

## LIVING WITH THE DEAD: MEMORY AND STATE AUTHORITY IN POST-SOCIALIST VIETNAM

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***Abstract:* The commemoration of war martyrs has been an important issue in contemporary Vietnam. These collective memories of war martyrs, however, do not appear independently but are organized and shaped by the powerful state machine. The state does not only control the means of remembering, but also prescribes rules for how the past should be remembered. Yet, the state's centralized authority is not absolute, since it exposes some limits and is challenged by local agents.**

***Keywords:* Collective memory, Communism, state authority, war martyrs, Vietnam**

Postwar societies, as observed by many scholars, are bound to the memory of the harsh past from which they are to build modern myths about submerging individuals, their suffering and sacrificing lives for the country (Mosse, 1990; Winter, 1995; Nelson, 2003). From France and Germany during and after the First World War until contemporary America and Japan, dead soldiers have been always presented, not only at physical sites of war memorials and cemeteries but also in representative collections of art. Though war has passed for

many years, the dead are still there, "living" on vividly with the living.

The fear, anger, and despair of individuals who have encountered mass death, going along with the mourning of those who have lost their brothers, fathers, and friends to the intensification of the organized violence of war, of course, keep the memory enduringly imprinted in individuals' consciousness. What, however, really underlies the large-scale obsession of the memory of the war dead - or to be more specific, the so-called cult of fallen soldiers - is more sophisticated, since it involves "the nationalization of death" (Mosse, 1990:37). Any attempt to understand this "centerpiece of the religion of nationalism" (Mosse, 1990; 7) should pay attention to its functions - both symbolic and literal - as well as the structure of power relations, and the meaning of the past and present it encompasses. In other words, the cult of fallen soldiers reflects the relationship between modern nation-states and their dead citizens, and how these political systems have inherited the traditional religious task of maintaining the ideologies of death as mechanisms of social control and manifestations of nationalist discourse. Thus, it is really an "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm, 1983) that acts on and often bypasses

individual consciousness and is promoted through institutional, organizational, and political entities as well as everyday sociocultural practices.

Following this lead, contemporary Vietnam provides a particularly significant area of study, in which a cultural – political intersection and an intertwining of religious practice and national ideology help the state continue to justify the veneration of war martyrs. In his study of the “social framework of memory”, Maurice Halbwachs argues that memories are socially constructed; social groups, not individuals, determine what should be remembered (Halbwachs, 1992). But memories, as Pierre Nora also reminds us, are malleable, “vulnerable in various ways to appropriation and manipulation” (Pierre Nora, 1989). In Vietnam, collective memories of war martyrs do not appear independently, rather they are organized and shaped by the powerful state machine, which not only controls the means of remembering but also prescribes rules for how the past should be remembered.

#### I. CATEGORIZATION OF WAR MARTYRS AND “CERTIFICATED” MEMORY

On 27th July, 1947, at a time when the Anti-French Resistance War<sup>1</sup> had just began, a meeting was held in a commune of Thai Nguyen province to approve the proposal offered by the Department of Politics of the Vietnam National Defence Army, which designated 27th July as the National War Invalids Day (*Ngày Thương Binh Quốc Gia*). One year later, the event was renamed the War Invalids and Martyrs Day (*Ngày Thương Binh Liệt Sĩ*). Hồ Chí Minh, President of the newly established state of The Democratic Republic of

Vietnam, also expressed his consent in his letters sent to the 1947 meeting and the ceremony in 1948. The 1948 letter read:

“They have determinedly sacrificed their lives to protect the lives of their compatriots.

They have sacrificed their families and properties to protect their compatriots’ families and properties.

They have risked their lives to fight the enemy so that our Fatherland and compatriots are alive.

Among them, many have left parts of their bodies on the battlefield. Many have died on the battlefield. They are war invalids and martyrs.

For whom they have sacrificed?

War invalids and martyrs have sacrificed for the Fatherland and compatriots.

To repay them for their meritorious efforts, our people must eternally record and remember the sacrifice of war invalids and martyrs. We must constantly study their courageous spirit to transcend all difficulties and tribulations”. (Hồ Chí Minh 1948 in Nguyễn, Lê, 2003: 508)

The designation of the War Invalids and Martyrs Day, together with Hồ Chí Minh’s statement may be seen as the official inception of the Vietnamese state’s articulation of a special category of the dead entitled “war martyr” (*Liệt sĩ*), which has persisted in Vietnam until the present. Like other socialist states such as the Soviet Union and China, the commemoration of war martyrs in Vietnam represents a sense of collective mourning within the framework of the Communist ideology and Socialist revolution (Malaney, 2002; Hung 2008; Hall, 2010). However, due to crucial changes which happened in the ideological fabric and political cultural domain of Communism and Socialism during the late 20th and the early 21st centuries, war martyr

remembrance remained (and remains) constantly subject to absorption of new styles and meanings. The most noticeable change could be seen in the semantics of the notion of war martyr, which was defined and later redefined by the Vietnamese state. In a 1957 government document, the early articulation of the war martyr was described as “a person who died gloriously on the field of honor in his struggle against imperialism and feudalism since 1925”. The document continued to emphasize that the war martyr had “courageously fallen at the front in the defence of the work of the national revolution” (Vietnamese Government 1957 in Nguyễn, Lê, 2003: 42). By including those who died in nationalist movements in 1925, before the Vietnamese Communist Party was founded, the statement clearly underscored the primacy of the struggle for national independence as the principal yardstick for determining the martyrdom<sup>2</sup>. It generally indicated war martyrs as someone who had performed noble deeds serving the revolution. However, later official recognition of the Vietnamese state exclusively indicated war martyrs as those who had died carrying out revolutionary duties, especially fighting on the battlefield. The aspect of killed-in-action became more dominant in defining liệt sĩ in later government documents in 1976 and 1995. War martyrs, hence, constituted an exclusive group<sup>3</sup>.

The designation of the category of war martyrs, as claimed by Malarney, involves a moral discrimination, since some deceased individuals are differentially evaluated by living social agents (Malarney, 2007: 517). Membership in the category of war martyrs is obviously the product of social action, but as it occurs posthumously, it is something that is attributed by others, and it is accordingly the result of actions of definable social actors. In the Vietnamese case, as described above, the most important

designator who justifies and determines the status of war martyrs is none other than the state. The relation between political authority and ultimate meaning of the dead in modern nation-states, as Bellah and Hammond note, “becomes more problematic than had ever been thought before” (Bellah, Hammond, 1980: x, quoted in Kears and Rinaldi, 1983: 670). Such a problem, I contend, can be seen in the ability of the Vietnamese socialist state and its Communist Party to establish a centralized authority over the national scale campaigns of legitimating and commemorating war martyrs. The establishment of a top-down administrative system which controls all commemorative projects helps bring the presence of state authority to national events and all local ones as well. The state operates its supervision by taking part in the planning process, providing the budget and inserting official representatives into commemorative projects. Since the 1950s, numerous government documents have been approved to enhance the state management in the affairs of war invalids and martyrs. This centralized authority aims to construct an image of martyrs and direct the commemorative activities to fit the political framework set by the state.

Over the decades, one has found on the wall of many homes throughout the country framed “*Tổ Quốc Ghi Công*” certificates given by the government to record the death of a soldier killed in battle and confirm his or her martyrdom status. The certificate was officially designed and has been offered to the families of war martyrs since 1951. It was described as an approximately twelve by fifteen inch paper, upon which was inscribed in large red lettering, *Tổ Quốc Ghi Công*, literally rendered as “The Country of the Ancestors Records Your Works”, but perhaps more accurately rendered as “The Fatherland Remembers Your Sacrifice”. This certificate recorded the

perished soldier's name, natal commune, and death date. It was issued for every martyr and definitely marked the deceased's assumption of that status by its replacement in large black letters of the words "war martyr" before the deceased's name. It also stated that the soldier had sacrificed his life during the war and included an inscription along the bottom that read, "Eternally remember the moral debt (on) to the war martyrs who have sacrificed their lives for a bright future for the people" (*Đời đời nhớ ơn các liệt sĩ đã hi sinh cho tương lai đất nước*). (Nguyễn, Lê, 2003: 164, 219, 244, 405; Malarney, 2002: 172-79). The certificate was given to the martyr's family in an official memorial service for war dead (*Lễ Truy Diệu*), which was designed by the state in 1972, and was organized at the dead soldiers' homes. The memorial ceremony service was instructed in a government document as "expressions of gratitude, respect and responsibility the state, party and people have for the martyrs and their families. They also commemorate the martyrs in earnest in order to heighten people's political consciousness and enable them to learn from the martyr's revolutionary spirit" (Nguyễn, Lê, 2003: 218-19).

The construction and legitimation of the image of dead soldiers, however, calls for wider attention from the public. The declaration of a special day honoring the dead soldier is, of course, not unique to Vietnam and it is widely observed in other nations as well. Memorial Day in the United States and Heroes Memorial Day in Hitler's Third Reich, the Martyrs' Memorial Day in China all share a similar meaning with the War Invalids and Martyrs Day in Vietnam. This kind of calendrical event which "occurs and is repetitive at a fixed time", Connerton reminds us, "does not simply imply continuity with the past but explicitly claims such continuity" (Connerton, 1989: 45). The public commemoration of the death of war martyrs

through an annual event in Vietnam, moreover, is formalized, and tends to be stylised and stereotyped under the instruction of the socialist state policies. The practice of honoring martyrs was repeated every year in every commune in the North of Vietnam from the late 1940s to the late 1970s. Every year, on this occasion, an official meeting with the participation of state and party leaders was organized in the capital, going along with ceremonies in every local commune for all residents to attend. In both levels, celebration activities included presenting gifts to the families of war martyrs and giving laudatory speeches recording their sacrifices. Letters from the President of the state or from the General Secretary of the party sometimes were read at the ceremonies as a way to pay respects for the martyrs, as well as encourage the fighting spirit of the people. The mourning for the fallen then was expressed by observing a moment of silence and wreaths offering by ceremonial participants at war memorials. After the reunification of the country in 1975, this public annual event was spread to Southern Vietnam. The official meeting of the state and party leaders in the capital has been eliminated. Instead, some of them would pay visits to local ceremonies or families of war martyrs. However, as Malarney (2007) points out, the self-consciousness of the state regarding its social power does not allow the majority of public commemorations to turn into national-level events. On the contrary, the state keeps the number relatively small, while at the same time plays its role as patron of national/local tradition as well as of progress.

The commemoration of fallen soldiers is inseparable from its tangible structures, namely war memorials in the form of military cemeteries, commemorative monuments and martyrs' shrines (Mosse, 1990; Winter, 1995). Such physical structures, to borrow a term from Pierre Nora,

“site of memory”, allow mourners actually to feel, see and touch material objects during their remembrance of the dead. More important, perhaps, is that people can actually visit physical sites, and hence these locations are ideal locations for political indoctrination. “These tangible symbols of the cult of the fallen”, claims Mosse, “became shrines of national worship”. (Mosse, 1990: 80).

Monuments to the war dead are certainly common in many nations. From the Acropolis to the Arc de Triomphe, as Jay Winter points out, war memorials have occupied a central place in the history of European architecture (Winter, 1995; 79). These projects of martyr commemoration began soon after the end of the Anti-French Resistance War in 1954, and have expanded in quantity and scale in an essentially unchanged ascending fashion since then. 4 All monuments and war memorials have been designed and constructed under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture, being visible in nearly every commune and district in the lowlands. Often tall spires adorned with a red or gold star at their apex, and the words “The Fatherland Remembers Your Sacrifice” or “Eternally Remember the Moral Debt to the Martyrs” written across the base, these monuments provide continued public testimony to those who gave their lives for the country. War martyr monuments, thus, have been considered to be architectures specifically designed to embody and uphold socialist characteristics and ideals. The most important monument for war dead, the Bắc Sơn monument, completed in 1995, now sits directly across from Hồ Chí Minh mausoleum in Hanoi’s Ba Đình Square. These monuments are still the focus of official commemoration on War Invalids and Martyrs Day.

Beside war monuments erected in public spaces to honor and commemorate the fallen, war cemeteries as their final resting place have been dotting the country.

Those who perished on the battle of Điện Biên Phủ and in the Anti-French Resistance War are honored in the Điện Biên Phủ Cemetery, a war memorial complex constructed after 1954. By the end of the 1990s, the cemetery contains the bodies of 4,030 communist comrades and soldiers (Nguyễn, Lê, 2003: 563). An even larger cemetery is the Trường Sơn National Cemetery whose construction was started in October 1975 and completed in April 1977. The cemetery covers almost 202 acres and includes a war memorial located in the top of a 32-meter-hill. As the largest war cemetery in Vietnam, it is the final resting place for 10,333 war martyrs who died in the Anti-American War. The memories of the war dead are also kept alive through the delineation of special areas in local cemeteries reserved for war dead. Every local administrative unit in Vietnam has a war martyrs’ cemetery built at the center of the community’s public space. By 2001, these local war cemeteries contain 783,368 tombstones of war martyrs (Nguyễn, Lê, 2003: 610). In both war cemeteries and civic cemeteries, tombs of war martyrs are stylized and distinguishable, each grave also has a small headstone on which display a red star above the deceased’s name, rank, and death date.

We know, from the historical documents, to deal with the issue of human cost in war always calls for a great effort. Tens of thousands of Northern Vietnamese died in military service, first in the French War (1946 – 1965), then in the struggle to unify the country from 1959-1975 (Hirschman, Preston and Vũ Mạnh Lợi, 1995, quoted in Endres, Lauser, 2011: 124). How to explain such unthinkable cost in human life has been the question posed to the party and state during and after the war. By constructing an ideal image of the fallen who have died for the noble cause of defending the country, the state and party sent out a message that was: “the death must be

honored, not be seen in vain". For them, this turned out to be an ideal time to merge death with nationalism by transforming wartime sacrifice into political gains. Mourning for the dead was general, yet it was not dominant in the official narrative of war in Vietnam, at least until the late 1980s. Instead, a sense of pride and a feeling of having taken part and sacrificed in a noble cause were transmitted and implanted into the people's consciousness as a central discourse of the government agenda to glorify war death. During the nation-building process, the martyrs had embodied insurrectionary agents that "opened the path to independence and freedom, prosperity and happiness toward a bright future of Socialism and Communism. (Lê Duẩn in Vietnam News Agency, 24 July 1974 quoted in Pike, 1986: 314)

More importantly, the official social discourse on the war martyrs, which was constructed during the 1905s-1980s, provided evidence of the attempt to transcend the death within the framework of atheism prevailed in the socialist regime. Like many communists in the Soviet Union or China, Vietnamese communists tried to dispense with the religious element from the practice of commemoration to the dead. Death should be honored since it was the result of a real and noble action, not a consequence of a magic force. In other words, the socialist state in Vietnam attempted to replace the religious authority with the political one in dealing with death. It was, of course, just one part of a wider campaign in secularizing cultural life of the revolutionary government.

However, as collective memory is a process embracing not only an official or grand narrative but many other counter narratives, the top-down approach conducted in Vietnam was never absolute, at some time, the government had to face the challenge from other local agents.

The challenge has become more obvious since the Post-socialist shift happened in the late 1980s.

## II. THE SPIRIT, (RE)ENCHANTMENT AND THE LIMITS OF STATE AUTHORITY

Long before the modern nation-state and the concept of citizenship role emerged, individuals had attained their membership within a religious system in which one's death and its meaning to the society had been accompanied by ritual and explained by religious beliefs. Like many Southeast Asian countries, the dead are important components in many religions in Vietnam. Most importantly, the religious significance of the dead derives from the belief in the afterlife and the theory of the body's constitution which defined by Durkheim and other scholars as Animism (Durkheim, 1925; Tylor, 1871). Most Vietnamese people believe that each body has one soul (*hồn*) and several life spirits (*vi*), seven for men and nine for women. When one dies, the life spirits die with the body but the soul lives on and transfers to the Otherworld (*Thế Giới Khác*). This ontology gives rise to two separate moral domains of the disembodied souls of the dead - ancestors and ghosts. The differentiation between the status as an ancestor or a ghost depends on many factors, among which the most important include conditions of the death and appropriateness of the rites of passage. Being advanced in years, having many children as survivors, dying quickly and painlessly, having one's corpse complete, and dying at home all constitute a favorable end of an individual life. In addition to these factors, if funeral rites for the dead are correctly performed by the living, the soul will successfully move to the Otherworld and become a benevolent family ancestor who

will care for the family and reciprocally be cared for by those it left behind. Whereas, many conditions such as dying young, childless, violently, away from home, and/or in such a manner that the corpse is mutilated or incomplete create the dangerous possibility that the soul will be unable to make its passage to the otherworld to become a benevolent, cared-for ancestor. Instead, it will become a malevolent, wandering, hungry ghost that is doomed to eternally roam the earth.

The dead, thus, play a central role in religious discourse which deeply roots itself in the Vietnamese moral imagination of the indebtedness and dependence of the living on the dead. The souls of the dead exercise a powerful influence over the world of humans. Such a problem of religious regime, as we can see in the previous section, has been partly inherited by the socialist state to create a grand narrative of the glorious death of war martyrs. However, a close examination in the intersection of different discourses – national-patriotic, spiritual-religious, and revolutionary- under the centralized authority of the Vietnamese socialist state shows a number of powerful cultural dilemmas. As mentioned above, the official commemoration of war martyrs is one of the central concerns of the Vietnamese state. Besides dotting the landscape with war cemeteries and memorials, an official memorial service is created to honor the contributions of the war dead on a more individual level. Dedicated solely to the glorification of dead soldiers' contributions to the noble cause of national independence and reunification, however, these ceremonies do not address the one issue that is most crucial in Vietnamese cultural ways of conceptualizing and dealing with death: the fate of a dead person's soul.

The deaths of war martyrs though as honored by the state, often involve every possible dimension of bad

deaths according to Vietnamese religious belief. Young, childless men died painful, violent deaths, usually hundreds miles from home. The novelist Bảo Ninh vividly describes the frightening desolation of the jungle haunted by the souls of dead soldiers whose bodies had been blown apart by heavenly artillery in Vietnam's central highlands: "They were still loose, wandering in every corner and bush in the jungle, drifting along the stream, refusing to depart for the otherworld...The sobbing whispers were heard deep in the jungle at night, the howls carried on the wind. Perhaps they really were the voices of wandering souls of dead soldiers" (Bảo Ninh, 1996: 6). The living relatives of dead soldiers, thus, have to experience the trauma of losing their family members, especially the painful feeling when thinking of them as hungry ghosts wandering the country. For this reason, it is necessary for them to conduct special rites to pray for the souls of the dead to rest and send them to the Otherworld. Proper funeral rites include many special practices such as "calling the soul" (*Gọi hồn*), "request for the soul" (*Câu hồn*), which will be carried out by Buddhist specialists or spirit priests at the family ancestral altar, the portal, through which the soul can begin its passage. Especially, in such rites, the living usually burn votive paper objects (*Hàng mã*). These objects, fashioned of colored paper wrapped around bamboo frames, represent gold, money, clothing, or other items for use by the dead in the otherworld. They are offered during rituals, and then burned to transmit them, via the smoke, to the Otherworld (Malarney, 2002; Endres, 2011).

However, during the post-revolution period, these desires of the bereaved conflicted with the state's perspectives and policies on secularizing and rationalizing the society. In 1943, the Vietnamese Communist Party, in its "Theses on Vietnamese Culture", introduced three

principles: nationalization, popularization, and scientism (*đan toc hoa, dai chung hoa, khoa hoc hoa*) as the “guiding concepts for the project of building a ‘new culture’ and a ‘new life’” (Ministry of Culture, 2004: 48). A confident, modern rationality was proposed to become the central principal of the new society. The new culture and society championed atheism (*Chủ nghĩa vô thần*), rejecting the notion that anything other than empirically verifiable causality existed in human life. Beliefs in supernatural forces and the soul’s continuous existence after death were to be replaced by a ‘scientific spirit’ that sought truth from provable facts rather than through spirit practices (Vietnamese Government, 1962; Malarney, 1996, 2002). Feudal culture and ideology had been predicated upon a complex of “superstitions” (*Mê tín dị đoan*). In order to combat superstitions, the party vigorously banned several formerly prominent ritual practices in which the living attempted to contact and influence the supernatural world. Such cultural campaigns were influenced by the French colonial modernization discourses and the early Vietnamese nationalist ideas of cultural self-enlightenment, yet more importantly, they presented a Communist vision of revolution and modernization within the framework of Marxism, Leninism (Trần Độ, 1986; Marlaney, 2002; Pelly, 2002; Taylor, 2005). This “wholly modern revolutionary organization” seemed to achieve its logical culmination in Lenin’s creation of an austere, disciplined and single-minded functional and a consciously encouraged system of “ritualistic” ceremony, comparable in forms and scale to that of the major religions, but based on an atheistic belief-system (Binns, 1979: 585). Reformed ritual practice, therefore, was not devoted to influencing the Otherworld to gain favors for oneself or for one’s living or dead relations. Reformed

ritual was performed solely to celebrate the secular virtues of the revolutionary state (Malarney, 1996: 542).

Despite the traditional belief in the existence of ghosts and traumatic feeling experienced by the bereaved, the state kept manipulating and promoting a constraint upon the ways in which people engaged the war dead. The state considered the war martyrs as the “exceptional dead” (Malarney, 2007), they represented revolutionary and communist virtues such as “willingness for sacrifice”, reminding people of the glory of the anti-foreigner tradition. As officially stated, the dead war martyrs were to be ‘respected’ (*Kính trọng*) and the people’s debt to them remembered (*Nhớ ơn*), but it was inappropriate to ‘worship’ (*Thờ*) them (Taylor, 2004: 204). As a result, the hands of the state reached down to the practices of ritual at family and individual levels. The tradition funeral rites both for war martyrs and civilians were replaced by a sole socialist model, in which all feudal elements were purged and the rites were to be egalitarian; all elements of the supernatural were to be eliminated (Malarney, 1996, 2002). Additionally, an official commemorative service (*Lễ Truy Diệu*) was created with the presence of government officials whose speeches, written based on the templates in government documents, to honor the death of war martyrs became the central part of the whole service. Malarney points out, “the insertion of local officials into these rites, and particularly their assumption of control over the speeches played a critical role in the realization of the government’s agenda to transform the rites into vehicles for official propaganda” (Marlaney, 2002; 143). By the end of the 1960s, the government had succeeded in bringing all aspects of religious and ritual life under its control, first done in the Northern half of the country. The campaigns

then were spread across the regions after the reunification of the country in 1975.

The (re)construction of the past, however, always contains a tension between the official and alternative visions (Foucault, 1977; Connerton, 1989; Bodnar, 1992). To deal with the socialist state's ban on the practice of spiritual-based rituals, many families secretly carried them out as a way to reduce their pain of losing relatives in the warfare or the anxiety about their possible loss. Many families were creative in their means of resistance, instead of inviting spirit priests, they chose a young sibling of the dead to take this place. While votive paper was outlawed and for the most part disappeared from public life, secret production and trade within people's homes allowed usage to continue (Malarney, 2002; Kwon, 2008). This contestation secretly occurred in families and local villages in the 1970s-1980s, yet it played an important role in the transformation of socio-political and cultural landscape in Vietnam in the following three decades (Luong, 2007: 443).

Indeed, many changes have occurred since the late 1980s. While war cemeteries and monuments have been important destinations for pilgrims, many families have organized trips to former battlefields in Southern and Central Vietnam to search for remains of the dead soldiers. For the bereft, retrieving the mortal remains of a missing relative is of the utmost importance in order to ensure the soul's safe transition to the Otherworld through a proper reburial and thus to avoid the illness or misfortune that could be inflicted upon them by the angry ghosts of the uncared-for dead (Kwon, 2008; Endres and Lauser, 2012). News about these trips has been publicly available in the state's media. Vietnamese television has broadcast a number of shows that followed both family and military efforts to locate remains. In the mid-

1990s, many people started to mention a "new method" of finding the burial place of soldiers (Nguyễn Việt Chiến, 1997; Xuân Nguyễn, 1997). The new method, in fact, employs the ability of certain individuals to communicate with the souls of the dead. These individuals are referred to as *nhà ngoại cảm*, a neologism that can be translated as "a specialist in extrasensory perception", or, to use a popular Western term, a "psychic". This method has been reported to be successful in finding the remains of thousands of soldiers and revolutionary comrades, including those of former Party leaders (Malarney, 2002; Nguyễn Bằng, 2007; Schlecker and Endres, 2011; Endres and Lauser, 2011). The apparent success of psychics in finding the graves of the missing war dead has given them such credibility that a whole semi-official grave-finding service has developed since the mid-1990s. Much to the dismay of local authorities, individual spirit practitioners soon achieved considerable fame for their apparent success in finding the skeletal remains of the missing in unmarked burial sites or in nameless graves at war cemeteries. Some of these searches, however, were conducted under the official supervision of the provincial People's Committee (Xuân Nguyễn, 1997; Schlecker and Endres, 2011).

Going along with the new method of finding the graves of missing war dead, many religious-based rituals have been conducted, among them the most important is the Buddhist requiem. The overall aim of this ritual is to invoke all Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Saints to facilitate the soul's salvation. These requiems have been organized by families in the death anniversary of the war martyrs, or at war cemeteries, and monuments (Endres and Lauser, 2012). Recently, the state has been involved in organizing these requiems as an activity to celebrate the

War Invalids and Martyrs Day. One requiem organized in 2012 was widely reported in mass media as following:

On July 27th, 2012, at 6 o'clock in the morning, bells were rung in all Buddhist temples throughout the country, marking the inception of a day-long requiem which was part of the activities to celebrate the 65th anniversary of the War Invalids and Martyrs Day. Buddhists, and relatives of martyrs and veterans from different parts of the country gathered at two main places for the simultaneous rites, Hoe Nhai pagoda in Hanoi and the Road 9 National Cemetery in Quang Tri province. Millions of people who could not attend the ceremonies in person would be able to watch them live on their television sets.

The requiem commenced first at the Road 9 National Cemetery when the President of the Vietnamese State accompanied by delegations from the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of National Defense, the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, the Hanoi municipal Party Committee and the Hanoi municipal People's Committee offered wreaths at the Martyr Memorial Monument and lit incense sticks at the altars. Monks then chanted, and the requiem lasted several hours. At 6.30 pm, thousands of paper lanterns were floated down the West Lake in Hanoi and the Thach Han River in Quang Tri. Finally, at 8pm, in 2,562 cemeteries in 63 provinces and cities, about 900,000 local youth lit candles to pray for peace for the soldiers. This was the first time a governmental agency, the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, officially cooperated with a religious association, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, in organizing a public ceremony to commemorate the war dead.

After several decades since the centralized authority and strict control of the socialist state has been practiced

in the entire country what has made the transformation in the cultural discourse of war dead commemoration happen? What has given rise to the public revival of practices which were once considered as "superstitious"? Why has state actively involved itself in the rituals which they labeled as "backward" and unsuitable to the modern socialist culture? Many scholars see the resurgence of ritual and religious practice in Vietnam as a result of the Renovation Program (*Đổi Mới*) which has been conducted in Vietnam since 1986 (Luong, 2007; Tylor, 205). The state has loosened their control over the ritual life, and given more space for individuals and local communities to bring religious elements into commemorative projects. This movement has been affirmed as a "transformative dialogue" (Marleney, 1996); or a "dialogic restructuring of rituals" (Luong, 2007) happening between the state and local communities. It also presents the limits of state functionalism in secularizing ritual practice toward the dead (Malarney, 1996).

I agree with these scholars in this approach; however, I argue further that the main purpose of the state in changing policy is to exploit the advantage of religious and ritual practice in attracting and mobilizing the populace. Buddhist practices could be defined as "backward" elements, and unsuitable for the nation-making project in 1950s-1980s; however, they are now good elements to attract the attention of the people to commemorative projects today. The spirits do not exist in general; yet the war martyrs might be considered "exceptions" since they sacrificed their lives for the independence of the nation. Honoring war martyrs through traditional religious rituals can be referred to as the familiar tactic of "pouring new wine into an old bottle" as we have seen in many other Western countries (Ozouf, 1975; Connerton, 1989; Mosse, 1990; Winter, 1995; Hung, 2008). Though the

state has not officially accepted the existence of the soul of dead soldiers and the afterlife, it in fact has supported and actively involved itself in rituals related to this moral imagination. The main motivation of this change can be explained as the state has recognized the potential of religious practices as a tool to unite the people and create a nation of “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991).

### III. CONCLUSION

The evocative capacity and political inflection of war martyrdom makes this death an ideal concept to be examined through the lens of collective memory. As Halbwachs explains, it is within social contexts that individuals “recall, recognize, and localize their memories,” and then through individual memories that social groups realize their power (Halbwachs, 1992). In the case of Vietnam the status of war martyrs is not claimed through the inherent virtue of their actions, but rather posthumously produced by meanings woven through social webs of commemoration. Like the case of China, in its creation of the cult of war martyrs, the Vietnamese socialists have employed death both to achieve maximum political power and to reaffirm socialist values (Hung, 2008: 290). By promoting the official image of the martyrs who had been willing to fight against foreign invaders and sacrifice their lives for the country, the state seeks to invent and reinforce the solidarity of a Vietnamese nation as a shared community with common goals and collective experience. This underscored coherence rather than difference, consensus rather than discord. But, despite the state’s many means of and attempts at controlling publicity, including creating War Invalids and Martyrs Day and building war memorials, its control sometimes

proved limited, for the reasons noted above: the public nature of the official commemorations could not dismiss their intensely private relevance to those who mourned the dead, and thus the ceremonies could never be entirely manipulated by state hegemony.

In a broader social context, projects on commemorating war martyrs in Vietnam present a cultural dilemma and a crisis of authority experienced by many other Southeast Asian countries (Keyes, Laurel and Hardacre, 1994; Malarney, 1996; Taylor, 2005). These problems have emerged as a consequence of the modernization and national-building process. While the modernization stance leads to a de-emphasis of ritual practices, the nation-building, on the other hand, leads to the promotion of selected practices and even the invention of new rites (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Modernization emphasizes rational action; nation-building insists on a commitment of faith. The crisis has become the impetus for the Vietnamese state to modify its policies, especially in the post-socialist transformation. While its attempt to “re-inscribe the local landscape within its own totalizing order” (Anagnost, 1994, in Keyes, Laurel and Hardacre, 1994: 230) has exposed some limits, it has to seek other means to deal with all fundamental existential problems that people encounter.

### ENDNOTES

- [1] Normally, many professional Vietnamese historians assert that the postcolonial moment happened in Vietnam in 1945, right after the victory of the August Revolution and the emergence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in September 1945. However, one year later, the French came back in 1946 and reestablished their colonial rule in Vietnam. Therefore, the postcolonial shift, in fact, was delayed until 1954 when the First Indochina

War was concluded in the Geneva conference, marking the end of French colonial rule. The Geneva treaty agreements, however, partitioned Vietnam with a Communist Party-ruled government in the North and an anti-Communist government in the South. The Second Indochina War, widely known as the Vietnam War or The anti-American Resistance War for National Salvation (Kháng chiến chống Mỹ cứu nước) then happened from late 1950s-1975. This was a violent struggle between the North Vietnam led by the Communist party and the socialist state on one side and the South Vietnam government directly supported by the U.S on the other side. Thus, the period from the late 1950s to 1975, Vietnam had two separate states and two different political institutions in the two parts of the country.

The country was officially unified in 1975. The government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Vietnamese Communist Party set out to consolidate the country economically and politically under the banner of socialism.

This postwar subsidy era (1975-1986) was a time of hardship and isolation when people who had sacrificed their homes, their land and their children during decades of war faced a seemingly endless deprivation of basic necessities. This time was also a dark period for cultural activities since ritual practices were limited, many religions were banned, etc.

Reforms did emerge in the mid-1980s with changes in Party leadership and influence from external conditions. However, Vietnam is still a one-party state. The Politburo, selected by the Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party, shapes government policy and the Party's Central Military Commission makes decisions on military policy.

- [2] In the mid-1920s, nationalist movements in Vietnam were led by the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNP), a political party of Hanoi-based intellectuals. Modeling itself on the Chinese Goumintang, the VNP under the leadership of Nguyễn Thái Học sought independence from French colonial rule. It published many revolutionary materials and attracted attention through its assassinations of French officials and Vietnamese collaborators. However, the movement was quickly put down under the suppression

of the French. The leader of the VNP, Nguyễn Thái Học was captured and executed in 1930.

- [3] Thus, the soldier who was killed in battle was a martyr (*Liệt sĩ*), whereas other soldiers and volunteers who died from the accidents or disease while serving in military service were classified as "war dead" (*tử sĩ*) and the large numbers of North Vietnamese civilians killed in American bombing raids were "victim of war" (*nạn nhân chiến tranh*).
- [4] The first official monument built by the socialist state to commemorate the fallen soldiers erected in the capital in 1955. The monument was built of wood including a single pillar stood up and a curved roof. The most outstanding feature of this monument was the phrase "The Fatherland Remembers Your Sacrifice" vertically inscribed on the pillar. Erected in the Ba Đình Square, a historical site of Hanoi, the monument immediately attracted the attention of the public. Its design also became the model for many war monuments in North Vietnam in the 1950s-1960s. The monument was dismantled in 1957, and rebuilt with bricks at the Mai Dich cemetery several years later.
- [5] The official presence at the ceremony was extensive including the secretary of the Communist party cell, the President or Vice-President of the People's Committee of the commune in which the family resided. On some occasions every member of the executive committee of the administration and the party cell attended. Some other representatives from the agricultural cooperative and the party's mass organizations were also invited to the ceremony (Nguyễn, Lê 2003: 218-219; Malarney 2002: 172-79).
- [6] Doi Moi was designed to transform the Vietnamese economy from a socialist, centrally planned economy to one driven by the market. During the implementation of these reformations, central features of socialism, especially the monopoly of political activity by one party, the Communist Party, and the social ownership of the most important means of production, have been strongly upheld by socialist authorities. However, privatization and opening the country to foreign investment has been gradually carried out. Civil society and non-state organizations have been given more space.