

# Introduction

On the twenty-fourth day of the first lunar month of 1968, the Year of the Monkey, Ha My suffered the shattering tragedy of surrendering an entire village population to a crime of war. On this fateful day, three platoons of foreign soldiers closed in on the small coastal settlement south of Da Nang from three directions and assembled the villagers at three different locations. The killing began with a hand gesture from the officer, which triggered the automatic rifles and grenade launchers. One hundred and thirty-five elders, women, and children from the village's thirty households were massacred within two hours. After the killing, the army bulldozers buried the bodies en masse and desecrated the shallow graves of the victims that had been hastily prepared by the few survivors. This was the time of the Tet Offensive, when practically the entire countryside in southern and central Vietnam became a "free-fire zone," meaning that any objects within it were legitimate targets of destruction, in response to the nationwide assaults by the communist forces against the urban areas controlled by South Vietnam and its allies. A month after this incident, a similar tragedy happened in the neighboring province of Quang Ngai, later known to the international community as the My Lai Massacre.

These two incidents were only a small part of the gigantic human catastrophe that devastated Vietnam in the second half of the 1960s. A systematic mass killing of civilians by ground troops was sweeping across a vast area of the central region, and the indiscriminate bombing of populated areas had become routine. The massacres in Ha My and My Lai

were closely connected too, and their connectedness was at once regional and global in scope. Two key military allies to the former South Vietnam, the United States and the Republic of Korea, were responsible for the atrocities. The massacre in Ha My was one among the numerous incidents of mass killing in central Vietnam perpetrated by the South Korean expeditionary forces from 1966 to 1969, and it took place on February 25, 1968, according to the Western calendar, shortly after the Fifth U.S. Marine regiment had banded the responsibility for security in the village area to their Korean colleagues.<sup>1</sup> My Lai also suffered devastation related to a changeover of troops. On March 16, 1968, three platoons of Task Force Barker closed in on the area of My Lai from three directions and forced the villagers to assemble at three locations. Just before this operation, which resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths, "the area circled in red ink under the special duty of Brigade 2, South Korean Marine from January 1967 to December 31, 1967, was handed over to Task Force Barker, Brigade 11, Americal Division from the above mentioned time."<sup>2</sup>

The connectedness of these incidents was not limited to the dynamic theater of a territorial war but also had a global dimension. This was not merely because the guilty were international actors coming from across the East and the West. The crimes were inseparable from the bipolar geopolitical structure and the interstate network dominant at the time, which we call the Cold War. This structure brought the two (and other) international actors together in the name of a crusade against communism, and this network ultimately drove the minor actor, which some earlier observers called "America's rented troops," to be more active in violent village pacification operations than the dominant one without attracting attention from the international community.<sup>3</sup>

It took only a few hours to annihilate each village; it has taken more than thirty years to revive the ruins. After the war was over in 1975, the survivors were not able to commemorate the tragic death publicly and in ways they considered appropriate. The postwar state hierarchy of Vietnam promoted the worship of the heroic war dead to a civic religion and, in doing so, demoted the traditional culture of death commemoration.<sup>4</sup> The bodies of the fallen revolutionary soldiers and the monuments that celebrate their regenerative spirits were prime symbols for the nation's unity and for its prosperous and enlightened future. The unmarked graves that held the entangled bodies of village women and children were not a desirable object in this postwar construction of national memory. These mass graves were evacuated as village land was prepared for agri-

cultural production; the individual tombs of fallen soldiers took their place at the center of the village to bless the nation's posterity.

A generation after the end of the war, the political economy of memory is changing in Vietnam. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the people of Ha My and My Lai have been busy renovating the places of the dead. This intense activity is part of "the commemorative fever" and the popularity of *việc họ*, or "the work of family ancestral worship," which has been rising since the late 1980s, when the global structure of the Cold War began to disintegrate and general economic and social reform was initiated in Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> Ancestral rites, according to Shaun Malarmey, became a critical locus for state action in revolutionary Vietnam and, after 1989, a principal site for a contest of power between the state and the family.<sup>6</sup> Hy Van Luong argues that the demise of the centrally planned socialist economy resulted in the revival of ancestral rituals as a way of strengthening the moral basis of the family—a principal unit in the new economic environment.<sup>7</sup> The marginalized, informal memory of war dead under the dominant cult of heroic war death benefited from the economic vitality and political liberalization in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

As in other places in Vietnam, the privatization of agriculture promptly promoted family ritual activities in Ha My and My Lai.<sup>9</sup> Today, massive numbers of old bones have been moved to new places, and renovated places of the dead have mushroomed across villages. Relatives assemble to rebury the long-neglected remains of the war dead, and individual families are saving their resources in the hope of holding an appropriate ritual to console the spirits of the tragic dead. New private graveyards and renovated ancestral shrines are among the most demonstrative symbols of a new Vietnamese modernity after the reform. The situation indeed indicates that the commemoration of war in Vietnam, like the nation's economy, is shifting from the state monopoly to the private and communal sectors—although there are limitations to the use of a framework of political economy in interpreting the developmental process at community level (see chapter 3).<sup>10</sup> In the midst of this great exodus of the dead, placing the memory of mass village death in the fabric of social life became a critical issue in Ha My and My Lai, and the villagers began to explore ways to bring the memory of the tragic dead closer to their everyday lives.

This book is about the Vietnam War's legacy of civilian massacre. Part of it deals with the historical circumstances of the atrocity, but its main focus is on what people do now with the physical and spiritual remains

of the tragic incidents. The book engages with the enduring wounds in social life caused by the mass violence, but its primary objective is to describe the social practices emerging to attend to these wounds. I discuss the changing moral identity of mass civilian death in the domestic politics of Vietnam and its changing international environment. However, my main aim in this book is much more modest: to explore the legacy of the massacres in the everyday life of Vietnamese villagers, their domestic life in particular.

The moral and political identities of mass death discussed in this book primarily concern the everyday actions taken to assimilate the tragic dead to the full spectrum of village ritual life. This process of assimilation is not set in stone, and it faces a number of formidable challenges. Some of these challenges come from revolutionary politics, and some from traditional cultural concepts, although it is certainly debatable whether recent revolutionary experience or prerevolutionary cultural tradition is more "traditional" to contemporary Vietnamese life. Sometimes, the challenges rise from a powerful alliance between revolutionary ideals and dominant traditional norms.

The apparatus of the unified Vietnamese state put great emphasis on centralizing and controlling commemorative practices.<sup>11</sup> The new elites "sought to shift the focus of festivals and commemorations away from the village and the family and toward the state," according to Patricia Pelley, and propagated a genealogy of heroic resistance wars against foreign powers, or "selective redemption of the past," in the words of David Marr, situating the heroic dead of the revolutionary war in a line of descent reaching to the mythical heroes of ancient victories.<sup>12</sup> Ancestor worship, according to Le Van Dinh, "is welcomed with enthusiasm [by people in central Vietnam], like a regulating agent of family customs, a high and noble principle of life, which works to put family life in good order, . . . exalting moral virtues and the principles of duty, obliging the living to keep their eyes always fixed on the actions of the dead."<sup>13</sup> As such, ancestor worship celebrates an ordered continuity of generations and the wealth of honor and merit preserved and augmented in genealogical progression.<sup>14</sup> This system of values sits uneasily with radical social ruptures and does not easily tolerate death that disrupts the genealogical order. Moreover, the system, based on the continuity of the family, has no space for death that means the termination of a family line. Mass civilian war death is characterized by many negative, ignoble, unproductive values in terms of both tradition and revolution.

Placing the tragic mass death in the organization of social life, there-

fore, involves paradigmatic conflicts with dominant ideologies, although it is possible to counter them by letting one work against another. The revived tradition of ancestor worship can help to bring the memory of the victims to private or communal places of worship, especially a generation after the tragedy when the victims, the young ones included, become ancestors. If the tradition happens to exclude those who died a tragic death from the venerable site of ancestor worship, however, the revolutionary morality of antihierarchy and antitradition can moderate this idiosyncratic tendency. If revolutionary doctrine preaches against all superstitious practices, including unauthorized attention to the fate of the dead, the traditional religious ideals, when revived, may counter it by adopting some elements from the politically dominant hero worship. Part of this book is devoted to describing this bricolage of popular political consciousness and moral sensibilities.<sup>15</sup> Between tradition and revolution, or between ancestor worship and hero worship in a more restricted sense, the space for the remembrance of mass death nevertheless remains restricted, and carving out this space requires continuous symbolic struggles.

The principal site of the conflicts and struggles that I discuss in this book is the domestic ritual space, broadly defined, in which the Vietnamese interact with gods, ancestors, and ghosts on a daily basis. The fact that I choose domestic space as the center of my investigation does not, however, mean I ignore the wider historical and ethical issues of the massacres. On the contrary, I acknowledge that domestic ritual space is an arena as relevant as any public, more secular, domain for thinking about crimes of war and the wounds they inflict on human society. The hidden forces of modern body politics, according to Hannah Arendt, may be unraveled in the very realm of life that the political forces strive to reduce to privacy, that is, within the "rich and manifold" conditions of intimate domestic interaction.<sup>16</sup>

There are certain ideas about human rights and justice embedded in Vietnamese domestic ritual practices, and it is necessary to understand these ideas as culturally grounded concepts before we can think of bridging the gap between how international justice is defined in a universal, predominantly legal language and what it means in a lived, local reality.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, it is within the structure of Vietnamese commemorative ritual, and in the context of everyday cultural practices, that I discuss the significance of the massacres for the history of the Cold War and the politics of nationalism in the era of transition from the bipolar order. Bipolar politics not only constituted the background of the mass killing but also

remains integral to the reality of mass burial. The materiality of mass village death embodies the political history of the Cold War. The killing took place partly according to the zero-sum geopolitical logic that regarded people as having taken the enemy's side if they didn't take one's own side. After the war was over, public commemoration of the victims was difficult partly because of the extension of this logic. Within the schema of heroic war death, the mass graves not only lacked regenerative value but also were ambiguous objects in which the remains of "our side" and those of "their side" were enmeshed inseparably. As we shall see, the bipolar body politics of purity has made it especially difficult for the communal initiatives to acknowledge the mass death publicly. Doing justice to their memory, therefore, involves unmaking the bipolar political worldview and creating an alternative vision of the world, and this is what I believe is manifested in Vietnamese domestic ritual practice.

Domestic ritual organization in central and southern Vietnam is two-sided, and commemorative ritual practice consists of shifting between the two sides and between the two different milieus of memory they represent. The organization follows a principle of concentric dualism and consists of an architectural complex that demonstrates this principle in a form of horizontal duality. The two sides of the complex are identified as "house" and "street" (*nha* and *duong*), or inside and outside. The "house" can be an ordinary village house in which an ancestral altar is kept, or a lineage and village ancestral temple, or any other built place of worship. The "street" refers to the external environment of the "house" in the scheme of concentric dualism, and this is often represented by a small independent shrine for ghosts, popularly called *khom* in the language of central Vietnam, which is usually erected at the edge of the fenced domestic garden. Most communal places of ancestral worship also feature an external shrine on the opposite side of the house of worship. Such shrines may be nominally dedicated to the Spirit of the Land (*tho than*), but today people use them primarily to make ritual offerings to wandering ghosts.<sup>18</sup>

The shrine for ghosts is where people believe spirits visit temporarily, and this distinguishes the place from the house of worship, such as the lineage ancestral temple or the domestic shrine for family ancestors in a private home, where people assume spirits dwell permanently. Whereas people worship in the house because they believe the spirits placed there are related to them in a line of descent, in the external shrine no such genealogical ideology or lineage paradigms are necessary to justify the act of making ritualized associations with the past. "Dwelling," Caroline Humphrey

writes, is "both process and artifact."<sup>19</sup> We may say that each of the two built places corresponds to "dwelling-as-residing" or "dwelling-as-wandering," which the philosopher Edward Casey, drawing upon Greek mythology and Renaissance architecture, describes as "the fundamental twofoldness of dwelling" or "two ways of being bodily in the world."<sup>20</sup> The memory of the past in the "dwelling-as-wandering" is unbound in time and space, and global in outlook. The place can accommodate all walks of death—ancient or modern, and Vietnamese or foreign—and, therefore, it is also open to the spirits that are believed to be on the loose because of their failure to enter the house of worship. As for the last point, the dual structure of worship relates to a moral hierarchy of death—the classification of "good death" versus "bad death"—which the Vietnamese express in a derivative way as "death at home" versus "death in the street" (*chet nha* and *chet duong*).

This book explores the legacy of mass death in Ha My and My Lai in the light of the conceptual polarity of death and within the related spatial organization of death commemoration consisting of two sides: the side for ancestral memory and the opposite side for displaced ghosts. Death in a civilian massacre is neither exactly "death at home" nor exactly "death in the street." In such a case, the magnitude of violence has turned the traditional spatial structure inside out. Chapter 1 examines the implications of the conceptual polarity for the memory of mass death and discusses relevant sociological theories about death symbolism for that purpose. It highlights the two-sided commemorative ritual practice, relates it to the idea of "symbolic ambidexterity" proposed by Robert Hertz, and considers its practical implications and theoretical significance against the background of the moral symbolic hierarchy of death.

Chapter 2 introduces a brief history of Ha My and My Lai, with a focus on the historical situation of the village being turned inside out by the violent forces of the Cold War. I discuss the history of the village's ancestral temples and their fluctuation between being positive and negative moral symbols as a way of situating the political history within the spectrum of local norms. Chapters 3 and 4 give general accounts of contemporary domestic death remembrance activities and discuss the dual structure of ghosts and ancestors within which these activities take place. I show how the memory of mass death does not fit within the traditional classification of death. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss how the identity of the victims of mass death goes beyond the conceptual boundaries drawn between war heroes, ancestors, and ghosts, and how their memory is distributed across the sites dedicated to these different categories. Chapter 6

also introduces the idea of “liberation from grievance”—a concept central to understanding popular Vietnamese war commemoration practices. Chapter 7 continues the discussion of the dispersion of memory across boundaries and deals specifically with the problems between the dispersed memory and the forms of commemoration that aim to concentrate the legacy of the tragic past. The final chapter explores some aspects of global bipolar conflict from within the spectrum of local social development and process of conflict resolution. This chapter shows that certain democratic and cosmopolitan values are expressed in the everyday practices of the Vietnamese villagers and illustrates how this cultural phenomenon helps undo the historical legacy of the Cold War. The book’s conclusion returns to the idea of “liberation from grievous history” and examines its wider political and ethical implications.

I conducted research in Ha My and My Lai on a number of occasions since 1994, mostly during summer breaks from teaching and for longer periods in 1997–1998 and 2000–2001. In order to do the research in Ha My, I lived in the town of Hoi An and near the municipal library of Da Nang and traveled daily to the village. In My Lai, I regularly moved between the city of Quang Ngai and the village. Residence in a bustling urban setting made my presence more tolerable to officials, and it offered the added advantage of enabling me to meet diverse groups of informants on the wartime situation. I often found it as instructive to talk to a former low-ranking liaison officer to the allied forces as to listen to a former regional partisan leader when trying to reconstruct the local situations of 1968. To gather material for a local history of war, I also found conversations with former covert civilian activists most engaging. These actors had diverse social backgrounds and could discuss both the past reality of death and violence and the contemporary themes of religious morality and financial anxiety. In their accounts, they could easily shift between the politics of everyday life during wartime and everyday life in today’s political and economic transformation, without giving the impression that they were changing the subject. Their immense knowledge is not explicitly represented in the chapters of this book, and I can’t even acknowledge their contributions, believing that their identities are best left anonymous for the moment, but I have no doubt that I would not have been able to write a history of the Vietnam-American War without their often-gripping stories of daily struggle at the marketplace, at school, in the family home, and in the noodle bar near the army base.

I cherished their “history from below,” in the sense in which E. P. Thompson used the expression,<sup>21</sup> and I tried to situate the legacy of the massacres within this milieu of everyday actions and popular norms.

In the villages affected by large-scale civilian killings, including My Lai and Ha My, I also spoke to people with various historical and social backgrounds: survivors, close relatives of the victims, government officials, veterans of the guerilla war, former employees of the South Vietnamese administration, lineage elders and keepers of the ancestral temples, cemetery keepers and village undertakers, and ritual specialists. This was partly to obtain a multiperspectival, multivocal account of the relevant historical events and the contemporary ritual reality. Among the survivors, my informants consisted of two groups: the adult survivors and those who were children at the time of the massacres. For an oral history of the massacres, I tried to put together the somewhat divergent recollections from these two groups. I also became close to some of the younger group, who not only sympathized with my research aims but also allowed me the privileged intimacy of an identical age group, and who sometimes protested against the unfriendly attitudes of state officials who disapproved of contact between the villagers and a foreign investigator. It is to this younger group that I owe my deepest gratitude. Within a tightly controlled village political environment, it was not always easy to freely meet up and talk with the villagers. The household death-day anniversaries, funerals, and other ritual occasions, however, proved to offer excellent opportunities to do so. I gradually built and expanded a network of trust with the locals by regularly participating in these ancestral rites, through which I was later introduced to the ritual milieu for the ghosts of tragic death.

This book is a result of long-term fieldwork conducted in combination with a review of historical literature, and, as such, it engages with a historical event of global significance by means of research tools familiar to anthropologists. The year 1968, according to Immanuel Wallerstein, who calls it the year of systemic “world revolution,” was a threshold of modern history, when forceful civil protests erupted simultaneously across the West against the governing power structure.<sup>22</sup> Civilian massacre in the Vietnam War was at the heart of the moral and political awakening that provoked the critical historical turn. The massacre in My Lai, in particular, has since been a subject of intense scrutiny in the scholarship of American history, international history, and international criminal and humanitarian law, and this book contributes to the ongoing

debates and vast corpus of literature on the subject. It adds to the literature a review of the incident and other related events from within the life-world of the victims, drawing upon their own conceptions of justice.

I also submit this book as a form of commemorative offering. To this end, I have structured the book to create something akin to a progressive symbolic transformation. Within the book, I sought to move the discussion progressively closer to the esthetics and morality of Vietnamese death commemorative practices in the hope that, if I did this, the memory of the tragic deaths would perhaps move closer and more easily to the realm of these cultural practices to be consoled by them. Hence, this book begins with an account of domestic death commemoration, then moves outward to more public domains of war remembrance, and then back to the domestic sphere. This descriptive strategy relates to the way in which the social life of tragic death, in popular Vietnamese thought, is characterized by forced displacement from the security and comfort of domestic life and an arduous struggle away from this forced mobility. It also relates to how the villagers practice their death commemoration—by turning their bodies between the two opposite orientations of inside out and outside in, and between the place for ancestors and the space for ghosts.<sup>23</sup> (Robert Hertz describes this concentric spatial structure of moral hierarchy with the metaphor of the right and the left hand, and describes his vision of overcoming the hierarchy with the metaphor of an ambidextrous human body.) I wrote this book in the belief that a simple movement of the body—to face opposite directions in turn—within an asymmetrical binary structure is instructive for understanding wider political and historical issues. I also wrote it in the hope that the ambidextrous action might really be a positive instrument for human liberty, as Hertz believed.

## CHAPTER I

# The Bipolarity of Death

Dead people, in popular Vietnamese culture, can be powerfully sentient and salient beings who entertain emotions, intentions, and historical awareness. The ethnological literature about their mortuary customs and religious imaginations confirms this. Remembering ancestors means, in Vietnam, according to Le Van Dinh, relating to them “as if they were alive.”<sup>1</sup> A French Jesuit missionary to Vietnam and author of classical studies on Vietnamese popular religions, Léopold Cadière, wrote that the Vietnamese perception of the world incorporates the awareness that the life of the dead is intertwined with that of the living, and that the Vietnamese idealize a harmonious relationship between the two forms of life.<sup>2</sup> Their social life consists in both relations among the living and interactions with the dead, according to Nguyen Van Huyen, and it follows that the history of war, for the Vietnamese, can be as much about what to do with the dead here and now as about how to interpret the past events of destruction.<sup>3</sup> In Vietnamese mortuary knowledge, the souls of the dead may refuse to depart from the living world, and their unwillingness is expressed when, for instance, the coffin suddenly crushes the shoulders of the pallbearers with unbearable weight.

In a funeral that I saw in a suburb of Da Nang, the pallbearers complained of the excessive weight of the coffin of an unmarried man when they were passing by a particular house in the community. People speculated that the problem was caused by the young man’s affection for the daughter of the family in the house. The man’s family persuaded the