

Remember Forever: Relationships with the Living and the Dead in a Vietnamese Online Memorial Site

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Thesis Statement

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Previously published material

Chapter 6 has been published previously in an altered form as "Heathcote, A. 2014. A grief that cannot be shared: Continuing relationships with aborted fetuses in contemporary Vietnam. *Thanatos*, 3 (1), 29-45".

For Bernadette and Eleanor

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with online memorialisation in contemporary Vietnam. It argues that the experiences of Vietnamese who participate in the online memorial site *Nghĩa Trang Online* highlight the continuities as well as tensions which exist between online, offline and other world (the world of the dead) communications. At its starting point, this thesis situates Vietnamese online interactions within the cultural practice of ancestor worship in Vietnam, which is the dominant relationship Vietnamese have with the dead. It demonstrates that online interactions with the dead which may seem new and untraditional are profoundly embedded in ancestor worship, and that the practice of ancestor worship itself is one which has transformed, through political, technological, economic and cultural changes. These examinations also feed into wider socio-political issues in Vietnam, including the online memorialisation of fetuses after an abortion, and the remembering of revolutionary martyrs (*liệt sĩ*) killed during the American/Vietnam War in contrast to the forgetting of soldiers in the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam/South Vietnamese Army).

This thesis also argues that *Nghĩa Trang Online* engenders a community where Vietnamese can express their emotions relating to loss, continue a relationship with the deceased through comments and online offerings, and give and receive support with fellow members. Such emotional expression is often disenfranchised in Vietnamese society and so online memorialisation becomes a new vehicle for the enfranchisement of grief.

This thesis is based on twelve months' fieldwork between 2012-2013 in Vietnam within the major cities of Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Da Nang, through online and offline participant observation in the country's largest online memorial, *Nghĩa Trang Online* (Cemetery Online). The site is also known as *Nhớ Mãi* (Remember Forever). Originating in 2008, the website currently has around 60,000 members who use the memorial to create online tombs for the dead, 'light' candles and 'burn' incense, create online offerings, and remember and communicate with the living and the dead. A number of members also meet in person and participate in death days, cemetery visits, birthdays, weddings, charity events and other social gatherings.

The Internet is burgeoning with spaces dedicated to remembering the dead through social networking sites, blogs, museums, archives, cemeteries and memorials. While there is an expanding body of research contributing to this field, the interactions between the online, offline and the other world in contemporary Vietnam have not been anthropologically

researched. This work aims to fill this gap, focusing on the extraordinarily diverse intersection of remembrance, continuing relationships, community, emotion and online memorialisation in contemporary Vietnam.

Keywords

Nghĩa Trang Online, Nhomai.vn, Anthropology, Ancestor Worship, Death, Ethnography, Vietnam, Online Memorial, Community, Continuing Bonds, Grief, Emotion, Forgetting, Abortion, Revolutionary Martyrs, ARVN, Reflexivity

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A note to readers

During research many Vietnamese interacted with me through the English language. This was beneficial to the research especially in the early stages when my Vietnamese was still at an elementary level. Throughout this work quotations spoken or written in English have remained in their exact transcriptions, except for the fixing of minor grammatical or spelling mistakes. Where a quotation has been translated from Vietnamese I note this directly after. Throughout this work translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Details of members of *Nghĩa Trang Online* (NTO), those memorialised and comments left on NTO, have been changed to protect identity. Dates, locations and circumstances have also at times been altered and pseudonyms used. To make the online interactions untraceable on the Internet the original Vietnamese has not been included, except where noted. Likewise, my own online communications incorporated into the research have been deleted (including on my NTO and *Facebook* accounts).

Vietnamese terms of address are relational, as Vietnamese address each other as members of a wider family. For example, I could either be a younger or older brother depending on the age of who I was communicating with. However for the purposes of this thesis I translate Vietnamese pronouns into an English-speaking perspective to hinder any potential confusion. Also, Vietnamese names begin from the family name, then middle, before the given name (example, Nguyen Anh Minh). However I refer to individuals by their first name (e.g. Minh) unless otherwise noted. Throughout this work diacritic marks are included, excepting the major towns and cities of Vietnam and the names of participants in this research. Diacritics are also excluded when they were not present in original communication or scholarly literature.