Rendering the ‘orphaned’ dead palpable: spiritual care and memory activism at the former Republic of Vietnam military cemetery

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Abstract

Following the end of the Vietnam–American War in 1975, the commemoration of the fallen soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) remains a difficult issue. The post-war Vietnamese state has marginalised ARVN dead from its national commemorative practices, while it has destroyed or neglected former South Vietnam memorial sites. This article provides an examination of recent efforts by local ARVN former combatants, living relatives of fallen soldiers and young Vietnamese to attend to the upkeep of the former ARVN cemetery in southern Vietnam. Based on participant observation and interviews, I explore how people care for the dead through regular acts of grave maintenance and religious rituals. I show that, through these persistent practices of care, southern Vietnamese engage in a form of memory activism to ensure the continual existence of the cemetery and lay claims to the right to mourn for the marginalised dead.

Key words: military dead, spiritual care, affect, memory, human and more-than-human relation, Vietnam

After the Vietnam–American War, the post-war Vietnamese state engaged in a variety of acts of nation-building, including efforts to revise the country’s history along revolutionary, nationalist lines and to commemorate those fallen for the revolution. With the shift from the centrally planned economy to a market economy in 1986, the country witnessed what the historian Hue-Tam Ho Tai refers to as the ‘commemorative fever’ as memorial sites and cemeteries for the revolutionary martyrs dotted the country’s landscape. 1 These sites commemorate the sacrifice of Vietnamese from all regions to the revolutionary cause, fighting against foreign imperialism and unifying the two parts of the country.

As scholars and southern Vietnamese would note, however, there was (and continues to be) an ostensible absence of state recognition and commemoration of the dead associated with the government of the defunct Republic of Vietnam (‘South Vietnam’) that existed from 1955 to 1975, most particularly those fighting for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). After the war, while many of those
associated with the government of the Republic of Vietnam and ARVN were sent to re-education camps, fallen soldiers of the ARVN were marginalised from the post-war state commemorative practices for the military dead and the recent, state-led adoption of new DNA-based forensic technologies to identify the dead. Previous ARVN memorial sites and cemeteries were destroyed or subjected to serious neglect and disrepair. One such site was the former ARVN military cemetery in contemporary Bình Dương province, twenty-five kilometres from Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon).

In this article, I focus on the recent voluntary efforts by a local, semi-organised group of ARVN veterans, family members of the fallen and young Vietnamese to commemorate and care for the military dead at the former ARVN cemetery. While access to the cemetery was severely restricted in the immediate post-war period, since 2006, the shift of the cemetery’s control from the military to the local government has led to new endeavours to preserve the space. Since 2013, the voluntary group has cared for the dead through frequent grave upkeep, grave renovation and the performance of commemorative rituals. I draw on data gathered from participant observation at the cemetery, semi-structured interviews with the leader of the voluntary group and informal conversations with the group’s members and other families of the fallen whom I encountered during multiple visits to the cemetery.2

In documenting the affective interactions among the living, the dead, the graves and nature in the cemetery, I demonstrate that these regular rituals of care for the dead constitute a form of memory activism, whereby local southern Vietnamese strive to remember and recognise the marginalised ARVN dead. I contend that the power of such a form of memory activism lies not so much in overt political resistance against the state but, rather, in its drawing on the religio-cultural repertoire surrounding the proper care for the dead to ensure the continual existence of the cemetery. These subtle, persistent acts of care for the dead help to maintain the cemetery as a space worthy of remembrance; they are part of an endeavour to navigate the shifting landscape of memory and to resist what my interlocutors fear: the potential encroachment of the space, particularly due to the new industrial development in the area. As such, I draw attention to the care rituals for the dead as a praxis of what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls ‘just memory’ – that is, a memory that goes beyond the identity politics of nationalism and that recognises ‘the weak, the subjugated, the different, the enemy, and the forgotten’.3 These more recent local, semi-organised endeavours to care for the ARVN dead, I argue, are part of an emerging care-scape, signalling a shifting ‘threshold of grievability’4 toward the ‘enemy’ ARVN dead in southern Vietnam that allows for a relatively more open and visible performance of care.

The ARVN cemetery: a brief background

Completed in 1973, ‘Nghĩa trang Quân đội Biên Hòa’ (Bien Hoa Military Cemetery) was one of the central military cemeteries of the Republic of Vietnam. Located near the Biên Hòa highway, now Hanoi highway, the cemetery occupied a large area of 125 hectares (1.25 square kilometres), with the capacity to accommodate 30,000

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graves. Up until 1975, following the Tet Offensive of 1968 and the spring–summer offensive of 1972, referred to by the South Vietnam army as the ‘mùa hè đọ màu’ (red fiery summer), during which communist forces led direct attacks on key South Vietnamese military bases, the cemetery became the resting place for more than 16,000 ARVN soldiers and military officers.5

According to sources written by overseas Vietnamese, the cemetery was designed to resemble a ‘bee’, which has been interpreted to symbolise the virtues of loyalty and dedication.6 The bee’s head contained a small commemorative temple, Đền Trị sĩ, in front of which was a three-gated entrance (cổng tam quan) that marked one’s entry into a sacred space. Engraved on the two columns of the gate were two slogans, ‘vì nước hy sinh’ (sacrifice for the country) and ‘vì dân chiến đấu’ (fight for the people). The commemorative temple, according to my interlocutors, was where the second president of the Republic of Vietnam, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, would deliver a commemorative speech dedicated to the fallen. The bee’s body was where one could find the thousands of graves of fallen soldiers and military personnel, surrounding a tall, upright memorial structure called ‘Nghĩa dũng đại’ (the Tower of Bravery). Christina Schwenkel notes that there was a hierarchy in how the graves were arranged, with those belonging to high-ranking officials located closer to the memorial structure and separated from common soldiers.7 Besides the bee-like structure of the cemetery, another point of interest was the statue of an ARVN soldier that greeted visitors as they turned from the highway. Named ‘Thương tiếc’ (Mourning), the statue depicted a soldier sitting down with a gun across his leg, guarding the resting place.

After North Vietnam forces took over South Vietnam in 1975, the cemetery was controlled by Military Zone Seven, the Ministry of Defense. During this time, access to the cemetery was highly restricted. Families of the fallen needed to receive formal permission to enter the space, and many of them were encouraged to remove the remains from the cemetery and take them back home for worship. Many of the graves had been emptied, while others had been discreetly cared for by locals living nearby.8 During this period of forceful abandonment, the commemorative temple and the graves were left in serious disrepair. Pictures of the dead on many graves appeared to have been ‘vandalised’.9 The ‘Mourning’ statue was also knocked down. Online blogs and news outlets of overseas Vietnamese have treated these acts of destruction and forceful abandonment as exemplifying the cruelty of the ‘communist’, as they continued to enact violence on the dead after the war.10 In subsequent decades, a large part of the cemetery had also been encroached upon by local residents’ houses, a water plant, industrial parks and a college.

It was not until November 2006 that the then Prime Minister of Vietnam, Nguyễn Tấn Dũng, signed the decision to give over what was left of the cemetery to the management of the Bình Dương local authority. This decision came after a series of negotiations among various actors within the Vietnamese Government and the overseas Vietnamese community.11 The cemetery was renamed ‘Nghĩa trang Nhân dân Bình An’ (Bình An People’s Cemetery), effectively turning the once-military cemetery into a civilian one. The word bình an here can be translated as peacefulness, and it can be read as a discursive strategy to quell South
Vietnam’s military dead and legacy. New walls were built around the cemetery, as well as a new entrance and security booth. Since 2006, visiting the cemetery has become more relaxed, even though visitors still need to check in at the security entrance and have their identification information recorded. The turning of cemetery over to the management of the local government was celebrated in Vietnamese media as an important step in the state’s effort towards post-war national reconciliation. The current management of the cemetery by Bình Dương local authorities, which have employed staff to monitor the flow of visitors and guard the graves, has also been used by the media as a counterpoint to accusations of neglect levied by overseas Vietnamese communities.

Since then, families of the fallen, veterans’ groups and other local and diasporic Vietnamese have been able to visit the site and commemorate the fallen. The cemetery has received support from some overseas Vietnamese groups, including those run by South Vietnamese veterans in France and the United States. As early as 2007, the South Vietnam veterans’ organisation in France ‘Hội ban của thương binh Việt Nam Cộng Hòa’ (French: Association d’aide aux victimes de guerre du Viet Nam; also known as Hội Nông Gồ, or Wooden Crutch Association) and the Vietnamese American Federation (VAF) in the United States had sponsored and overseen early efforts of tomb renovation. While these particular forms of remittances have been directed toward the upkeep of a very symbolic South Vietnam heritage site, the monetary flow exemplifies a change in attitude of the post-war government toward overseas Vietnamese, following the economic reforms in the late 1980s.

**Human and more-than-human encounters: melancholia-anxiety and the ‘orphaned’ dead**

Besides the efforts of overseas Vietnamese organisations to renovate the cemetery, there have been recent endeavours by local southern Vietnamese to care for the graves. One of the interlocutors with whom I had the opportunity to be connected has organised frequent group trips to the cemetery since 2013 to voluntarily perform grave upkeep. Mr Tính (a pseudonym), a man in his seventies, was recruited to be an ARVN soldier in 1968. Each time, the visiting group was composed of roughly ten members, including ARVN former combatants, family members of fallen soldiers, as well as young Vietnamese who had some familial connections to the ARVN or were sympathetic toward South Vietnam. The group members were mainly southern Vietnamese who resided in Vietnam, but many of them also had family members who were living in the United States at the time. During my fieldwork, I was able to accompany the group on some of their visits to the cemetery. The majority of these visits had a similar pattern. The group would rake the leaves around the graves, cut down the untamed weeds, burn them and end the visit with lighting incense and cigarettes for the fallen soldiers.

It was during my third visit in late 2021 with the group that I began to recognise what seemed to me an unending ‘battle’ between the group members and the untamed nature at the cemetery. Unlike many of the revolutionary cemeteries...
that are beautifully manicured and managed, including Ho Chi Minh City’s Revolutionary Martyrs’ Cemetery only a few kilometres away, the former ARVN cemetery did not receive the same level of upkeep. Although the cemetery’s governing board had hired people to care for the cemetery – particularly, closer to important days such as the Lunar New Year, when many families would visit the graves of their loved ones – many parts of the cemetery continued to appear untended. When I was there on this third visit, it was during the dry season. The trees were shedding their leaves continuously. The wild weeds, after the rainy season, had grown tall and now turned brown and dry. It felt like an unending, cyclical task: the trees continued to shed their leaves as the small number of volunteers worked hard to make the ground look neat and to preserve some sense of upkeep of the graves.

The political nature of this seeming battle between nature and the human graves was brought into sharp relief for me throughout the visit. A little more than an hour after I started helping with the raking, one of the younger men who had been a regular member of the group cautioned me to pile the leaves further from some of the trees. He explained that if the pile is too close, the trees’ trunks and roots might get charred by the flames. It turned out that the group had previously been seriously reprimanded for this.

While I have not been able to identify primary sources regarding who had grown these trees and what their plans were, the more conspiratorial narrative circulated on online blogs produced by overseas Vietnamese attributes these trees as part of a ‘communist’ agenda to hide and dominate one of the more symbolic commemorative sites of South Vietnam. Although Mr Tinté and many members of his group did not explicitly attribute blame to any particular individual or group they seemed to agree that there was something purposeful and potentially nefarious about the tree planting. The group members pointed out to me that many of the trees had developed roots so large and so deep that they had destroyed some of the graves. I saw one grave where the root had penetrated the middle of the cement tomb, breaking it open (Figure 1).

During this visit, Mr Tinté remarked a few times how cruel ‘they’ were in growing trees like these in a cemetery. On the one hand, such evaluation stems partly from the cultural belief that graves, as homes for the dead, need to be well maintained; ill-maintained or broken tombs denote disrespect toward the dead. On the other hand, implicit in this judgement is the lingering Cold War framework that attributes acts of destruction and forceful neglect of South Vietnam commemorative sites to the ‘communist’. Apparently, the group had brought this issue up to the cemetery’s governing board, asking them permission to cut down these trees so as to prevent the further destruction of the tombs, but little action was taken.

Nature, in the cemetery, was endowed by Mr Tinté and other members of the group with a cruel character. While the trees themselves inflicted physical damage on the graves, they were perceived to be part of a long-term, deliberate plan to erase the memories of South Vietnam. As Sophie Chao observes in her recent ethnography of the oil palm industry that threatens the life-world of the indigenous Marind in West Papua, one needs to ‘take seriously the possibility of plants, not...
as amoral, but as immoral, subjects’ (emphasis in original) and to ‘redefine violence itself as a multispecies act’. In the former ARVN cemetery, the trees and the weeds have become potential agents of violence, as they transform the commemorative site into a seeming site of ‘ruin’.

The forceful abandonment of the site in the immediate post-war period and what my interlocutors saw as the failure of the local government to sufficiently care for the site in the post-2006 period – that is, through its failure to routinely clear out the weeds, to manage the trees and its outsourcing of such tasks to individual families and voluntary groups – connotes, as Rebecca Bryant writes of ruin, ‘that the object or place does not belong to one’.

As I sat down to take a break from the physical work during that third visit, an older woman in the group sat across from me and told me that during the rainy season the water would also flood certain sections of the cemetery. It would go into some of the graves. ‘Tôi nghĩ rằng (It is pitiful),’ she sighed. Many of the graves did not have any identification, she pointed out, saying that it was impossible for family to know and to claim, and that not many people seemed to care about them.

According to Mr Tính’s observation and estimate, about half of the graves in the cemetery had no identification, while the other half had some identifications, but only about half of these were still visited by living family members. Even though many of the graves appeared to be deserted – what Mr Tính referred to as ‘mộ mộ...’

Figure 1  A tomb broken by a tree’s roots. Photo credit: Author’s photo.
"cô"ồi" (orphaned graves) – he told me that the spirits of these fallen soldiers might linger there.

The term ‘orphanned’ here can denote different modalities of abandonment. On the one hand, many graves have not been claimed or visited by families, partly due to the serious lack of information. During my fieldwork, I encountered many family members attempting to search for the graves of their loved ones. Some expressed great surprise that the cemetery still existed, as they had assumed that the place was completely torn down after the war. Others had been searching in vain because many graves do not have any identification information. Toward the end of the war, burials at the cemetery were carried out hastily; many of the graves were only ‘mound[s] with a brick as a mark’, as one US Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City recollected.23 It is important to note here that some graves do receive visits from living family members and relatives. In the weeks leading up to the Lunar New Year in 2022, for example, I observed many different groups visiting the graves of their loved ones. During these visits, they cleaned up the graves and provided offerings to the dead as family members gathered around chatting and sharing memories of the dead. Many families have fixed up or built new graves for their loved ones. I also learned that families who live far away can hire people from the local area to care for the specific graves of their loved ones. This, however, has created visible, material differences between the dead with families who still care for them and those without as much familial care (Figure 2).

On the other hand, the ARVN dead have been ‘orphaned’ by the post-war political establishment. The ARVN dead continue to be ‘categorised as “dead enemies”’ and thus ‘unworthy of ritual and forensic care’24 by the Vietnamese authorities. While the cemetery is no longer forcibly abandoned like it was in the immediate post-war period, political marginalisation and differentiation continue to be marked, most visibly in the untended environment and the decrepit state of many of the tombs.

I take the woman’s exclaiming, ‘It is pitiful’, to reflect and express an affect of melancholia. Yael Navaro-Yashin, in writing about the partition of Cyprus in 1974 following the invasion by the Turkish army and the subsequent displacement of thousands of Greek- and Turkish-Cypriots, proposes the concepts of ‘melancholic objects’ and ‘spatial melancholia’ to respectively refer to things and environments that give off a feeling of melancholy.25 Navaro-Yashin uses these concepts to describe the affective relationality between Turkish-Cypriots and the objects and houses of Greek-Cypriots that they looted and inhabited following the invasion. Melancholy, in Navaro-Yashin’s formulation, is not just an inner state of being but is also ‘mediated through objects and non-human environments’26 and, as affect, it passes between the human and the non-human.

The ARVN cemetery, with its broken tombs and untamed nature, evokes a strong sense of melancholy, grief and pity, especially among family members who have paid it a visit. In my conversations with some family members of the ARVN fallen and veterans, they recollected how ‘beautiful’ (đẹp) and ‘reverential’ (trang nghiêm) the place was, when they visited the cemetery as young children with their families. In talking about the cemetery, these individuals would also recollect the
painless memories of the immediate post-war period, in which their families suffered from the confiscation of properties (đánh tự bán) and endured the hardship of the collectivisation and the new economic zone programmes of the post-war period. As such, the contrast between how these individuals remembered the cemetery and the site’s current decrepit state evokes and intertwines with the painful family histories of many.

But melancholy for what was lost is not the only affect expressed by my interlocutors. There is also the affect of ‘anxiety’ toward the future of the cemetery as a place to commemorate the ARVN dead and as an ARVN heritage site. During my conversations with Mr Tính and other members of the group, one concern became clear: what would happen to the cemetery when South Vietnamese veterans die, and when living family members, in Vietnam and abroad, stop caring about the space? Moreover, Mr Tính has himself on multiple occasions voiced his fear about the future potential encroachment on the cemetery’s land not only by the government but also by local businesses and households, particularly as part of urban development projects. Bình Dương province has been one of the central locations for urban and industrial development projects in southern Vietnam. This has raised some concerns about the future status of the cemetery land amid new infrastructural developments within the province. The cemetery, with its broken...
tombs and untamed nature, but also the unsettling physical remains and spiritual presence of the dead, to borrow from Bryant, ‘portend[s] unpredictable change’ and ‘elicit[s], evoke[s], emit[s] other possible futures’.30

The frequent visits and the voluntary work that Mr Tính and his group did, in many ways, were sites of affective encounters between the human and the more-than-human, including the dead, the material ruins and remains, and the natural elements. While these encounters evoke a strong sense of melancholy and anxiety, it is also with and through these affective experiences that Mr Tính and his group engaged in what I perceive as a form of memory activism, particularly through rituals to care for the dead.

Comforting the dead: rituals and memory activism

The first time I talked with Mr Tính was on a long-distance phone call. I asked him about the presence of spirits and of religious rituals at the cemetery. He only talked briefly about how his group sometimes brought offerings to the cemetery and once managed to have a Buddhist monk perform some chanting for the dead. It was not until I had the opportunity to participate in the group’s visits in person that I learned that Mr Tính was very well versed in religious ceremonies and rituals, and that not only did he and other members of the group talk about spirits quite often, but the spirits also talked to them.

My first visit with the group was in November 2021. Vietnam was then slowly recovering from a major COVID-19 outbreak that lasted from April to August 2021, one that resulted in thousands of deaths, the highest rate since the start of the pandemic in 2020.31 As the lockdown and travel restrictions inside the country were gradually lifted in October 2021, Mr Tính and his group were finally able to resume their visits after a very long period of absence. On my first visit in November, the group organised a ceremony with many elaborate offerings, a large amount of incense and cigarettes. As I soon learned, the ceremony had originally been planned for the month of July in the lunar calendar – what is commonly known as the month of the hungry ghosts, where the living would prepare offerings for the ancestors and other spirits – but it had been delayed due to the strict COVID-19 lockdown.

The ceremony resembled many of the rituals of offerings to the ancestors that one can observe in individual Vietnamese households – starting with the preparation and giving of the offerings to the ancestral spirits, which is then followed by incense burning and a series of reverential bowings – with a few key differences. Upon arrival, the women in the group, with some occasional assistance from the men, began to lay out the offerings. Some of the offerings were particularly male oriented. In addition to some roasted pig, coffee, different types of fruit and treats, sweet sticky rice and paper money, there were lots of cigarettes and a bottle of what looked like whiskey or dark medicinal wine (Figure 3).

A few minutes after everything had been laid out, Mr Tính performed the role of the ceremonial director as he distributed incense sticks to each of us participants, divided us into rows (with the more senior veterans up front, younger people
behind and regular members of the group before newcomers) and asked us to move up to place our incense in the large ceremonial urn.

After everyone had gone up and paid their tribute, Mr Tính stood solemnly in front of the altar. He did three full prostrations, moving from a standing bowing position to kneeling on his knees and ending with a low bow on the ground. These deeper prostrations are typically reserved for the Buddhas, deities and the ancestors. He ended the bowing routine with a strong, resolute salute. Like a soldier, his body language was firm, exuding an air of respect and authority. Following the ritual, we moved on to lighting incense for the soldiers’ graves throughout the cemetery.

Merav Shohet, in analysing bowing sequences in family rituals for the ancestors in central Vietnam, suggests that bowing helps to ‘affirm generationally continuing relationships of respect, devotion, and obligation between the living and the dead’, that failures to participate in these ritualised acts risk ‘making the dead ancestors “buôn” (sad)’ and upsetting the ‘reciprocal, asymmetric obligations within a hierarchical social field’. Mr Tính’s performance of the full prostrations demonstrates the upholding of this morally obligatory respectful worship between the living and the dead. His strong, resolute salute at the end of the sequence communicates his recognition of, and ritually restores, the status of the dead as military dead, deserving of reverence and remembrance for their sacrifices. This is particularly significant, considering the local government’s designation of the cemetery

**Figure 3** Offerings for the fallen. Photo credit: Author’s photo.
as a ‘people’s cemetery’, which discursively renders the ARVN dead civilian dead. Even when the state of the Republic of Vietnam has fallen, Mr Tính’s bodily performances, following Michel Foucault’s formulation, exemplify the biopolitical power of the state in disciplining the military body. Moreover, one can argue that these displays also brought the fallen, marginalised South Vietnam to the minds of those observing. I suggest that the marriage of traditional Vietnamese bowing and military salutation in Mr Tính’s ritual performances constitutes a form of what Paul Connerton calls ‘incorporating practice’ that invokes and sustains the memory of South Vietnam and its army as once legitimate, powerful political entities. In many ways similar to the round-the-clock commemorative ceremony of the sentinels at the Tombs of the Unknown in Washington DC that Sarah Wagner and Thomas Matyók analyse, Mr Tính’s ritual performances carry a strong didactic message, as they instruct other group members, particularly the young Vietnamese in the group, about the memory and historical presence of the ARVN.

During the following months, I was able to observe a few more of these rituals as they took place on important dates of the lunar calendar. On the days leading up to the Lunar New Year, for example, when it was traditional for families to visit and clean up the graves of the ancestors, Mr Tính and the group also organised an elaborate ritual like the one I saw in November. On that day, we also lit incense for almost all of the graves in the cemetery.

The ritual ceremonies, the offerings, as well as the frequent voluntary upkeeping work by Mr Tính and the group help to (re)establish what Robert Weller in a recent piece on silence refers to as ‘the rhythms of life’, one that can rescue the ARVN dead in the cemetery from the ‘abyss’. The abyss, as Weller elaborates, is the complete annihilation that can be brought on by death and atrocity, that breaks ‘the antiphony of words and silences’. From 1975 to the mid-2000s, access to the cemetery was limited and highly regulated for the general public, risking the ARVN dead being forgotten in the absence of visitation and care. As such, Mr Tính and his group’s voluntary work and ritual performances have reanimated the ARVN dead at the cemetery, bringing them back into the rhythms of daily life, of the ritual calendar and into public recognition. Mr Tính also has a social-media page where he posts about his work at the cemetery. On more than one occasion, he has been recognised by other visitors to the cemetery, and a few younger Vietnamese have contacted him about joining the voluntary work.

Ritualised care work for the dead, as such, serves as the basis for a form of memory activism – that is, in the case of Mr Tính and his group, efforts to preserve ARVN legacies and histories, particularly against the anxiety surrounding the potential destruction of the cemetery for new industrial developments. These rituals of care for the dead, I argue, help to constitute and maintain the cemetery as a space worthy of remembrance, respect and moral actions, and thus, it should not be destroyed. The frequent upkeeping work and incense lighting have maintained a sense of ‘warmth’ to the graves (mô ấm), a term used by some of the group members to denote the continual presence of care.

Here, I would also like to reiterate that Mr Tính and his group were not the only ones doing this ritual and caring work. As already mentioned, since the early
2000s, overseas Vietnamese individuals and veterans’ groups have helped to restore a large number of graves, despite the fact that natural elements have continued to chip away at them. Following the turning of the cemetery over to management by the local authorities in the mid-2000s, many families had visited, rebuilt and cared for the tombs of their loved ones, particularly on important ritual days like the days leading up to the Lunar New Year. What stood out about the work that Mr Tính and his group did, though, was the frequency of their upkeeping work. While large renovative projects by overseas Vietnamese groups occurred over a definite period of time, and family visits took place during special holidays or ad hoc, Mr Tính and his group would gather more frequently and carry out the upkeeping, barring bad weather or other emergencies. Noticeably, in one of my conversations with Mr Tính, he mentioned that he would avoid going to the cemetery on important commemorative days of South Vietnam, including the Republic of Vietnam’s Army Day (19 June) and the Fall/Liberation of Saigon (30 April). He also discouraged his group members from wearing anything too visibly connected to ARVN, like the army uniform, hat or boots. These conspicuous commemorative signs and dates, he reasoned, might bring unnecessary trouble and hinder the really important work, that is, caring for the graves. In this sense, Mr Tính and his group’s voluntary work and commemorative rituals are aimed at establishing a more regular rhythm of social life and remembrance at the cemetery, rather than one that revolves only around exceptional political ceremonial days.

These efforts of Mr Tính and his group seem to have consoled and appeased the spirits of the fallen soldiers. In one of our phone conversations where I wanted to check if the group would be visiting the cemetery on a particular day, Mr Tính responded with an absolute yes, adding, ‘if we don’t go, they [the soldiers] would demand that we do! (Không đi máy ông rēo)’. On another occasion, as we were saying goodbye after a day of hard work, Mr Tính told me that his younger daughter, who had been accompanying him on these trips, ‘had not known sickness’ (không biết bê. nh là gì). I interpreted this as his way of saying that those who came to care for the dead would in turn be protected.

Through care work and rituals for the dead, Mr Tính and his group engaged in, to borrow from Tim Ingold, ‘correspondence’ with the dead. Correspondence, in Ingold’s formulation, refers to ‘the process by which beings or things literally answer to one another over time’.38 Different from the notion of interaction that connotes a going-back-and-forth between agents, Ingold sees correspondence as joining in the middle, as going along longitudinally.39 Within this framework, care emerges not simply as something done out of mere obligation, but as something emerging from one’s attention to what others need and from one’s responsivity to such demands.40 To me, Mr Tính’s assertion, ‘Không đi máy ông rēo’, above, communicated a sense of urgency: the dead made demands on the living, as the living felt the urgency to respond to care for the dead. Social rhythms and ritual duties need to be upheld and maintained, especially after a long period of neglect following the war and more recently, after a series of COVID-19 lockdowns. As Weller suggests, silence creates a kind of yearning and longing for the next beat,
not only for the living, but also seemingly for the dead. The care work and commemorative rituals performed by Mr Tính and his group, in many ways, bring the ‘orphaned’ dead and the living into correspondence, rendering the past present, palpable, unfinished. They can thus facilitate the ‘prolongation of the life-line’ and transmit historical memory cross-generationally.

Conclusion

The efforts by Mr Tính and his group, but also by other southern Vietnamese, constitute a certain striving for a just memory. In a post-war context where the state predominantly recognises the sacrifices of revolutionary martyrs and heroic mothers as ‘meritorious’, the sacrifices and sufferings of the Vietnamese on the other side have been marginalised in the post-war state’s discourses. As I have shown in this article, through memory activism via the means of ritual care for the dead, the voluntary group – composed of ARVN veterans, family members of the fallen and young Vietnamese – makes claims on the right to mourn the South Vietnam military dead in a more public and culturally meaningful manner. Their endeavours have focused not so much on making overt political demands but, rather, on more subtle, persistent acts of care aimed at ensuring the continual existence of the former ARVN cemetery as a site worthy of commemoration. As Christina Schwenkel writes, in post-war Vietnam, commemorative acts ‘reveal the transformation of traumascapes into dynamic topographies of recovery’.

I will add here that in the context of the former ARVN cemetery, rituals of care for the dead have the potentiality of transforming a site of historical trauma into one where new forms of care can emerge.

To a large extent, the voluntary care described in this article is a continuation of a longer history of agentive memory work by ARVN veterans in post-war southern Vietnam. Previous research on memoryscape in post-war Vietnam has shown how ARVN veterans, since the economic reforms of 1986, have been active in carving out spaces for ARVN legacies and memories, including serving as tour guides to foreigners interested in the history of the losing side. The pivotal shift of the cemetery’s management from the military to the local government in 2006 arguably broadens the space for ARVN veterans’ and other southern Vietnamese’s memory work, allowing them to grieve and commemorate those fallen. Of course, the painful memories of the immediate post-war period continue to cast a shadow on these efforts, evidenced, for example, by people’s attribution of the destructive trees and overgrown weeds to a purposeful plan (presumably by the ‘communist’) to dominate the ARVN heritage site. Despite the contemporary relative openness to the remembrance of South Vietnam legacies as compared to the previous period of severe restriction, the untended environment and the decrepit state of many graves at the cemetery continue to remind ARVN veterans and families of past political distinctions. ARVN dead can be regarded as ‘the abject’ to the post-war political order in the sense that they represent the ‘other’ to the political, historical and military forces that constitute the current regime.
At the same time, as Navaro-Yashin argues, the ‘abject’ can also be domesticated, recycled and incorporated into the social order. The turnover of the former ARVN cemetery to civilian care has indeed facilitated ways for the ‘abject’ to be part of the post-war society. While family members and voluntary groups like that of Mr Tính bring offerings and pay for the grave maintenance, people who live near the cemetery are hired by families who live far away to repaint and clean the tombs before the Lunar New Year. Overseas Vietnamese individuals and groups have also donated and sent remittances to help with the upkeep of the cemetery. This burgeoning economy of care for the dead in the cemetery, as such, incorporates the ‘abject’ South Vietnam legacies and sites into Vietnam’s post-war market economy.

As such, ARVN dead, as the abject’ to be othered, but also to be incorporated, demonstrate what Long Bui refers to as the ‘heteroglossia’ of Vietnam’s history, where multiple viewpoints continue to be expressed and where North and South Vietnam legacies are dialectically related in the (re)construction of history and social life in the post-war context. Nevertheless, the historical legacies of South Vietnam and the ARVN remain a ‘bone of contention’ within the politics of post-war social reconstruction in Vietnam. I have shown that practices of care (and lack thereof) for the war dead of South Vietnam, on the one hand, highlight the enduring political distinction within contemporary state necropolitical policies, and on the other hand, allow south Vietnamese to make claims on the right to (increasingly) public grieving and remembrance.

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**Notes**

2 I made these visits between late 2021 and early 2022. I was not able to interview the cemetery’s security guards or members of the local government.
4 I want to thank Christina Schwenkel for this term in her discussant’s comments at the panel, ‘War Dead Identification and the Politics of Reconciliation: The Case of the Vietnam War’, at the Association for Asian Studies Conference, 2023.
5 There have been different estimates as to the number of ARVN military personnel and soldiers buried here. According to an article published on RFA in
2013, there were about 18,000 graves. See Tường An, ‘Nghĩa trang Quân đội Biên Hòa ngày dã, bây giờ’, https://rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/military-cemetery-bh-before-now-ta-04232013172101.html (accessed 15 April 2022). However, during my fieldwork, my interlocutors often cited 16,000.


9 Nguyễn, Nothing Ever Dies, p. 37.


14 For more detail about VAF’s renovation project, see the article by Võ in Part I of this special issue, Human Remains and Violence, 9:2 (2023), 76–95. For more detail about the work of the veterans’ association in France, see ‘Về lại Nghĩa trang’, https://nanggo.wixsite.com/nanggo/video (accessed 25 August 2022).

For a discussion of this particular cemetery, see Schwenkel, ‘The Ambivalence of Reconciliation’. This is not to say that all revolutionary cemeteries across the country are well managed and beautified. However, the stark contrast between Ho Chi Minh City’s Revolutionary Martyrs’ Cemetery and the former ARVN cemetery, and their proximity to one another, highlights the post-war differentiation of the war dead.

See Đỗ Ngọc Uyên, ‘Việt Công tử bỗ’ and Lê Tùng Châu, ‘Nghĩa trang Quân đội Biên Hòa’.


I later learned that families could technically ask the governing board to cut down trees that were damaging the graves of their loved ones; it had to be the families who made the request.


As a point of contrast, revolutionary martyrs’ cemeteries in Vietnam are managed by the local governments and Departments of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs, which employ people to routinely care for the upkeep of the cemeteries. At the former ARVN cemetery, while there are a board of management, security team and people hired to care for the graves on specific occasions, the cemetery generally does not seem to receive as much regular upkeep.


Bryant, ‘History’s Remainders’.

Đạt Nguyẽn

30 Bryant, ‘History’s Remainders’, 683.
37 Ibid., 485.
39 Ibid., 18.
40 Ibid., 21.
42 Ingold, ‘On Human Correspondence’, 21.
48 Ngo, ‘Bones of Contention’.

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