Empty old graves of the Korean War Hill Fight

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Abstract

The Hill Fight of the Korean War constitutes an important chapter of the formative military conflict of the mid-twentieth century where the South Korean and other UN forces confronted the Chinese and North Korean forces. Currently, it has become a vital site of contested memory, especially in relation to the growing contest of power between the United States and the People’s Republic of China. Describing South Korea’s recent initiative of missing in action (MIA)/killed in action (KIA) accounting activities on these old battlegrounds since 2000, this article looks at how public actions concerning the remains of war are intertwined with changing geopolitical conditions. This will be followed by a reflection on the limits of the prevailing art and technology of war-remains accounting.

Key words: Korean War, hill fights, MIA/KIA accounting, war commemoration, mixed graveyard

Introduction

Among its contributions, the current special issue features several excellent accounts of Vietnam War memories, focusing on the missing bodies of the war dead and on the remains belonging to the losing side of the war. In view of this, although my main focus in this article is on contemporary Korean War memories and material culture of the war dead, I will begin with a few thoughts on issues of war commemoration that are found commonly in either Vietnam or Korea, two major theatres of Asia’s postcolonial Cold War in the mid-twentieth century. The expression ‘postcolonial Cold War’ refers to the horizon of the decolonising world in the mid-twentieth century in which the decolonialisation of the political order was a concurrent process with the bipolarisation of politics – what is often described as ‘decolonisation and the Cold War’ in existing scholarship. It is meant to highlight a set of distinct elements in this historical milieu, in comparison to the Cold War in the context of post-Second World War Europe, including the proliferation of ideologically charged civil wars and other radical forms of political violence as part of decolonisation (i.e., forms of bipolar politics that cannot be reduced to...
the idiom of the Cold War). In the context of East Asia, broadly defined, Korea and Vietnam were among the principal sites of the violent postcolonial Cold War.

The histories of these two countries are interconnected in a myriad of interesting ways. One of them relates to Korea and Vietnam’s shared position in the Sinocentric traditional world order as vital peripheries in East Asia. This positionality entails not only being an important player in the long history of tributary relations with China but also, in relatively recent times, the pursuit of political and cultural autonomy from the Middle Kingdom. The latter involves, somewhat paradoxically, a stronger adherence to the ethics of neo-Confucianism than in China itself – namely, the effort to define oneself as a (little) middle kingdom meaningful on its own. Seen in the light of the stated aims of the present special issue, this cultural adherence entails a profound interest in the condition of the dead and related awareness of close intertwine ment between the plight of the dead and the wellbeing of the living. These interests in what Tâm Ngô aptly calls ‘necrosociality’ go a long way back in Vietnam and Korea and continue to shape the everyday cultural and moral lives of their citizens.

Beyond the horizon of these olden times, the fates of these two nations have become closely intertwined in modern history. Their experiences of the early Cold War are most notable, in which the 1950–53 Korean War and the long Vietnam wars of 1945–75 loom large. Both were, as mentioned earlier, part of Asia’s turbulent postcolonial Cold War. They were also at once civil and international conflicts, involving many fatalities among foreign combatants, as well as a high toll of Vietnamese and Korean deaths. In Korea, this is evident in the UN Cemetery in the southern coastal town of Pusan, established as early as January 1951. The cemetery is a unique place in the world where over two thousand fallen soldiers of eleven nations that joined the UN forces in Korea are laid to rest. About forty thousand UN soldiers fell during the war; many of their bodies and remains are still unaccounted for. We also find in this place a coexistence of the religious symbols of the Cross (e.g., for the Australian, British, Canadian, Dutch, French, New Zealand and South African fallen) and the Crescent (for the 462 Turkish fallen). In the northern part of the peninsula, the equivalent would be the cemetery for the fallen Chinese soldiers north-west of Pyongyang, the country’s capital city, as well as the many cenotaphs and memorials existing in Pyongyang and elsewhere in North Korea that are dedicated to their memory and the ‘unbreakable, eternal friendship’ between the two countries. Called the Cemetery for the Martyrs of Chinese People’s Volunteers, this place is well known for the grave of Mao Anying (1922–50), Mao Zedong’s eldest son and one of the first Chinese casualties in Korea, which is a site of great importance in rituals of diplomacy between Beijing and Pyongyang today. The leaders of North Korea as well as state delegations from China regularly visit Mao Anying’s grave as a gesture of affirmation for their historically forged revolutionary friendship (youyi in Chinese, u˘ui in Korean) between the two countries and peoples. The ruins of the long war in Vietnam have a similar ‘cosmopolitan’ character, as shown poignantly in Phan Huy Duong’s short story, The Billion Dollar Skeleton – involving the French, North African, American, Australian, Khmer,
Lao, Thai, Korean and other Asian traces, as well as those of Vietnamese lives, both combatant and civilian and both southern and northern (and in both the highlands and the lowland). These two old theatres of war have another common element – closely related to the organising theme of the present collection of articles – which is sustained public interest in the plight of the missing war dead. This interest is grounded in their respective moral traditions, as noted earlier; it also has a political dimension, both native and non-native. The native aspect painfully involves the character of civil war, which is entrenched in the histories and memories of both the Korean and the Vietnam conflicts (as for the latter, especially the second Indochinese conflict, although not exclusively). The experience of mass-mobilised modern civil warfare unavoidably induces a radical moral hierarchy in its public memory, dividing it between those worthy and those unworthy of remembrance. Modern civil war is not only a contest of power and legitimacy between contending and mutually negating political and military forces; the wars that took place in Korea and Vietnam were part of the process of decolonisation and nation and state building. This political process, against the background of civil war, inevitably involves some form of exclusionary or discriminatory politics against the defeated. Therefore, the idea of the nation or the ‘people’ that arises from such a milieu may be distinct from that which is based, for instance, on the experience of a political or armed struggle against colonial domination, although in the historical reality of the mid-twentieth century, as noted earlier while discussing the notion of the postcolonial Cold War, the decolonisation of the political order and the bipolarisation of politics were intertwined and often resulted in civil war-like crisis. The non-native aspect of public interests in the fate of the missing war dead is unintelligible, unless we bring into the picture a particular local heritage far away from the space of East Asia. This heritage is in origin distinctly American (see below), which may be summed up by the powerful slogan, ‘Until the Last Man Comes Home’. Although the ethos behind this slogan goes a long way back in American history, as Michael Allen explains, its political relevance and rhetorical power was magnified in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, especially during the Reagan era.

The contemporary histories of the Vietnam War and that of the Korean War are commonly subjected to a strong intervention by this slogan and the ethos it represents. I have previously engaged briefly with this ethos in the context of postwar Vietnam, especially in the central region. Here, I shift to that of the post-Korean War, where we also find a powerful public initiative concerning missing bodies of the fallen. This picture has an added complication, compared with that of Vietnam, as it concerns a civil-and-international war that has not ended yet, seventy years after the heavy guns fell silent. The violence of the Korean War stopped with an armistice agreement on 27 July 1953, which was not followed, unlike in other major military conflicts of the twentieth century, by a treaty of peace. This means that the Korean peninsula still is, in formality, in a state of war. The unending character of the Korean War has also both civil and international aspects to it. The civil part is the partition of the nation into two separate, mutually hostile polities, which makes the interests and actions concerning the missing war dead a profoundly political
question (in the sense Carl Schmitt propagated), grounded in the friend/enemy contrast.\textsuperscript{13} The international dimension of Korean War accounting involves not only the long-held American efforts but also, as we will see, China’s growing interest in this domain. In brief, the four principal actors in the Korean War MIA affairs are the two Korean states, the United States and China. In this sphere, moreover, the ties among these four state actors are contrary to what we are used to – the principal counterpart of the United States is Pyongyang rather than Seoul, whereas that of China has been South Korea in recent years, rather than North Korea, its traditional ally.

**South Korea’s MIA accounting**

The Army of the Republic of Korea initiated a Korean War MIA accounting programme in the lead-up to the fiftieth anniversary of the Korean War in 2000. Initially a modest project, by the end of the 2000s, the programme became firmly established as a distinct and worthy public policy, attracting intense public interest. The hugely popular war film, *The Brotherhood of War* (2004, also known as *Taegukgi*, South Korea’s national flag) played a considerable role in generating public interest in the army’s Korean War MIA mission. The story unfolds along contradictions between the amity of consanguine brotherhood and the enmity of political brotherhood – what Ambrose Bierce called ‘the masterwork of civil war’ against the background of American Civil War. It starts and ends with a moving scene of (post mortem) brotherly reunion at an army excavation site. The encounter is between an elderly South Korean veteran and his long-missing brother who, being his closest comrade-in-arms as well as paternalistic elder brother, was later killed in action on a hill as an officer of the North Korea’s elite shock-troops.\textsuperscript{14}

I joined the mission’s forensic anthropological taskforce in 2007 as an external advisor. This was the year when the previously army-managed modest activity was being upgraded in status and scale and subsequently transferred to the mandate of South Korea’s Ministry of National Defence. Since 2008, the mission’s official title has become the Ministry of National Defence Agency for KIA Recovery and Identification. The Korean KIA mission has since covered nearly all of the major battlegrounds of the Korean War (within the territory of South Korea), starting from the Nakdong perimeter, where the South Korean and US forces confronted North Korea’s strong People’s Army (KPA) in the early days of the war, from July to September 1950. Later the mission concentrated on the sites of vicious hill fights in the central region. This is where South Korean, US and other UN forces confronted the Chinese and North Korean forces, following China’s intervention in the Korean War in October 1950. This was a war of attrition whose condition was akin to the trench warfare of 1914–18 in northern France. The Hill Fight lasted until the very last day (and the last hour) of the Korean War on 27 July 1953. This is where the drama of *The Brotherhood of War* unfolds; it is also the background of another of popular war film South Korea’s, *Hill Fights* (*Gojijôn*, 2011), which features dreadful fights over the hills between the two Korean forces. In the cinematic history of the Korean War, the hill fights have long been a favourite subject.
The important war film of the earlier era, titled *The Marines Who Never Returned* (*Dolaoji atnín haebýung*, 1963), for instance, takes these hill fights as its dramatic, concluding episode, although here the fight is between Chinese troops and their outnumbered South Korean antagonists.

Modeled on the American MIA/POW (Prisoner of War) accounting agency, the Korean taskforce has recovered over ten thousand KIA remains, with estimated over 120,000 individuals yet to be accounted for. The taskforce collaborated with the US agencies and other former UN allies, such as Belgium. It briefly expanded its activity to Vietnam in 2015 (concerning Korean MIAs in the second Indochina war). There was even a discussion to collaborate with the North Korean counterpart on the surveying of the Demilitarized Zone, the heavily fortified 250 kilometre-long borderland between the two Koreas. However, the most notable aspect of the external activity of Korean KIA and MIA accounting involved China. In 2014, the remains of the Chinese volunteer soldiers to the Korean War that had been discovered as part of South Korea’s search-and-find activities began to be repatriated to their homeland, mostly to the CPV (Chinese People’s Volunteers) Martyrs’ Cemetery in Shenyang, Liaoning Province.

The last initiative was part of the rapid growth in economic ties between China and South Korea and subsequently became a notable event in the history of war commemoration in the broad region. The idea of bringing home the human remains lost in foreign wars is a modern invention, closely tied to America’s public history since its Civil War times. South Korea’s excavation activity has contributed to expanding this hitherto uniquely American tradition to an international practice, eventually involving China. Therefore, it may be argued that the commemoration of war has increasingly become an American art in this part of the world, irrespective of the fact that different states and societies within the region may not understand what they are doing in this light. In 2014–15, public enthusiasm in China concerning their homecoming heroes was nearly indistinguishable from what we had witnessed before in the United States regarding its own heroes from Korea. The immensely popular ‘Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea’ war campaign (i.e., Korean War) film in China, *My War* (2016), which features hill fights between the Chinese and US forces, testifies to this, and so does the following box-office hit, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021). These films were released when tensions between the United States and the People’s Republic of China were escalating on economic and military fronts, and because of this, there was a renewed interest in the Korean War, this time, as a formative episode of Sino-American relations. In this sense, the Korean War’s hill fights is far from an old history but increasingly a vital site of memory where the history and legacy of the Korean War as an international conflict are vigorously contested between two of the most powerful political entities of the contemporary world, the United States and China. Since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, this Sino-American dimension of the Korean War has been the subject of prolific investigations. This is in part because of the growing availability of previously inaccessible archival sources held in the former Soviet Union, China and elsewhere in former Eastern Bloc countries. The growing attention on the Korean War as a pivotal episode of
US–Chinese relations is also because the implications of this particular dimension of the war reverberate strongly in unfolding contemporary world politics. It is a broadly shared view among scholars of American history that the United States became a military superpower through the Korean War, and China’s pursuit of a great power status today, according to some historians of China, began with its active role in the Korean War (that is, in place of the USSR). According to these historians, China’s partaking in the Korean War raised the country’s authority as a revolutionary power to a status on a par with the Soviet Union. This led to the Sino-Soviet split starting in the late 1950s (together with the Chinese leadership’s discontent with the de-Stalinisation move in the Soviet Union following Khrushchev’s secret speech in the 20th Party Congress in February 1956). The result was the socialist international world having two bright-shining suns rather than one, as it were, which later developed into the détente and rapprochement moves between China and the United States in the 1970s (as a way of isolating and containing the Soviet power). Taking note of these historical backgrounds, we are nervously reminded of the critical fact that the 1950–53 war in Korea constitutes the singular space in modern history where young men from the United States and not-so-young men from China (many of the Chinese volunteers to the Korean War were battle-hardened former Kuomintang soldiers from the time of China’s civil war) took each other’s lives. We may add that in the escalation of hostility between the People’s Republic of China and the United States today, the diffusion of the art and politics of MIA/KIA recovery from one to the other power has played more than a marginal part.

The unaccounted-for remains of the Korean War have other geopolitical properties. Earlier, I mentioned the two distinct phases of the 1950–53 war. One was the standoff between North Korea’s rapidly advancing People’s Army forces and the South Korean and US defences along the Nakdong River in the peninsula’s southeast corner. Excavations on this battleground have recovered primarily Korean bodies (many of the KPA recruits were South Korean students and youth hastily mobilised within the KPA-occupied areas, and most of the fallen American bodies had been removed from the sites during the war and immediately afterwards). In contrast, the sites of chaotic hill fights, along the rugged mountain regions of central Korea, host a diverse group of fallen soldiers – American, French and other UN troops, as well as Chinese and Korean. What distinguishes these two phases was the northward advance of the US and South Korean troops following the amphibious manoeuvre in Incheon in September 1950 that broke the will and morale of the KPA forces. It also involves China’s all-out intervention in the theatre of the Korean War starting in late October 1950. Forced into a hasty and chaotic retreat, both the US and South Korean forces failed to recover numerous bodies of their fallen comrades during this time. The recovery of these long-lost bodies became a key issue in the negotiation between Washington and Pyongyang for possible rapprochement. This transpired primarily in the decade of the 1990s, during which the Clinton administration (1993–2001) pursued a similar policy in relation to Vietnam. Bringing home American heroes lost in Korea (and in Vietnam) was, in fact, one of Bill Clinton’s key pledges during his
election campaigns. The MIA-focused diplomatic initiative was abruptly discontinued under the following George W. Bush administration, shortly after Bush’s so-called Axis of Evil speech on 29 January 2002, in which he designated North Korea as part of three terrorism-breeding rogue states, together with Iraq and Iran. That was also when the so-called second North Korean nuclear crisis (relating to Pyongyang’s relentless pursuit of a nuclear-armed statehood) became an explosive issue in north-east Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific. Although discontinued, the initiative remains valid to date, occupying an important domain in the hopeful reconciliation and reproachment between Pyongyang and Washington. During the 2018 summit in Singapore between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, North Korea’s current paramount leader, for instance, the two countries’ collaboration on accounting for American servicemen missing from the Korean War was discussed, once again, as an important agenda.

Forensic work along the Nakdong perimeter primarily concerned, as mentioned, the remains of the Korean fallen. The Korean KIA/MIA taskforce consisted of a search-and-find team and an identification team, with the latter responsible for the classification of the found remains by racial and national belongings, as well as for DNA specification and storage. Those identified as belonging to the northern army are brought to a burial place near the Demilitarized Zone. As their activity went on, this place changed its name from the previous Cemetery for Enemy Soldiers to the Cemetery of North Korean and Chinese Combatants, a notable amendment indeed in view of the much-hoped-for future reconciliation between the two Koreas. One memorable episode was about a vivid dream that a member of the Korean KIA mission, an archaeology student, had one night. In her dream, a young woman wearing the uniform of a KPA officer was indignant at the archaeologist. The officer slapped her face, saying ‘How dare you treat my body that way!’ Hearing the story over the breakfast, members of the excavation team later concluded that the incident related to one of the few sets of human remains the team was working on during the previous days. We know that the archaeology student mishandled one thigh bone, breaking it into two pieces. Although the KPA officer was a southern Korean in origin (her remains were discovered together with two personal items, which indicated that before the war, the fallen soldier was a college student in Seoul), these ‘enemy remains’ did not go through any further identification procedure such as DNA extraction and recording. The last was reserved for human remains that were identified during the excavation team’s initial screening as belonging to South Korea’s national army or student volunteer corps.19

In contrast to these places, the work on old Hill Fight sites often yielded a more diverse collection of remains in terms of racial and national profiles, especially in places that had witnessed chaotic hand-to-hand fights. Many of these battlefields also changed hands several times. Having spent nearly two generations together, these remains parted company as they were being unearthed. They were moved to different resting places – laboratories and then South Korea’s national cemeteries, the POW/MIA Accounting Agency Forensic Identification Laboratory in Hawaii and further on, or the Resist America, Aid Korea War Martyrs Cemetery in China, which are all, despite directional differences, commonly organised

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19 For more information on this incident, see Human Remains and Violence 10(1) (2024), 55–67.
in discreet national groupings. Once gone this way, their old resting places – that is, the excavation sites on the hills – revert to unremarkable bushes, leaving no trace of cohabitation among groups and individuals across the thresholds of racial, national and political differences.

**Conclusion**

The above phenomenon speaks of the established art of war commemoration in modern politics. Modern war cemeteries embody some core principles of modern political life. Equality and fraternity are among them, as observed in the many First World War cemeteries dotting the former Western Front in northern France and western Flanders. In these places, the bodies of fallen soldiers are buried in simple, identical individual graves irrespective of their differences in class, rank and other social backgrounds – thus the principle of equality or ‘democracy of death’ as Thomas Laqueur calls it. Collectively, the fallen soldiers are typically divided into discrete national groupings and put to rest in separate national cemeteries.

There are exceptions, however. Notable among them is the St Symphorien military cemetery east of Mons in Belgium. Most soldiers buried in this place had fallen in the very early days of the First World War, during the Battle of Mons, before the war evolved into the trench warfare further west. The brutality of the trench war is well known; so are its tragic consequences. The victims of the trench warfare were mostly retained by their respective national armies and buried accordingly within the generally stagnant parameters to which these armies were holding on, with tremendous sacrifice of human lives. In contrast, the earlier conflict represented by the Battle of Mons was mobile and chaotic, with battlefronts changing rapidly in time, which resulted in the bodies of fallen soldiers being lost to the enemy group. Military burial customs were as yet undetermined in those early days of the conflict; the dead bodies were often hastily buried in village woods or elsewhere readily available. The result was military graveyards, such as the St Symphorien cemetery, where one group of fallen soldiers came to share their resting space with their enemies.

The St Symphorien military cemetery holds 284 German graves and 229 Commonwealth graves, including those of several Irish and Canadian servicemen. Among these are the first Commonwealth casualty of the First World War, John Parr of the Middlesex Regiment, and the last two casualties, George Ellison of the Royal Irish Lancers and George Price of the Canadian Infantry. Although their graves are organised into discrete, separate national groupings within the immaculately landscaped cemetery, the place as a whole constitutes a unique site of memory whose structure departs considerably from that of other better-known Western Front cemeteries. The idea of equality applies to both structural forms; in St Symphorien, as elsewhere, soldiers are buried in simple, nearly identical graves (although headstones differ slightly between British and German graves). However, the idea of fraternity, clearly and prominently manifested in other places, is far less certain in St Symphorien. In the latter, whereas British and German graves make up small circles of separate fraternal solidarity, the relationship between these
collectives of graves cannot be identified in the same language of solidarity or according to the existing idea of fraternity and national unity that are familiar in the history of modern war. It is observed that ‘Most of the Commonwealth dead at St Symphorien are buried in their own separate plots, but they lie close to the roughly equal number of German dead, and in one particularly symbolic corner of the cemetery a German corporal and an English officer are buried side-by-side.’

Currently, the manifest public image of the St Symphorien cemetery touches upon that poignant ‘symbolic corner’ noted above. This image is not of national solidarity but of an identity of solidarity that transcends national origins. In August 2014, in the run-up to the centenary of the First World War in 2014–18, the UK government decided to foreground the message of conciliation for its First World War Centenary, choosing to inaugurate the four-year process of commemoration at the British–German cemetery in St Symphorien. This followed the German and the French initiative to hold joint commemorative ceremonies at several locations in northern France. The latter culminated in a moving centennial ceremony of the Armistice held in the forest of Compiègne, north-east of Paris, jointly by the French President Emmanuel Macron and the German Chancellor Angela Merkel on 11 November 2018. The Centenary attracted a great deal of interest from the national and the local administrations of Europe, involving focused attention to the aesthetics of the mixed graveyard and to the related conciliatory gestures of collaborative commemoration.

The question then is: can we find a place like St Symphorien in the old theatre of the Korean War – at a time when there is a need to do so? This could be a time when a genuine peace is found in the region and when the sense of a community of nations has become a reality – a prospect still unforeseeable at the moment. Otherwise, it could be a time of crisis building up for a renewed conflict and, in view of this crisis, when the conscientious public can reflect on the futility and brutality of war. In fact, hundreds of St Symphorien cemeteries stand on the old sites of the Korean War’s hill fights. As the public policy of ‘Bring Them Home’ advances, however, these sites disappear from view and their unique compositions are obliterated.

The ethos of ‘Until the Last Man Comes Home’ is vital to the moral integrity of the modern nation-state, and it undoubtedly constitutes a far more superior form of dealing with modern warfare’s mass human sacrifice than, for instance, what we witness at the eastern end of Europe today, where bodies of fallen soldiers are reportedly being abandoned by their comrades-in-arms. However, this democracy of death may have its own limits and, at times, may need to be counterbalanced by a different ethics and aesthetics of death commemoration – an art of war commemoration that goes beyond the prevailing art of commemoration of the past century, which was singularly centred on the integrity of a national community. I believe that modern forensic anthropology is strong in its discomfort with the friend/enemy contrast and in its vocational ethics that takes all remains of the dead, whether friends or enemies, equally meaningful and all telling unique stories. This was the case with my colleagues and the students of anthropology and archaeology with whom I had the pleasure to work together during my time with the Korean Army’s KIA taskforce. The same was true with Professor Park Sun-ju, a
Heonik Kwon

renowned forensic expert who played a formative role in the army taskforce’s early activities. The taskforce’s judicious and painstaking work, nevertheless, also breaks apart the community of co-dwelling fallen soldiers and contributes to encapsulating them in narrowly defined fraternities. At the end of a laborious day under the scorching sun, the diggers, although utterly exhausted, are happy to have achieved some meaningful recovery and to have helped some old soldiers to find a way back to their homes. Am I alone, however, in feeling uncertain about whether what we achieved that day was truly the right thing to do?

In raising these questions, my intention is not to question the merit and the virtue of our effort to bring the old soldiers home. Homecoming is a powerful sentiment, as expressed in Donald Dawe’s 1968 lyric, ‘Homecoming’. What I ask is, rather, about a way to do justice to the long, common, intimate, neighbourly existence of these fallen soldiers – to preserve this material history that is no longer a material fact in the hills of the old Hill Fight. Am I wrong to imagine that some of the old soldiers of the Korean War Hill Fight, back in their homeland and resting in nice and beautifully landscaped national cemeteries, might wonder, then and now, ‘Where are my good old neighbours?’

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Notes

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11 Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*. This power derives from the collusion between popular family feelings (represented by the League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, and against the post-1975 Vietnam that these families believed were holding their beloved in captivity), on the one hand, and, on the other, the electoral politics that tapped into and mobilised these bitter feelings with a promise of punishment against the
imaginary captor (in the case of the POWs) in terms of economic and diplomatic blockade – until the normalisation of relations between the two countries in 1995. Throughout the early 1990s, MIA issues were at the centre of the US Congressional debates about the normalisation of diplomatic ties with Vietnam. The news media in the United States followed the army’s forensic expeditions to Vietnam closely, and so did their Vietnamese counterparts. The discovery of the American MIA in Indochina attracted wide public attention in both countries, and the progress in both forensic activity and diplomatic affairs appeared to be closely interconnected. When Bill Clinton came to Vietnam in November 2000 as the first US president to visit the country since Richard Nixon, the most memorable event of this historic visit, Clinton writes in his autobiography, was the trip to a mud field in the west of Hanoi. That place was the crash site of an F-105 fighter-bomber in November 1967, and it was where a team of American forensic anthropologists was searching for the remains of the pilot, Captain Evert, one of the US servicemen listed ‘missing in action’ from the Vietnam War. See Bill Clinton, *My Life* (London, Hutchinson, 2004), pp. 930–31.

12 H. Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 44–63. The number of American servicemen missing in action is relatively small in Vietnam, amounting to about 1,800, as compared to 8,000 in Korea.

13 C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2016 [1932]).


19 Such dream-time encounters with the souls of the dead (and sometimes even apparitions) are actually quite common in the fields of forensic activity, although these stories rarely appear in the academic or policy reports. Some of the members of the Korean Army forensic taskforce later engaged with the excavation of some of the numerous sites of large-scale Korean War civilian massacres. Here, dream encounters and apparitions were nearly everyday affairs. Relatedly, excavations in Korea (and in Vietnam) typically involve the traditional ‘open the soil’ ritual, addressed to the spirit of the mountain or that of the land under question. A similar ritual with food and alcohol offerings is usually held at the end of the excavation activity, this time addressed not only to the spirit of the land but also to all the human souls to whom the spirit played a generous host in the past years. For people directly involved in the excavation, such as the
scientists and the local government officials, these rituals are considered an imperative for the success of their activity as well as for their own safety (against anti-personnel mines and other deadly war remains). Again, such non-scientific, cultural activities are rarely mentioned in the reports of forensic anthropology. In Vietnam, the army and the government’s MIA missions mobilised assistance from actors specialising in spirit possession and communication in their search for the remains of the war dead, both American and Vietnamese. See Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*, pp. 51–7. The purging of these cultural and culturally meaningful experiences from the academic discourse is itself an interesting question. Seen from a different angle, such questions speak loudly of the relationship, or the lack of it, between modern anthropology’s two disciplinary wings, sociocultural and biological. What I say in this article’s concluding remarks speaks closely to the question of cultural diversity in the performance of forensic science.


21 E. Madigan, ‘St Symphorien Military Cemetery, the Battle of Mons and British centenary commemoration’, 13 June 2013, www.academia.edu/4645783/St_Symphorien_Military_Cemetery_the_Battle_of_Mons_and_British_Centenary_Commemoration (accessed 18 January 2024).


24 Madigan, ‘St Symphorien Military Cemetery’.
