

# The tombs of wind (Những ngôi mộ gió): the enigmas of empty graves, encrypted archives and porous bones

Tâm T. T. Ngô  NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW)  
t.ngo@niod.knaw.nl

## Abstract

This article details the remarkable involvement of the Vietnamese population in finding and naming half a million Vietnamese missing-in-action (MIAs). The secrecy that characterised Vietnam's military operations during wartime, and the overlapping claims and therefore control of the MIAs by the army and civil administrations in the aftermath of the wars, are the reasons behind unsolvable quagmires in Vietnam's current war-accounting effort. The myriad of state actors involved who often work at cross purposes raises the public's awareness of the incompetence of the state and calls for the participation of non-state actors. The latest potential avenue to solve the MIA problem, DNA forensics, is facing all kinds of challenges, such as the quality of the bone samples and the scale of the effort. War accounting has therefore become an open arena of public engagement and popular dissent, while significantly transforming the cult of the dead in Vietnam.

**Key words:** commemorative politics, war accounting, Vietnamese MIAs, DNA-based identification, vernacular forensics

## Introduction

The wars that Vietnam fought in the twentieth century claimed millions of Vietnamese lives. An estimated 1.2 million soldiers died while fighting for the Vietnamese communist state and were recognised and honoured as martyrs. Like many modern nation-states, Vietnam reserves a central place in its political agenda for what George Mosse described as the state-sponsored 'cult of fallen soldiers'.<sup>1</sup> Deaths in the line of service have been hailed as the most sacred, ultimate and heroic sacrifice, which the nation has vowed to 'remember forever' (*đời đời nhớ ơn*). Since 1947, when 27 July was chosen as Vietnam's Annual Day for Wounded and Fallen Soldiers (*Ngày thương binh liệt sỹ*), the postcolonial state of Vietnam has created countless other memorial holidays, war monuments and military cemeteries to render the death of soldiers as a symbol of national revolutionary martyrdom. This temporal and spatial memorial infrastructure, as Mark P. Bradley aptly notes, 'functions both as shrines of national worship and as physical symbols



of superior claims made by the state on the memories of those who died in battles.<sup>2</sup> As such, the cult of fallen soldiers in Vietnam is no different from those promoted by European states and the United States in the interwar period. Yet one element that distinguishes Vietnam from these other, Western examples is the extent to which the Vietnamese state struggled to monopolise its control over the memory of its fallen soldiers. Thanks to the power and resilience of ancestral worship and other spiritual traditions that emphasise positioning them within proper kinship and spiritual orders,<sup>3</sup> Vietnamese fallen soldiers, especially those in the category of martyrs, always have been the subjects of overlapping claims between state and family. This explains why, today, war cemeteries and memorial infrastructures shape Vietnamese landscapes while variegated forms of state ceremonies and private rituals to honour the war dead characterise the social life of post-war Vietnam.

Missing and unidentified are the common fate of millions of Vietnamese war dead. To find and identify them has been a challenging but ceaseless effort that has involved Vietnamese society as a whole. The struggles to account for the missing and unidentified Vietnamese civilians and members of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN, South Vietnam; see the articles by Alex-Thái Dinh Võ and Đạt Nguyễn respectively in the current issue<sup>4</sup>) are beyond the scope of this article, and my focus here is exclusively on the work to account for those recognised as martyrs by the Government of Vietnam. This category of war dead includes mostly soldiers from Northern and North-Central Vietnam who enlisted in the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), the armed force of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, North Vietnam). In addition, it also includes fallen members of the DRV-sponsored National Liberation Front. Since 2013, civilians who died while serving in the DRV's war effort, such as militia and female volunteers and members of the DRV's Youth Shock Brigades, may also be included in this category, but on a case-by-case basis.

The total number of missing and unidentified Vietnamese martyrs is estimated to be half a million. That number has given rise to the remarkable involvement of the entire population, employed in a variety of vernacular techniques and practices to assist in locating and identifying these missing martyrs. In this article, I argue that the secrecy that characterised Vietnam's military operations during wartime, and the overlapping claim and therefore control of the martyrs by the army and civil administrations in the aftermath of the wars, have contributed significantly to the unsolvable quagmires in Vietnam's current war-accounting effort. A myriad of state actors involved in these efforts have often ended up working at cross purposes, fueling in turn the public's perception of the incompetence of the state and calls for the participation of non-state actors. The latest potential avenue for solving the MIA problem is DNA testing, which has great attraction for bureaucrats and the public alike because of its scientific outlook and extraordinary promise. In this instance, however, science promises much but cannot deliver the desired results in the near to mid-term, given the various intervening factors, such as the quality of the bone samples and the scale of the effort. War accounting has

therefore become an open arena of public engagement and popular dissent while significantly transforming the cult of the dead in Vietnam.

### The tombs of wind

Corporal of Special Forces Dương Văn Sáo was killed in action in 1967. In the fifty years that his body was not recovered, in his home town in Hải Phòng province there have been three graves on which his name was inscribed. The first grave was built in 1972, under the shadow of a starfruit tree in the garden behind his parents' home on the day that they received a crumpled piece of paper called *Giấy Báo Tử* (Death Certificate). In 1976, a year after reunification, the government built the second grave in the commune's martyr cemetery. On that occasion, in a solemn ceremony, they handed the family a *Bằng Tổ Quốc Ghi Công* (Certificate of the Fatherland's Acknowledgement of Your Merit). In 2008, after a decade-long search under the guidance of various telepaths specialising in finding martyrs' remains, his siblings and relatives brought home an urn which was supposed to contain martyr Sáo's remains. The remains, they said, were retrieved from a tomb in a war cemetery in Quảng Trị province, in central Vietnam. During an elaborate ceremony, with a brass band, a parade of veterans in military uniforms and lengthy speeches by representatives of the local authorities, the urn, respectfully draped with the Vietnamese national flag, was interred in a big concrete tomb in the newly inaugurated Martyr Cemetery of An Lão District. The widow of martyr Sáo spent sixty million đồng (roughly 6,000 dollars then), wired by her son from Germany via Western Union, to hold a traditional funeral for three days. A few years later, however, after suffering various misfortunes, the nieces and nephews who were involved in the exhumation and reburial of martyr Sáo's remains confessed that there were no bones of their uncle in the urn that had they brought back, but only a few handfuls of blackened soil dug up from a war cemetery in Quảng Trị. The third grave with martyr Sáo's name on it also turned out to be empty.

While the remains of martyr Sáo continued to be missing, all three empty graves dedicated to him have been respectfully cared for by his relatives and local authorities. These graves are known in Vietnam as the Graves of Wind (*những ngôi mộ gió*).<sup>5</sup> Also called 'graves to evoke the souls' (*mộ chiêu hồn*), these tombs traditionally were set up by family when a loved one died but the body was missing, such as in case of death at sea, drowning in rivers or when a body was not retrievable, for example, due to death far away from home in warfare. Sometimes, earthen dolls were made and interred in the graves. After a set of ritual ceremonies and specific incantations, the soul of the missing is called to enter and reside in the grave. Whether humble earthen mounds or flashy tombs, these empty graves are believed to provide a place for the missing to return to and for their family to mourn and commemorate them. On his death anniversary, martyr Sáo's widow would light incense and offer cooked food on a table set up in front of the grave in the garden that she inherited from her parents-in-law. The starfruit tree was long gone. The garden now has pomelo and lemon trees. On the same day, martyr Sáo's older

brother and nephews would ride their motorbikes to the martyr cemeteries in the commune and the district to sweep the other two graves and make offerings there.

Martyr Sáo's situation as an MIA soldier who has an elusive presence in multiple graves is far from unique in Vietnam. Some missing martyrs have even more graves in their name, including those built by their military units.<sup>6</sup> The specific reasons for the existence of each grave are too many and too diverse for the scope of this article, but, in general, it has to do with different levels of coming to terms with the human costs of war, from family to the state and the military. In the face of decades of warfare and the uncertain fate of hundreds of thousands of missing martyrs, Vietnamese families have worked on their grief, and some vent their anger about the loss of their loved ones at the side of these empty 'graves of wind'. They are an instance of unofficial, *vernacular* forms of war accounting that are rooted in culturally inflected ways of dealing with losses that have no material presence but can be given a place, a location in the land (see the Introduction in Part I of this special issue). The forms of vernacular accounting unfolding in Vietnam are situated in the geographical and social connection with the land, which is at once deeply personal and highly transferable. When veterans, families of the missing and spirit mediums (who lead civil society initiatives that employ vernacular methods to locate and identify the missing) make knowledge claims, they do so by asserting the connection between practitioners and nature, as well as by their moral commitment to find the missing instead of an abstract and exact scientific protocol. On the one hand, *mộ gió* symbolises the vernacular and grassroots war accounting in Vietnam. 'A grave for a fallen' is a symbolic action shared by families and different levels of state authorities to give presence to the absence. On the other hand, the excessive presence of these empty graves becomes an emotional and political symbol that has subversive potency.<sup>7</sup> It reminds society at all levels of the excessive human cost of war, half a million fallen soldiers with bodies or names missing. The emptiness of these graves, therefore, points to the failure of the post-war state to recover the bodies and the names of these fallen soldiers. This failure is not attributed to corruption or bureaucratic indifference. Rather, it is the inefficiency and incapacity of the state in view of the great promises that have been made that lead to an erosion of trust between citizen and state.

Knowledge about *mộ gió* is so common in Vietnam that it does not even seem to be worth the attention of the state, at least not until recently. A rare mention was that of the four empty tombs for Vietnam's former prime minister Võ Văn Kiệt and his family in Ho Chi Minh City Martyr Cemetery. In 1966, his wife and two infant sons travelled by boat to visit General Võ Văn Kiệt, then secretly operating in the mangrove forest outside of Saigon. Their boat was sighted and bombed by an American helicopter squad. Although the general had his fighters dive and search for months afterward, no remains of his loved ones were found. Later, when he became perhaps the most important politician in Vietnam, ceaseless effort and influence still could not carry the search any further. He had three small graves built on the bank of the Saigon River. When he passed away, Vietnam's central government honoured him with the highest state ceremony and interred his remains in a tomb in Ho Chi Minh City Martyr Cemetery. Next to his tomb were the empty

tombs for his wife, the two infant sons and yet another tomb with the remains of his oldest son, killed in action in 1972. Several years later, his only surviving daughter gained the Vietnamese state's permission to execute his will. She exhumed his remains from the state tomb, had them cremated and then scattered them over the river where his wife died. Premier Võ Văn Kiệt is the only Vietnamese head of state whose tomb is a tomb of wind.

Since the start of its cult of the fallen soldier, the Vietnamese state reserves for itself the monopoly of managing and caring for those fallen who are recognised as heroes and martyrs (*các anh hùng, liệt sỹ*). In 2011, however, the Vietnamese state began a nationwide programme to promote 'the socialisation of gratitude work' (*xã hội hóa công tác đền ơn đáp nghĩa*).<sup>8</sup> This is the latest trend in the 'socialisation' series started in the late 1990s. Socialisation is an attempt by the Vietnamese state to mobilise resources for social services that it is supposed to provide but has failed to do so, by drawing on cultural and socialist repertoires. As Minh Nguyen acutely puts it, 'In a country that bears the name "the Socialist Republic of Vietnam", socialisation represents a rallying point of both material and moral resources for the state's agenda and its contradictory goals of maintaining legitimacy while unloading responsibilities onto "all the people"'.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the other social services, caring for the fallen is one that the Vietnamese state is most reluctant to relinquish. This explains why it took more than a decade for the authorities to extend this call for 'the socialisation of gratitude work'. 'Socialisation of gratitude work' is an acknowledgement by the state that it cannot adequately provide for both the living and the dead patriots. This project quickly opened a space for society to lay claim to the fallen, for surviving combatants to unburden themselves of their survival guilt, for the families to seize back part of the control of the search for their missing loved ones and for private businesses to accumulate political and karmic credit. Answering this call, individuals and companies competed with one another to donate a grave, or sometimes even an entire cemetery, to honour the fallen. This 'socialisation of gratitude work' allows the moral citizen of neoliberal Vietnam to participate in the care for those who made a sacred sacrifice. It is considered a chance to repay the debt of being able to live in peace and to gain social and political karma. The booming grave industry and spiritual economy for the dead since the 2000s are the byproducts of this development, with far-reaching consequences for both the state and the families of Vietnamese fallen in the current war-accounting effort. For example, during the construction of the two national cemeteries in Quảng Trị, the Trường Sơn Cemetery and Route No. 9 National Cemetery, the demand by both the state and private donors to have all the grave quotas filled (nearly 20,000 graves) led to huge fraud and corruption. During a criminal trial in 1991, two high-ranking officers of the Quảng Trị provincial office of the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) received death penalties, while forty other officers were punished with life or multiple-year prison sentences for the crime of faking thousands of martyr graves, filling them with animal bones or soil or just leaving them empty. Information about how these fake graves have been dealt with was repressed by the state to prevent further scandal at the time.<sup>10</sup> This led to a bigger problem since 2013, when state officers and families came to collect bone

samples for DNA testing. It was not uncommon for the graves they opened turn out to be empty tombs of wind.

Similarly, in 2013, a massive legal scandal about fraud was committed by Master Thúy. Master Thúy, a famous telepath, had guided thousands of families in their search for and exhumation of the remains of their missing and had supplied both the army and MOLISA with several hundred remains. Witnesses declared that they were mostly fake human remains and Master Thúy confessed. Most of the parties involved with the work of Master Thúy backed away and the information about the graves that he helped the state to create disappeared, to problematic end – that is, many families who followed Master Thúy's instructions to exhume remains that they know now not to belong to their loved ones are facing their worst spiritual nightmare and the legal consequences of illegal possession of human remains.

### Encrypted archives

One of the significant problems in locating the MIAs is that the army records have remained secret for a long time, for allegedly strategic reasons. This is the problem that led to martyr Sáo's remains being unaccounted for. During a bus ride between Hai Phong and Hanoi in 2018, martyr Sáo's nephew Hệ met the retired Colonel Nhân. A veteran and member of the Association for the Support of Martyr Families, Colonel Nhân has helped many families in Hải Phòng and Hanoi provinces to find their missing martyrs by matching military information with the civil administrative listing of war martyrs. After a glance at martyr Sáo's death certificate, Colonel Nhân quickly deciphered the coded name of martyr Sáo's fighting squad and the region where they operated. Following a logic of deduction, Colonel Nhân concluded that Tây Ninh province should be the place of his burial, not Quảng Trị, a thousand kilometres away. 'You have got the wrong body. No way your martyr's remains can travel such a distance', she exclaimed to Hệ when he said that they had followed the telepath's instruction to search for remains in Quảng Trị. Continuing her detective work, by tracing the list of graves in war cemeteries in Tây Ninh province, a few months later Colonel Nhân found a grave in Dương Minh Châu cemetery in Tây Ninh. All the information on the grave, such as the name of the natal village, names of parents, dates of conscription, etc., matched the profile of martyr Sáo. One tiny detail about the name of the martyr, Dương Văn Sáu as opposed to Dương Văn Sáo, explains why he was lost in the state's record and why the whereabouts of his remains could not be properly communicated to his family during all those years. In December 2019, with the help of Colonel Nhân, the family succeeded in rectifying the information and can now officially claim the grave. This is the fourth grave under martyr Sáo's name, and the only one that possibly contains remains.

All the documents that notified martyr Sáo's family of his death contain a single piece of information 'Place of death: The Southern Front' (*Nơi hi sinh: Mặt Trận Phía Nam*). The name of his army unit is coded, while the location of the first burial is 'unit's cemetery' (*nhĩa trang đơn vị*). These documents, often beautifully and flowerily written but scantily informative, explained why martyr Sáo's family had

been groping in the dark, searching for the possible whereabouts of his remains, until they met Colonel Nhân.

Hundreds of thousand of other Vietnamese MIA families are less fortunate, left to wonder where, exactly, in that massive territory called the Southern Front, nearly 200,000 square kilometres below the 17th parallel, not to mention part of Laos and Cambodia, their sons and daughters were first laid to rest. To date, more than 200,000 Vietnamese fallen soldiers are listed as martyrs whose remains have not been recovered (*liệt sỹ chưa qui tập được hài cốt*), while a little more than 300,000 martyr remains have been recovered and reburied in the state's designated war cemeteries but only partially identified.<sup>11</sup> The partially identified martyrs are also listed as missing, as a 'martyr with incomplete profile' (*liệt sỹ còn thiếu thông tin*), and therefore the location of their graves is not communicated to their family, as in the case of martyr Sáo. Altogether, the families of half a million Vietnamese MIAs have been waiting for information about their possible whereabouts. Often the paper trails of the missing come to a dead end or were mixed up, as in the cases of enthusiastic donations of empty graves for the missing mentioned above, or in the thousands of cases of families and their spiritual guides claiming graves and retrieving remains on their own with or without notifying the authorities. In any case, the physical clues are also quickly disappearing. With time, the numbers of witnesses (such as fellow combatants or locals who possess knowledge of the first location of burial) are dwindling. Economic development, as well as natural disaster and climate change in the last two decades, have also quickly altered the terrain and erased visible traces of formal battlefields and burial grounds.

The encrypted nature of MIA documentation in Vietnam was for a long time explained away by 'the harsh condition of war and the need to protect military secrets during wartime'.<sup>12</sup> Such an excuse was no longer accepted in the 2010s. In 2013, Premier Nguyễn Tấn Dũng signed and launched two national strategic actions – Project 150 to use DNA forensic technology to identify the recovered but unidentified remains of some 300,000 martyrs, and Project 1237 to use war-accounting methods to search for and recover some 200,000 remains of martyrs to rebury them in state-designated martyr cemeteries.<sup>13</sup> While Project 150 has quickly gained national and international attention,<sup>14</sup> as it stipulated Vietnam's intention to import and apply state-of-the-art forensic technologies for war dead identification, Project 1237 received much less attention in national and international media. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) is the main manager of Project 1237, with the most important objective being to build a database of Vietnamese MIAs and make it open to the public. This technically means that the army has to declassify and decode information that it once classified as secret, such as information about wartime troop deployments, maps of battlefields and first burial grounds, and graves of martyrs currently administered by different organisations, sectors and people both inside and beyond Vietnam – all in a centralised database. It is in this work that numerous conflicts between the army and the populace have arisen.

Between 2013 and 2017, instead of collaboration, there has been competition between Project 150 and Project 1237, which mainly reflects the overlapping claims on the martyrs by the army (MOD) and by the civil administration (MOLISA). To



solve this problem, in 2018, Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc issued Decision No. 515/QĐ-TTg on consolidating the National Steering Board 515 (NSB 515). The purpose of this decision was to merge Project 1237 (on the search and collection of martyrs' remains) and Project 150 (on the identification of martyrs' remains). NSB 515's main task is to consolidate and improve the capacities and effectiveness of the current search, recovery and identification of martyrs' remains. The board can draw support from four ministries –MOD, MOLISA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC).

The second main task of the board is to complete the information databases of martyrs or the location of their graves or first burial. For this purpose, the board promotes communication and coordination between organisations and individuals both at home and abroad, particularly war veterans and the liaison boards of units, in actively detecting and providing information on martyrs and graves of martyrs. The second step is to create a comprehensive system of maps of the potential search areas. The brutality and length of the Vietnam War, during which the accounting by both military and civil administration was full of errors, sometimes on purpose, makes this an arduous task. Lists of martyrs are often incomplete, lacking crucial information such as the place of first burial, documentation of exhumation and reburials. Witnesses' memories have become blurred with time and with the fast-changing landscape of Vietnam. To aid the task of mapping burial locations, by the end of 2019, the NSB had distributed 14 million information collection forms, of which 13 million were returned, with 80,000 containing useful information.<sup>15</sup> Also, within the framework of NSB 515, international collaboration was encouraged and strengthened, especially with agencies and individuals from the United States. The end goal is to complete profiles of martyrs with all relevant information for search, recovery and identification and to make them available to the public via the website [www.thongtinlietsy.gov.vn](http://www.thongtinlietsy.gov.vn). In January 2022, a concluding meeting on the work of NSB 515 from 2013 to 2022 provided the following information:

To date, the profile of 150,379 martyrs has been completed and uploaded to the website (95.47% of target). Between August 2018 and August 2019, 208 martyr remains have been recovered, among whom thirty-four were identified. In Cambodia, eighteen recovery trips have been made, 9,653 martyrs remains have been repatriated among whom 516 are identified.<sup>16</sup>

These public demonstrations of the NSB 515's war-accounting work have failed to impress many martyrs' families. The search programme now transferred from MOD to the Department of National Devotees of MOLISA is nearly impossible to use, as the database/software are inadequate and ineffective.<sup>17</sup> I have been trying with many martyrs' families to use it, without much result. Lately, after each failed search, the user receives the message: 'Currently, we have basically completed the collection and verification of information and photographs of all martyr cemeteries nationwide, except a small number of graves in cemeteries currently



under renovation.’ Without accessibility to information, martyrs’ families return to the usual channels of making personal visits to the offices of the Department of National Devotees (DONĐ) and the Policy Offices of the Army. Usually staffed only with one or two personnel and equipped with pre-digital-age facilities, these offices are the places where martyrs’ families endure the worst form of bureaucracy and the longest wait. Since 2010, the Vietnam Martyr Family Support Association was set up as a civil society organisation to share some of the tasks of providing information and guiding the families of martyrs in their search. The association has branches all over Vietnam and has gained a prominent public profile, while its members have achieved respectable results. Its strength is the large network of veterans that it mobilises and its unlimited access to the army archive. Its members, people like Colonel Nhân, are often skilful in mediating between the searching families and the army bureaucracy. But this also explains why most of their members prefer to rely on the method of matching military information to verify the identity of a martyr (Project 1237) and are less inclined to recommend the use of DNA testing (Project 150).

Lately, the internet and social media, especially Facebook, have been game-changers for martyrs’ families. Today several dozens of Facebook groups, some with tens of thousands of members, formed around the mutual interest in searching for martyr remains, have become popular channels for families to access information and verify the partial information they have. Even when their search yields no result, the empathy and support they receive from these groups are soothing and meaningful. One of the most popular Facebook groups is Người Đưa Đò – Kết nối thông tin mộ liệt sỹ (The Boatman – Connecting information about martyr graves), founded by Mr Nguyễn Sỹ Hồ. A high school teacher of mathematics, Mr Hồ learned from his own thirty-one-year-long search for the remains of his older brother, martyr Nguyễn Đăng Khoa, a hard lesson about the pain of losing a loved one to war and even more the frustration of trying to find him in the monstrous state bureaucracy of war accounting. In the late 1990s, he began to devise a method of connecting information about martyr graves, verifying the information registered by the state and communicating that to martyrs’ families. His methods have helped many families to defy the odds and establish the missing links so that they can narrow down their search to graves with partial information that could be those of their family’s martyr. His logical and deductive skills as a mathematics teacher came in handy. In the 2000s, with the increasing availability and affordability of computer and internet connections, Mr Hồ started to digitalise his information in a database, which he shared on the internet<sup>18</sup> and, since 2013, widely on the Facebook group of the same name. Today the group has more than 32,000 members with thousands of active volunteers who follow Mr Hồ’s method of personally visiting state war cemeteries to take photos of martyr graves. The photos are sent to a designated group of volunteers who carefully process the information and upload it to a centralised database that is search friendly. Another volunteer group helps Mr Hồ to create a digital headstone for each grave, which is modelled after the state’s official martyr grave headstone. This work helps the information about a grave to appear more familiar to searching families and

is at the same time a gesture of respect to the fallen. Being honoured in 2017 by the Vietnam Record Organization with the title ‘The person who took the largest number of photographs of martyr grave headstones in Vietnam’, Mr Hồ is lovingly known by his volunteers and many families as a ‘silent boatman’ (*Người đưa đò thầm lặng*), once as a teacher who ferried thousands of students to the harbour of knowledge and now as a Charon who ferries the souls of thousands of Vietnamese martyrs home to their searching families.

The work that people like Colonel Nhàn and Mr Hồ are doing resembles what scholars have described as citizen-led searches and citizen science projects that work to uncover the missing and disappeared persons in many Latin American contexts or along the Mexico–US border.<sup>19</sup> What differs here is that their work highlights that what are missing are not only the fallen soldiers but also the proper and effective care that the state promised to them. By volunteering, each with their own special skills, life experiences and commitment, citizens like Colonel Nhàn and Mr Hồ insert themselves into the front of the battle to rescue the Vietnamese missing from their secondary disappearance due to bureaucratic, social and spiritual mismanagement. Their work is especially important when nascent efforts in forensic genetics, which has recently been brought into Vietnam War accounting and has already dominated public attention and imagination as the ‘gold standard’, hits dead ends, as I detail in the next section. The old technologies of knowing and seeing possessed by people like Colonel Nhàn and Mr Hồ have helped many Vietnamese families to come closer to the truth about their missing loved ones. In the case of US efforts to identify recovered but unknown Korean War remains, the limitation of genetic forensics was in part overcome by the contribution of knowledge and systematic review of historical records by Korean War veterans and surviving kin.<sup>20</sup> In the case of Vietnam, the knowledge processed by civil society actors like Colonel Nhàn and Mr Hồ is vital for targeted sampling of graves for DNA testing and of families for reference samples. However, the overlapping claims, and therefore control, over the fallen soldiers make it hard to tell whether such knowledge and expertise will be effectively employed and incorporated by genetic scientists and state bureaucrats to optimise their DNA-based forensics for war accounting.

### The porosity of bones

After successfully rectifying the information and reclaiming the graves, a new conflict arose in the Dương clan because part of the family wanted to conduct a DNA test to have absolute certainty that they have found the right body. Their dilemma is again not unique in Vietnam, as the country has recently joined the global ‘forensic turn’,<sup>21</sup> a trend set by the United States and exemplified by its global influence on war-accounting practice (see Heonik Kwon in the current issue).<sup>22</sup> Ever since the Vietnam Government launched Project 150 in 2013, which put forward the idea that DNA testing is the only reliable method for identification, the state and its population have increasingly been entangled in the myths and promises of DNA-based forensics. Partly as a response to the spiritual and political pressure created by the nationwide spontaneous search for war dead in the preceding two decades, Project 150 announced that it would use the most advanced DNA-based forensics

to find and identify the remains of half a million missing and/or unidentified martyrs. Like elsewhere in the world, DNA forensics is presented in Vietnam as the ‘truth machine’, a real science with 99.9999 per cent precision, to target problems created by ‘quasi-sciences’, if not outright fraud of ‘spiritual forensics’. With an initial investment of 500 billion dong (€21.5 million), Project 150 aimed to train scientists and upgraded four DNA testing centres. In 2016, an international consortium of leading genetic and DNA experts gathered by the Hamburg-based medical diagnostic company Bioglobe, the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP, Sarajevo and The Hague) and technical experts from the European forensics company QIAGEN won a contract to provide consultancy and training for scientists from the Institute of Biotechnology (IBT) in Hanoi, which runs one of Vietnam’s four DNA labs. Scientists at IBT were the first in the country to research mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) and its application in human identification. Their work helped to identify a number of martyrs and have given hope to the state and families alike. Between 2016 and 2019, the objective of Project 150 was to optimise Vietnamese scientists’ expertise by importing up-to-date technologies and equipment to extract mtDNA. For the plan to work, according to Bioglobe’s estimate in 2016, at least 1.4 million DNA samples from bones needed to be matched with DNA samples from living relatives, the number of which could be three times as large. The matching of samples was planned to be carried out using the DNA matching software Bonaparte, developed by SMART Research BV, a spin-off company of Radboud University in Nijmegen.

As soon as it began, Project 150 received wide and keen public attention both in Vietnam and beyond.<sup>23</sup> Problems, however, also quickly surfaced. In the country, the project’s implementation lengthened the wait for many families, while placing others in problematic situations because they failed to prove their genetic relation to the martyr remains they claimed. The result was mounting distrust among families toward the various agencies involved in the project. Internationally, critical voices also arose. In 2018, the *New York Times* published an article a day before the 74th anniversary for the establishment of the Vietnam People’s Army that spelled out the dismal state of Vietnam War accounting, including the recent employment of DNA forensics next to the United States’ massive investment in missions to bring home the American MIAs.<sup>24</sup> The article’s critical juxtaposition of the Vietnamese state’s eager support for the United States in searching for American MIAs versus little or no support for its own accounting efforts did not sit well with some Vietnamese readers. Many scientists, administrators and veterans involved in Project 150 to whom I spoke complain that the article was ‘bad press’ and intentional mocking of their work. Mr T,<sup>25</sup> a former diplomat, told me angrily, ‘Yes, we helped them all those year, what did his government [the United States] do to help us [in finding our own missing]?’ Mr T’s resentment reflects a common anti-imperialist perspective still shared by many of Vietnam’s old cadres who went through the wartime with scars and have seen the geopolitical legacy of the US–Vietnam War until this day.<sup>26</sup>

Logistical and coordination problems, human errors, political unwillingness and technical limitations are among the reasons that made it impossible for Project 150 to carry out its initial plan. The biggest problem of all, however, has been the

failure to extract mtDNA from the available bone samples. During my fieldwork in summer 2019, the festive mood of the 72nd anniversary of the National Day for Vietnamese Wounded Soldiers and Martyrs (*Ngày Thương Binh Liệt Sĩ*) was clouded by concerns about the small number of identified martyrs. 'All the bones have become porous' (*Xương mủn hết rồi*), many families remarked to me amid tears and heavy sighs. Several officers and scientists further lamented how most of the bones they worked on were 'bad samples' (*toàn mẫu xấu*). In early 2019, the number of bone samples tested at different labs that were returned to the office of the DOND increased to several thousand. These samples were either without DNA material or with DNA information but without matching relatives. The presence of these left-over bone samples was no longer bearable, physically and emotionally, at Mrs Lan's office. Lan is one of the national coordinators of Project 150.<sup>27</sup> In the three years that we have known each other and worked together, I noticed that her office has become fuller, filled not only with articles and files but also with plants. When I commented on her green thumb, Lan said matter of factly, 'Oh, the plants are not for me. They are places for the souls of the uncles to rest.' 'Uncle' was her name for the martyrs. Lan believes that the souls of tens of thousands of martyrs whose bone fragments were brought into her office to enter the DNA identification process also came here. Like their family, they wait for answers. Some left, and many lingered on. As a good host, she should at least offer them a place to rest. But as a spiritual Vietnamese, she does not like to work alone or late in her office.

Officially, these samples, the left-over bones, should be returned, either by the family who took them to DOND or by DOND themselves, to the graves from which they were collected. This bone restoration procedure, '*thủ tục hoàn cốt*', is a legal and spiritual requirement for dealing with the dead in Vietnam. But it is also a costly task, so the families who brought the samples to Lan's office either disown them there, or get rid of them in their own way.<sup>28</sup> I have had very uncomfortable interviews with several families who had discarded the bone sample and now are facing the psychological or spiritual torments of their actions. The DOND, which had made no financial provision for this scenario, has no budget to return the bone samples to the graves. After no longer being able to cope with the psychological weight of having these abandoned, left-over bones in her office, Lan asked for help to find a solution. The director of Gen Viet, one of the subcontractors of Project 150, contacted a high-ranking Buddhist monk. A solution was found. The samples were placed into nineteen jars (some jars contain several hundred samples). The jars were coded and arranged in numerical and alphabetical order, then placed into wall cabinets built for this specific purpose, hidden in the hall of spirits adjunct to the Mother Goddess Compound inside an ancient Buddhist temple forty kilometres outside of Hanoi. Three times a year, on the full moon day of the first, the last and the seventh month of the year, a specific ritual would be organised for them, with requiem and food offerings. The cost of these rituals, as well as for the year-round care is carried by the director of Gen Viet. The temple's abbot has repeatedly praised the man as being generous.<sup>29</sup>

Two spirit mediums in Hanoi and one in Quảng Trị confided in me, with gruesome details, about their dealing with a new type of martyr spirits who complained about the new injuries to their ‘posthumous body’ because of the practice of grinding pieces of bones for DNA extraction. So, in 2019, five years after forensic genetics was brought in to fight the rampant use and abuse of spiritual care for the dead, state officials had to again resort to spiritual care – however temporary they say this solution is.

## Conclusion

The Vietnamese authorities are trapped, and the trap is of their own making. The root cause of the current unsolvable quagmire in which the project of identification finds itself is not only the extraordinary circumstances of the Vietnam War, but also the secrecy surrounding military operations in this war and its aftermath. The army did everything to prevent the identification of its soldiers and guerrilla fighters. After peace was established, identifying remains was already extremely difficult. The army did not use dog tags, and the documentation of battlefields and operations was chaotic, to put it mildly. When the project of identification started, pushed by America’s demand for the identification of their soldiers, the denial of equal treatment for the fallen soldiers from the South Vietnamese army became a huge problem (as detailed in the contributions by Alex-Thái Dinh Võ and Đạt Nguyễn in this special issue). The unification of Vietnam cannot be successful without addressing this.

Like the United States, Vietnam is a militarised society in which taking care of its fallen soldiers represents a claim to sovereignty. The problem, however, is that it cannot fulfil this task. By pushing it back onto society, calling for ‘the socialisation of the gratitude work’ as a way to impose neoliberal demands on the Vietnamese moral citizen, it has acknowledged this and has opened an arena of action for telepaths, civil society actors, families, in short, the entire population. This is also potentially an arena for popular dissent. There are a variety of ministries and other state actors involved, such as the army, and they often work at cross purposes to raise the public’s awareness of the incompetence of the state. The latest potential avenue for solving the problems is DNA testing, which has a great attraction for bureaucrats and the public alike. But again, science promises a lot but currently cannot deliver the much-desired results, given the myriad intervening factors, such as the quality of the bone samples, the enormity of the circumstances of death and missing and scale of the effort required.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the current situation is the massive involvement of the population in the search for the fallen together with their comrades and family members. This has become an industry, especially since, with economic growth of recent decades, more resources became available to be spent in the search for the dead. The Vietnamese traditionally pay immense attention to the dead and their ancestors. In recent times this cult of the dead has been significantly transformed by the search for those who have fallen in the war.

## Acknowledgements

Research for this article benefited from the support of the Max Planck Society and the Netherland Organization for Scientific Research (NWO, VI.Vidi.195.051), which are gratefully acknowledged. I want thank Peter van der Veer, Sarah Wagner, Paco Ferrandiz, Thomas Parson, Hue Tam Ho-Tai, Andrew Wells-Dang, Christiana Schwenkel and the two anonymous *Human Remains and Violence* reviewers for generously sharing their insights and feedback on multiple versions of this article.

## Notes

- 1 G. Mosse, *Fallen Soldier: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1994).
- 2 M. P. Bradley, 'Contests of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting War in the Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema', in Hue-Tam Ho Tai (ed.), *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001), pp. 196–226. See also S. K. Malarney, 'The Fatherland Remembers Your Sacrifice: Commemorating War Dead in Northern Vietnam', published in the same edited volume.
- 3 T. T. T. Ngô, 'Bones of contention', *American Ethnologist*, 48 (2021), 192–205, <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13015>.
- 4 For the article by Võ see Part I of this special issue, *Human Remains and Violence*, 9:2 (2023), 76–95; Nguyễn's article is in the current issue, Part II of this special issue.
- 5 It was explained to me that these graves are called graves of wind because wind evokes a sense of ephemeral, flickering and lightness usually associated with the souls of the dead. It is also said that the dead travel by clouds and return with the winds (*đi mây về gió*). Some of my informants also explained that perhaps the idea of wind comes from the fact that these types of graves were first and foremost created by fishing communities who set up small mounds of sand to mourn those perished at sea. These sand mounds are often quickly shifted and removed by sea winds. An interesting article on Tin Tức Việt Nam also shares this explanation: <https://tintucvietnam.vn/mo-gio-la-gi-va-vi-sao-phai-lam-mo-gio-d171507.html> (accessed 15 April 2022).
- 6 Many military units in Vietnam in the last two decades have built cemeteries to commemorate their own fallen members. Many of these cemeteries contained empty tombs (*mộ gió*) as the remains have already been either collected by families or buried in state-designated martyr cemeteries, or have not been recovered. The Rừng Sác martyr cemetery in Cần Giờ district, Ho Chi Minh City, for example, contained 550 empty graves for members of the No. 10 Rừng Sác Commando Unit who were killed in action but their bodies were not recovered. Since these graves were built in 2005, many families of the 550 fallen have come here to retrieve 'some handful of soil' (*xin vài nắm đất*) to bury in the empty graves they have at home. Recently, these graves have also been entered into

- different databases of martyr graves built by the army and by civil society groups. This is an important cause of confusion for the current war-accounting project. Some information about this cemetery can be found at: <https://nhandan.vn/tin-chung1/nghia-tinh-rung-sac-231279/> (accessed 15 May 2022).
- 7 The prevalence of empty graves in war cemeteries had spurred a powerful civil society movement which called on the state to uphold its promise to return their names to the martyrs and their remains to their waiting families.
  - 8 Xã hội hóa công tác đền ơn đáp nghĩa, <https://baotintuc.vn> (accessed 2 May 2022).
  - 9 M. T. N. Nguyen, 'Vietnam's "socialisation" policy and the moral subject in a privatizing economy', *Economy and Society*, 47:4 (2018), 627–47, doi: 10.1080/03085147.2018.1544397, p. 629.
  - 10 Because of its scale and political significance, the information about this scandal is kept in twenty-five files at the National Archive Number 3. At least seventeen of these files are stamped 'top secret', and the others are with very limited access. I have been requesting to read some of these files for nearly two months without success. The information I gathered on this case to date mainly comes from interviews with local witnesses, journalists and a few officers who were involved in the trials.
  - 11 Trung Phương, Những con số biết nói...!, <http://tuoitrekontum.org.vn/3-phong-trao/xung-kich-bao-ve-to-quooc/-nhung-con-so-biet-noi...-.html> (accessed 15 May 2022).
  - 12 Cục Chính Sách, Đẩy mạnh công tác tìm kiếm, quy tập hài cốt liệt sĩ, <http://chinhsachquandoi.gov.vn/tin-bai/day-manh-cong-tac-tim-kiem-quy-tap-hai-cot-liet-si-353.20160111200758.394434.htm> (accessed 15 May 2022).
  - 13 Quyết định 150/QĐ-TTg năm 2013 phê duyệt Đề án xác định hài cốt liệt sĩ còn thiếu thông tin do Thủ tướng Chính phủ ban hành, and Quyết định 1237/QĐ-TTg năm 2013 phê duyệt Đề án tìm kiếm, quy tập hài cốt liệt sĩ từ nay đến năm 2020 và những năm tiếp theo do Thủ tướng Chính phủ ban hành (Decision 150/QĐ-TTg and Decision 1237/QĐ-TTg).
  - 14 A. Abbott, 'Vietnam Begins Huge Effort to Identify War Dead: World's Largest Systematic Identification Project Will Use Smart DNA-testing Technology', *Nature*, 529 (2016), 135–6, [www.nature.com/news/vietnam-begins-huge-effort-to-identify-war-dead-1.19147](http://www.nature.com/news/vietnam-begins-huge-effort-to-identify-war-dead-1.19147) (accessed 18 January 2024).
  - 15 Thu Thảo, Hội thảo xác định phiên hiệu đơn vị, danh tính hài cốt liệt sĩ, <https://baoquankhu7.vn/hoi-thao-xac-dinh-phiien-hieu-don-vi-danh-tinh-hai-cot-liet-si-1210798660-0022276s34410gs?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1> (accessed 15 May 2022); <https://baobinhduong.vn/hoi-thao-xac-dinh-danh-tinh-liet-si-phiien-hieu-don-vi-a263958.html> (accessed 15 May 2022).
  - 16 <http://quankhu2.vn/ban-chi-dao-quooc-gia-515-tong-ket-de-an-tim-kiem-quy-tap-hai-cot-liet-sy-va-xac-dinh-hai-cot-liet-sy-con-thieu-thong-tin-giai-doan-2013-2020/> (accessed 15 May 2022).
  - 17 Cổng thông tin điện tử về liệt sĩ, mộ liệt sĩ và nghĩa trang liệt sĩ, <http://thongtin.lietsi.gov.vn/tra-cuu> (accessed 18 January 2024).
  - 18 Via the website [www.nguoiduado.vn](http://www.nguoiduado.vn) (accessed 18 January 2024).



- 19 I. Rojas-Perez, *Mourning Remains: State Atrocity, Exhumations, and Governing the Disappeared in Peru's Postwar Andes* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2017); A. Rosenblatt, *Digging the Disappeared: Forensic Science after Atrocity* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2015); R. Reineke, 'Necroviolence and Postmortem Care along the US–Mexico Border', in T. E. Sheridan and R. H. McGuire (eds), *The Border and Its Bodies: The Embodiment of Risk on the US–Mexico Border* (Tucson, AZ, University of Arizona Press, 2019), pp. 144–72.
- 20 M. Dolski, 'When X Doesn't Mark the Spot: Historical Investigation and Identifying Remains from the Korean War', in D. Congram (ed.), *Missing Persons: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Disappeared* (Toronto, Canadian Scholars Press, 2016), pp. 137–70. See also discussion of the case in S. Wagner, 'Unearthing Unknowns: The Forensic Practice and Memory Politics of Korean War Disinterments', *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale*, 30:3 (2022), 38–55.
- 21 É. Anstett and J. Dreyfus, *Human Remains and Identification: Mass Violence, Genocide, and the 'Forensic Turn'* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015); Z. Dziuban (ed.), *Mapping the 'Forensic Turn': Engagements with Materialities of Mass Death in Holocaust Studies and Beyond* (Vienna, New Academic Press, 2017); L. Smith, 'The Missing, the Martyred and the Disappeared: Global Networks, Technical Intensification and the End of Human Rights Genetics', *Social Studies of Science*, 47 (2017), 398–441.
- 22 D. Steadman and S. Wagner, 'Taking Stock: DNA Testing and Its Complex Truths', in H. Erlich, E. Stover and T. J. White (eds), *Silent Witness: Forensic DNA Evidence in Criminal Investigations and Humanitarian Disasters* (New York, Oxford Academic, 2020), online edn, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190909444.003.0013> (accessed 1 November 2022).
- 23 Abbott, 'Vietnam Begins Huge Effort to Identify War Dead', is among much coverage in the national and international press.
- 24 J. Babcock, 'Vietnam's Sad Hunt: 300,000 Missing Souls', *New York Times* (21 December 2018), [www.nytimes.com/2018/12/21/opinion/vietnam-war-missing.html?smid=url-share](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/21/opinion/vietnam-war-missing.html?smid=url-share) (accessed 15 May 2022).
- 25 This is a pseudonym.
- 26 See Babcock, 'Vietnam's Sad Hunt'. Although Babcock did not raise this question in this article, he did raise it in another article that he published a few months later on The Daily Beast, entitled 'Lost Souls: The Search for Vietnam's 300,000 and or MIAs' (26 April 2019), [www.thedailybeast.com/lost-souls-the-search-for-vietnams-300000-or-more-mias](http://www.thedailybeast.com/lost-souls-the-search-for-vietnams-300000-or-more-mias) (accessed 1 November 2022).
- 27 Lan is a pseudonym.
- 28 This practice removes the potential for the samples to be tested later with DNA methods that work. Vietnamese scientists have understood the problem inherent in the whole mtDNA approach and are searching for new methods which may work in the near future. I agree with Dr Thomas Parson, former director of the Forensic Science Department of the International Commission for Missing Persons, that it is a great pity to collect the best samples that will ever be available and then, when an unsuitable method fails, to basically throw the whole thing out of the window by returning the samples. Tom shared with me that there was a big

- dialogue about this with families in the Balkans, but after much effort it was concluded (not without dissent, of course) that the samples removed could not be expected to be returned. Vietnam should learn from the Balkans about methods for curating and storing samples, with the diligent care befitting the respect they are due, until the purpose for which they were collected can be achieved.
- 29 Comparable, to some extent, to this case is New York City's huge deliberation on the treatment of samples from the World Trade Center remains that were not identifiable by current technology. They are in a climate-controlled, oxygen-free environment in a commemorative mausoleum to allow for future identification by suitable technologies. I am grateful to Thomas Parson for reminding me of this case.