” (*chết đường*).⁵⁹ Ghosts are imagined to suffer from forced mobility, having to wander between the periphery of the other world and the margins of this world without a site to anchor their memory on, just as the strangers in this world move from village to village without finding a place to settle their lives into. They constitute a composite group of individuals with various backgrounds of historical life, just as the strangers in the living world differ from the settlers with their characteristic lack of a homogenous background. These qualities of mobility and diversity distinguish the lives of ghosts from those of ancestors, whose memories of “good death” – the non-violent, ritually appropriated “death at home” (*chết nhà*) – are permanently settled in the social world according to the genealogical and spatial order.

At the center of this concentric conceptual moral order consisting of settled ancestors and placeless ghosts, there is the dexterous body of the ritual actor. The structure of domestic commemorative ritual, in the tradition of the central region, situates the ritual actor in between two separate modes of afterlife and milieus of memory. On the one side lies

the household ancestral shrine, or the equivalent in the community ancestral temple, which keeps the vestiges of family ancestors and household deities. The other side orientates towards what Michael Taussig calls “the open space of death,” which is the imagined life-world of the tragic, non-ancestral, unsettled, and unrelated spirits of the dead.⁶⁰ The beings imagined to populate this space include identities such as the party official’s brother, who should not, in ordinary circumstances, fall into the category of *co bac*. These identities have been uprooted from home and excluded from the sphere of ritual remembrance for political reasons. In this book, I will call them “political ghosts” as a way of distinguishing their status from that of unrelated, anonymous spirits of the dead to which the concept of *co bac* traditionally refers.

The ritual tradition in the central region represents this open space of death and the dwelling environment of *co bac* in the form of a small external shrine, popularly called *khom* in Quang Nam province, which is usually placed at the boundary between the domestic garden and the street. This external shrine for ghosts is in opposition, conceptually as well as spatially, to the in-house shrine for ancestors. Within the dual concentric spatial organization consisting of these two separate sites of worship that represent distinct milieus of memory, the typical ritual action in this region engages with both the house side of *ong ba* and the external, street side of *co bac* through a simple movement of the body. The most habitual act of commemoration consists of making kowtows and offering incense to the house-side ancestors and then turning the body to the opposite side to repeat the action towards the street-wandering ghosts. This two-directional commemorative act, when it takes place in a more formal setting such as during the annual opening ceremony of a community temple (see chapter 4), may be accompanied by a single beat of a gong followed by three or four beats of a drum.

Within this system of dual structure and two-way practice, there emerge two distinct ways to imagine social solidarity. On the house side, we can say that the ritual action affirms the existing solidary relations between the living and the dead in the way that, in Durkheim’s words, “each individual is the double of an ancestor.”⁶¹ The act of worshiping the sacred existence of the dead, in this scheme, is that of rendering sacred the profane entity that the former stands for in relation to the living – the genealogical unity. This symbolic construction of social unity, according to Durkheim, is focused on what he calls “the true spirits” of the place which he contrasts to what the ghosts stand for.⁶²

A ghost . . . is not a true spirit. First, its power is usually limited; second, it does not have definite functions. It is a vagabond being with no clear-cut responsibility,

since the effect of death was to set it outside all the regular structures. In relation to the living, it is demoted, as it were. On the other hand, a spirit always has some sort of power, and indeed it is defined by that power. It has authority over some range of cosmic or social phenomena; it has a more or less precise function to perform in the world scheme.

For Durkheim, the categorical distinction between “the true spirit” and “the ghost” relates to the relative conceptual distance between the soul and the body. He writes, “A soul is not a spirit . . . it is the body’s prisoner. It escapes for good only at death, and even so we have seen with what difficulty that separation is made final.”⁶³ The spirit is the result of a successful separation of the soul from the prison of the body, whereas a failure in this work of mortal separation results in a ghost. The former develops into a “positive cult” through which the living associate with the memory of the dead in socially constructive and regenerative ways, whilst the latter falls to a “negative cult” accompanying a system of pollution taboos and abstinences.

This way of dividing death into two separate moral domains and focusing the analytical attention on the positive spirit of the society (*genius loci*) has set a dominant trend in the subsequent study of religious symbols. Most notably, Maurice Bloch discusses reburial practices in Madagascar in this light and describes their custom of separating ancestral bones from the decomposed bodies as a core symbolic gesture in the making of a social order.⁶⁴ The bones cleaned from the flesh represent a sacred spirit removed from the profane body and their assembly in the collective ancestral tomb creates “the society of ancestors” – an ideal social form in the collective consciousness of the living.⁶⁵ Bloch later changes this idiom of symbolic removal to a stronger language of “symbolic conquest” as he tries to advance a general theory of human religious experience. He argues with reference to male initiation rituals that the logic of these rituals is to have the ancestral spirit *conquer* the body of the novice members of a social group.⁶⁶ The initiates obtain the rights for full membership in the society by becoming the double of ancestors and this is achieved through the ritual enactment of them renouncing their profane bodily substance in exchange for the reception of the transcendental ancestral spirit. It is important to note that the idiom of symbolic conquest works in two ways. It describes how the soul of the dead transforms into a true spirit on the one hand and how this pure spirit in turn makes a new bondage with the living on the other. The idiom postulates that a social order is created on the basis of this war against profane substances imagined to take place on both sides of the cosmological threshold.

Ghosts are an uninvited category to the paradigm of symbolic conquest. In the language of the rites of passage, they are perpetually liminal

beings that are neither entirely separated from the world of mortals nor yet incorporated into the socially defined world of true spirits.⁶⁷ They exist outside the social structure, according to Durkheim, and have no clearly defined social functions. With this background, it is not surprising to find that ghosts have played no significant part, in contrast to ancestors, in the advancement of a social theory. Bloch notes that the people in Madagascar fear dying away from home, which prevents the possibility of a post-mortem symbolic transformation, and that they are aware of the existence of such death in their living environment.⁶⁸ These “bad deaths” and their symbolic traces are irrelevant to the analytical project, however, because of the assumption that they are strangers to the social structure.

Shifting our analytical perspective closer to Simmel’s, however, we begin to question if the absence of ghosts can be justified in the composition of a social theory. Simmel’s strangers are ideologically outside a given social order but they are existentially close to the social process within the order. The identity is the peripheral background in which the symbols of social centrality come to the foreground. Like the interplay of figure and ground in the theory of metaphor,⁶⁹ “the stranger” in Simmel’s sociological imagination is an integral element in the symbolic construction of social identity.⁷⁰

Life holds the boundary fast, stands on this side of it – and in the same act stands on the other side of it; the boundary is viewed simultaneously from within and from without. The two aspects belong equally to its confirmation. Just as the boundary itself partakes both of “this side” and of “that side,” so the unified act of life includes both the state of being bounded and the transcending of the boundary, despite the fact that this seems to present a logical contradiction.

In this alternative scheme, alterity is in the making of identity, not outside of it, and all forms of exclusion are at once “inclusive exclusions,” meaning that the definition of the outsider affects the constitution of the interior social order.⁷¹ Regarding Bloch’s “society of ancestors,” we may say that the attempt to describe this society without an equivalent descriptive attention to the crowd of ghosts that surrounds it is like claiming the incomplete outline of a figure drawn on the raw background of a canvas as a finished portrait.⁷² The society of ancestors, as with other more secular societies, has foreign relations as well as domestic politics. We may not ignore these external relations in painting a social order, or justify doing so with the convenient idiom of conquest.

The absence of ghosts in a social theory is a product of the theory’s preoccupation with functional values and structural order.⁷³ In addition, the exclusion of ghosts from the symbolic construction of sacred social order relates to a problematic definition of the sacred. The Latin term

sacer, as Giorgio Agamben explains it, has the double meaning of “sacred” and “accursed,” and it incorporates both the holy spirit of moral unity and the spirits excluded and banned from the unity.⁷⁴ Arnold van Gennep similarly notes, “For a great many peoples a stranger is sacred, endowed with magico-religious powers, and supernaturally benevolent or malevolent.”⁷⁵ In Edward Casey’s phenomenology of place, the *genius loci* (“the spirit of the place”; Durkeim’s “true spirits”) should be distinguished from the *anima loci* (“the soul of the place”) but the two, nevertheless, cannot be considered separately. In this conception of the sacred, the negative cult of ghosts is mutually constitutive of the positive cult of ancestors and we cannot imagine the symbolic values of ancestors without placing them in a wider relational structure with those of ghosts.⁷⁶

Ghosts and the state

However, there is one domain of sacred symbols where the absence of ghosts becomes empirically real. Ghosts in contemporary Vietnam do not have a coherent existence: they dwell in the traditional cultural habitat in the periphery of ancestors, but this habitat exists within a wider modern and secular political society that negates their naturalist existence altogether. In the latter, the ghosts of war face a strong disciplinary force that strives to efface their traces from the spirituality of social unity.

Accordingly, the Vietnamese take on two distinctive behavioral patterns when they are engaged in the act of ritual commemoration. When the act concerns the family and community ancestors, their bodies are mobile and their gestures are dexterous. They move between the place of ancestors and the space for ghosts and perform the act of worship on both sides in a gracious, rhythmical manner. When the occasion is for the public commemoration of war heroes, on the contrary, the body of the ritual participant tends to be rigid and upright, as if he or she were a well-disciplined soldier standing in line for an inspection, eyes fixed singularly on the neo-gothic memorial tower throughout the proceeding. The participant may kowtow to the monument for war martyrs and offer a few joss sticks on behalf of them, in the same way that he or she prays to ancestors at home. Yet, this ritual action, unlike its equivalent in the domestic setting, must not be replicated towards the opposite side of the public shrine. Ghosts of war are made truly invisible in this particular field of ritual actions. In this politicized, centrist landscape of memory, the sacred spirit of the dead can exist alone without relating to the contrary background of vital ghosts and the human body is deprived of what Robert Hertz calls symbolic *ambidexterity* – the capacity to go

beyond the antithesis of right and left, inside and outside, and the moral hierarchy of “good death” and “bad death.”⁷⁷

The state commemorative rituals boast a wealth of speeches by the officials, and flower bouquets and banners donated from different committees and organizations decorate these occasions with vibrant colors and a pleasant perfume. Traditional commemorative food offering is not allowed at these serious events, although nowadays this is changing in some places. Bottled soft drinks tend to be permitted because these objects are recognized as clean and neat compared to homemade commemorative food and they are also perceived to represent a new future rather than the old backward past. The officials offer flowers to the patriotic tower and shake hands with each other. These people turn around sometimes and face the opposite side of the monument. They do so, however, in order to give an instructive speech to the mass, not to extend the gesture of remembrance to the world beyond the chosen memory of the dead. I am aware that some Vietnamese officials can easily do both the single-sided and the two-way bilateral commemoration. They give a well-crafted speech at a hero monument and later in the evening watch, approvingly, their wives kowtowing to the errant spirits.⁷⁸ Despite this growing penetration of popular ethos into the official habits, the absence of ghosts still defines the difference between the state and popular ritual patterns, and war death in the statecraft and that in social practice. This difference is conceived of a hierarchy of value from the perspective of the state. The mistrust and fear of unidentified and unclassified beings reinforces the state’s adherence to a particular class of war death. The state worships selfless heroes and altruistic martyrs, and in order to perform this worship, the system has to select regenerative death from the mass of war death based on a scale of virtue. The death that has done a meritorious service to the nation should be singled out and preserved for the future.⁷⁹ Thus we may say that what James Scott calls “seeing like the state,” in the sphere of war commemoration, is equal to seeing no wandering ghosts of war in the field of mass war death.⁸⁰

The state’s rejection of war ghosts is understandable, and Vietnam is far from alone in this forward-looking cult of the war dead.⁸¹ Any modern nation-state would require a hierarchy of value in war death for its legitimacy.⁸² The nature of the ghost world is such that it is difficult to introduce this hierarchy into it. The ghosts of war do not go along with any organized effort to classify war death to a system. Vietnamese ritual interactions with ghosts do not discriminate between foreign ghosts and the Vietnamese or between the heroic death and the tragic death. The difference between combatants and civilians, clear in the official media, becomes marginal and sometimes almost irrelevant in popular ghost

narratives and beliefs. Heroes and villains mix together and demonstrate different identities from those imposed by the official discourse. Among the spirits of fallen combatants, the record of to which side of the war they sacrificed their life becomes a minor issue compared to the suffering of the violent death that all experienced and experienced in different ways. Moreover, the popular ghost narratives do not even discriminate against the enemy. Don Lam claims, “Our cult of deities is an open system marked by some democracy. It admits both female and male divinities, young and old, of aristocratic or plebeian origin, even the souls of beggars, thieves and enemy soldiers falling in battle in our country.”⁸³ Indeed, I observed that the world of *co bac* adheres to a principle of openness: the ghost of a revolutionary militiaman and that of an unknown soldier who fought on the opposite side of the war shared the same village footpath as their favorite site of apparition; when the My Lai villagers made their ritual prayers and offerings to ghosts, they did not discriminate between the recipients of their gift on the basis of nationality – whether they are the ghosts of foreign combatants killed in action or those of Vietnamese civilian casualties of war.

The eminent Vietnamese poet Pham Duy wrote a song called *Chin si vo danh* (Unknown Soldiers) in 1958, dedicated to the fallen soldiers of the French War:⁸⁴

In the daylight, the sight of a troop appears in the distance
 The mountain trees are quiet to listen to the heroes
 The echo of their drum thunders the quiet hill in the dusk
 In a dreadful afternoon, go to the foggy front
 Numerous spirits of dead gather and talk in the voice of the wind
 These are the dead, unknown, Vietnamese soldiers who remember the
 enemy
 Leaving home, they promised to fight for the motherland
 Keeping the tradition of struggle against the foreign invaders
 Their courage bears victory, their anger frightens the invaders
 With the hallowed memory of their blood
 Their bodies are scattered everywhere, one on top of the other building
 a wall
 In the dusk, their ghosts come and go like swallows
 These are the *chin si vo danh*.⁸⁵

The idea that unknown fallen soldiers “wander between two worlds” is familiar to us as well as to the Vietnamese. It was popular in Europe in the aftermath of the Great War.⁸⁶ Nor is the idea that dead soldiers remember their enemy strange to us. In the midst of the trench warfare, Germany propagated the notion that, “the dead will rise again to inspire the living and the nation for which they sacrificed their lives is strong and immutable.”⁸⁷

The rendering of national unity as a spiritual unity between the living and the dead,⁸⁸ however, does not extend to the horizon of ghosts. Ghosts in Vietnam constitute a highly heterogeneous society as a whole, and, related to this element of social diversity in the collective existence of war ghosts, there is a pronounced notion in Vietnamese beliefs about the ghost's individual "memory" (*ky uc*) – the idea that the transition to death, or another life, brings with it characteristic amnesia. A popular Vietnamese saying deciphers, "There is no enmity in the cemetery," and the events described in this book will demonstrate how the ghosts of war "do not give a damn about wars," as the body collector says in Bao Ninh's story introduced earlier, and "forget" (*quen*) the political origins of the war that brought about their death. This idea that the dead *forget* war, or remember it differently from the living, gripped my attention throughout my research stays in Vietnam. Whereas the pain of violent death and the pain of separation from loved ones are not forgotten, according to this scheme, the cause and the intention of the war that brought about their death are left in oblivion. Later we will return to this theme and see how war death means, in this work of memory, the death of the very ideology of war (see chapter 7).

The above overview of ghosts of war in Vietnam has raised a set of issues. Among them are the conceptual moral hierarchy of death, the religious politics of modern statecraft, and ghosts as a cultural category or a historical allegory. These issues represent the wider context within which we shall assess the phenomenon of ghosts and ritual intimacy with these "invisible neighbors" in everyday life. In order to discuss them further, however, it is necessary first to come to terms with the historical material basis of the phenomenon, that is, the war-induced displacement of human lives. As mentioned earlier, ghosts in Vietnam are evidence (and, at the same time, witnesses) of violent death in displacement, and it follows that their perceived vitality in the social world is thus inseparable from the enduring materiality of displaced mass death in the living environment. The material culture of mass death and the moral symbolic hierarchy of death are inter-related fields of inquiry. Now we will turn to the materiality of "death in the street" and explore the two ways that the tragic, ghost-engendering condition manifests in postwar Vietnamese reality: many unknown dead existing near home, on the one hand, and, on the other, many dead missing from home burial.