

Memorial landscapes



This book offers valuable information and thoughtful comment. But they are presented in a form of writing that shrouds them in undue obscurity. Brought up to value straightforward language in such works, if not 'plain' English, I strive to do my best with what has happened since the 'linguistic turn'.

Nicholas Tarling

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The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation
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WORDS HAVE BEEN 'APPROPRIATED' – like that very word – and given meanings that are new – 'mapping' and 'terrain' are among them – or even meanings that are almost opposed to the original – 'agency', for example, or 'mediation'. Perhaps, as an historian, I have to expect the deployment of such tropes when tackling a work in another discipline. Disciplines have their own languages, their own practices: historians prefer footnotes, some social sciences are happy to make glancing references to authors and titles. But surely codes can become too hermetic and put at risk interdisciplinary exchange among scholars, let alone the involvement of a wider readership?

The research for this book derives from a mixture of reading and interviews. The latter were carried out in part by happenstance, and that has given them an authenticity that formal questionnaires might not have enjoyed. Indeed the author refers to '[t]he spontaneity of these interactions' and 'the subtle way [she] guided the direction of these discussions without assuming the lead'. [p. 16] They were carried out over several years, and that has also been of an advantage. Changes of approach and attitude were apparent even over a relatively short period.

The book exemplifies a current academic concern with memory. How are events recalled by participants? Through what means and in what ways are they brought to mind in others? What is the role of state, family, institution, commerce, individual? The focus is on what the Americans call the Vietnam war, but the conclusions may have implications beyond those even of that cataclysm.

Both as an historian, and as a student of Southeast Asia, I was keen to read the book, but found it a difficult task, though not in the end an unrewarding one. The author never uses one word when six will do, is reluctant not to precede a noun with an adjective, and deploys sentences often so long that their meaning is easy to escape. 'This work', we are told in the introduction, "traces the transnational mobility of memory embodied in images, objects, people and knowledge; its multidirectional, and highly uneven, movement across national borders, primarily between and within Vietnam and the United States, but also transgressing other nation-states that were drawn

into the social imaginary of the war through mass-mediated representations.' [p. 8] Could that have not been expressed more simply, I wondered? – also wondering what meaning to find for 'transgressing'.

Chapter One makes the sound, though not novel, point that the same actions have different meanings because they are seen in different perspectives. Veterans go back to Vietnam with different purposes, and return with views changed or reaffirmed. Vietnamese seem less haunted by the past. Some are able to see both foreign soldiers and their opponents as victims of imperialism. 'To what extent can trauma be co-experienced?' the author rather mysteriously asks. [p. 46]

The second chapter deals with photojournalism. Again the content is attractive, the treatment ponderous. It focuses on a particular exhibition, 'Requiem – the Vietnam Collection', that was prepared and shown in Kentucky and then flown in fourteen crates to Vietnam and shown in Hanoi, and later in Ho Chi Minh City. But it raises other issues, some of them, of course, not peculiar to Vietnam: 'images of distant suffering intended to elicit compassion and spread knowledge about violence may lead to indifference, inaction, or absence of pity' (Boltanski 1999). [p. 56] Nor, of course, were the positive images that wartime Vietnam produced without precedent; cheerful working women and courageous families were propaganda fodder I can remember from the 'home front' of my youth in Second World War era Britain.

Chapter Three deals with 'trauma tourism'. Travel to sites of mass death is, as the author says, not new, but it has increased. Most tourists, as she points out, have no experience of the Vietnamese battle sites, any more than of the Holocaust. Their motives for being there must be varied and, I believe, sometimes questionable. Tuol Sleng was more 'real', the author was told: you can see the bloodstains on the floor. [p. 85] In Vietnam, she tells us, commodification has 'prompted certain rearticulations of the past in the public sphere as the terrain of memory making becomes increasingly transnational and infused with capitalist values'. [p. 81] Incidentally, ARVN veterans, hitherto spurned, have gained employment and career prospects in the process.

'Monumentalizing War' is the main title of Chapter Four. The author discusses what she calls 'monument initiatives',

persuasively suggesting that the Vietnamese have been following a practice introduced by the French. How are memorial landscapes to be 'traditionalized' or 'Vietnamized'? 'I think that if our traditions are kept alive by tourism', one respondent said, 'then we are on some unstable ground.' [p. 140] It is a risk shared in other countries. 'Cultural producers, who seek to rediscover "Vietnamese" tradition and cultural identity unpolluted by foreign influence, play right back into the hands of global capitalist forces', the author comments. [p. 140]

Chapter Five discusses what she calls 'museal' institutions and the 'recreation' of exhibits. In Vietnam museums are another product of French colonialism. That, the author thinks, helps to explain 'the alienation of the populace from such spaces'. [p. 149] The young in particular are not interested. But that again is surely not peculiar to Vietnam. There were adjustments in content and description when relations with the US improved in the 1990s, demonstrating 'how museal institutions and the historical truths they produce are entangled in webs of global interdependence and uneven relations of power that affect and shape the representation of knowledge and memory'. [p. 164]

The sixth and final chapter is devoted to the memory and representation of American POWs. Close the past to face the future, was the Vietnamese gesture to the Americans. But, the author argues, the reverse occurred in US policy towards the Vietnamese. The past was recalled, 'perhaps not uncoincidentally as the U.S. strengthened its efforts toward dismantling "market socialism" and expanding economic liberalization'. [p. 177]

What the Vietnamese have done in the field this book covers is, the author concludes, not unlike 'market socialism'. 'The merging of capitalist and noncapitalist economic logics and knowledge practices demonstrate[s] not a definitive "defeat" of socialism – a claim denied by many in Vietnam – but its recombination as a strategy to delimit and control the reach and penetration of U.S. capitalism and its empire of memory into Vietnam's growing economy and its still-scarred landscape of history.' [p. 206]

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