

Understanding Asia: Bridging Margins

Between Spiritual Care and Forensic Care: Situating the Remains of War Dead in Contemporary Vietnam

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Zoom event

The wars that Vietnam fought in the 20th century claimed millions of Vietnamese lives. An estimated 1.2 million died while fighting for the Vietnamese communist state and were recognized and honored as martyrs. Nearly half of these martyrs are either buried as unknown combatants in state-designated martyr cemeteries or are reported missing. Facing the challenge of finding and identifying millions of missing war dead, Vietnamese families have resorted to 'spiritual forensics' since the 1990s, a variety of spiritual techniques to locate and name the dead. To counter spiritual forensics, in 2013 the Vietnamese state began to import top-notch DNA-based forensic technology, which is exclusively used for the identification of the remains of those who died fighting for, not against, the communist government.

In this talk, I shall explain the impact of the use of forensic science on the identification process and on the politics of remembrance in Vietnam. My research data points to the fact that the introduction of DNA technology is largely another way in which the Vietnamese state tries to control its population. Moreover, the act of extracting DNA is seen by many as an act of posthumous violence done to the remains of the dead. This raises the question to what extent science can frame Vietnam's commemoration of war, particularly in shaping what recovery efforts and identifications mean to families of the missing. The contentious bones of the Vietnamese war dead continue to juggle between spiritual care and forensic care while testing the limits of science and structuring the intimate relationship between the living and the dead in Vietnam.

Dr. Tâm T. T. Ngô studies religious changes, the dialogues between spiritualism and sciences, and memory politics in post-war late socialist Vietnam and China using anthropological methods and discourse analysis. She also conducted ethnographic fieldwork among Vietnamese former guest-workers and boat refugees in Germany.