

# 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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be challenging to have a family member so consumed for such a long period and I look forward to releasing you from its presence.

While writing about the subject of death in Vietnam, life has irresistibly woven itself in with the birth of my daughter Eleanor. Eleanor, when you came into my life everything changed for the better. One day your mother and I will talk to you about our time in Vietnam, and hear about your own global and intellectual journeys. Having your pure smile each morning (well, most mornings!) has been a constant source of encouragement in this process.

And lastly to Bernadette Smith, who knows in too many ways how she has been invaluable to this journey. From day one of the doctorate you have been an enriching part of my life, and it is to you and Eleanor to whom I dedicate this work.

## 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.

## Chapter 1. Remembering online: an introduction

### Ngoc's parents

*It was mid-afternoon and Ngoc, a young Vietnamese woman was riding her bicycle home through the inner districts of Ho Chi Minh City. It was a route she had travelled many times before, over the bridge where all the ducks were sold and then through a green park where couples danced on the weekend.*

*The crash happened around 3pm. A bus smashed into the cement side barriers, lost control and hit her bike, killing her instantly. The scene was described as a horror scene, with cement and dust and glass everywhere. A monk who was driving along stopped and started praying for her soul: the soul of the deceased.*

*The parents were notified by phone, there were no words that could be spoken to prepare them. Their daughter was a young woman, only 26. Their child, always their child. At the scene the father tried desperately to get underneath the bus, to hold his daughter. At that moment he did not want to live, he could not envision life without his only daughter. He was held back by the growing crowd, some of them shocked passengers. A tow-truck was called in to lift the bus and as it begun to pull it up, something went wrong and the bus fell down onto the young woman once more. It was sadly said that "she died two times" that day.*

*For the parents, some kind of life continues. Together they hang on. They place a death portrait of Ngoc in a Buddhist pagoda where they will pray for her. They visit a local monk who speaks to them about the cycle of their daughter's death, the reasons for it and the continuation of the soul after death. The monk recommends an Internet site where they can connect with others through the remembrance of their daughter. They have never heard of such a site, but they like the idea of creating a page where her friends and extended family can relive memories of her, can remember Ngoc. The mother visits Nghĩa Trang Online (NTO) and with the help of a moderator creates an online tomb. She uploads pictures: her daughter's physical tomb and a photo of Ngoc with her smile shy and face framed by thick hair. Her daughter would not grow old now, would always be in that moment: a young woman with a world of aspirations on her way home from university.*

*The mother starts to converse with members from NTO who send condolences to her family, and also directly to the daughter through the online portal. Members light online candles and*

*upload a proliferation of online offerings—flowers, candles, incense, food and drink. Online, Ngoc’s mother can see others who have experienced loss as well. They cannot take away the loss but the companionship helps as they talk about the life of the dead, and the life of the living. They are participating in the memory of their loved ones. The parents ask for members of NTO to refer to them as Mother and Father, and many become close with them. One particular member—a key moderator of the site—calls them every night to make sure they are okay. She visits the pagoda where the picture of Ngoc is kept, and though she did not know her in life, she does now.*

*On the second anniversary of Ngoc’s death—two long years—twenty members of NTO arrive with offerings at the local pagoda. They are there to support the parents and many know of loss themselves. The parents and fellow members stand next to the death portrait of Ngoc and have their photos taken; these are uploaded onto Nghĩa Trang Online, Facebook and YouTube, emailed to friends and family throughout Vietnam and beyond.*

*As I stand there, I look at the image of Ngoc which I have seen many times before. Music begins playing throughout the pagoda. Her father approaches and we hold hands, and in this moment his daughter is very much present.*

I first met Ngoc’s parents in the bustling centre of Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). I was sitting down to eat a grand Vietnamese dinner with members who used the website *Nghĩa Trang Online*, the table full of platters of vegetables and raw meat for us to cook ourselves. It was midway into the research process and I was becoming more familiar with my surroundings, more comfortable with informants and my own social space in the research. But at that moment, in all honesty, not much research was taking place. Rather I was enjoying the warm weather with the sun fading in the distance, soon to be replaced by neon lights and the night-time crowd. At that moment I was more interested in the banquet before me, and asking what such-and-such a vegetable was and how to cook and assemble the wrap, and what the street vendor on the corner, like on every corner, was selling. This moment, like most in Vietnam, revealed countless minutia of the everyday to intrigue me.

An older Vietnamese couple joined us. They were noticeably more neatly attired than the casual dress of most of us that evening and a member of NTO introduced them as the parents of Ngoc. It was an important moment, for I had been looking closely into the world shaped by the memorialisation of Ngoc through the comments, candles and offerings left on her online tomb.

Around the table that night, no one had ever met their daughter Ngoc while alive, but all now remembered her.

At that first meeting I did not ask the parents all the questions I had about their daughter and their relationship with NTO and the other members, there was time for that to come later. And even though we did not speak of her that night, our relationship was forged through the online memorialisation of Ngoc. For the parents, continuing on after the death of their only child, their world was one forever altered, their pain one no family would want to contemplate. But in that particular restaurant and on that particular night, they were not simply the surviving mother and father to Ngoc, but rather they were a couple enjoying great food and company, incorporated into a larger community that happened to have been formed through the online memorial. Sitting there, I could not help but think of the words spoken about the NTO community several weeks earlier by Linh, an active moderator of the site. She had lost her father to cancer and her words resounded powerfully with the feeling experienced around the table:

We are brother, sister, a member of a big family so we come to NTO to say our feelings and to encourage together. After our family member passes away we don't lie down, don't be so sad. Life is not the ending and NTO helps people, it doesn't want people so sad. NTO moves many people to tears... A lot of people feel that their life is terrible but we want to continue together. If there are any problems happening we help together, assisting, talk about our problems, and find the best solution... NTO makes a new window for me about life, a new window to know many many people, to know when I have some difficult problem, when I feel so sad, I can think about the people I know on NTO. They help and we share problems. I know that I cannot fall. I want to stand up, yes, it makes me strong again. It makes me stand up again.

In this statement the sentiments of inclusion and sharing rise above the pain felt, and the strength to continue with others becomes paramount. For members sitting around the table that night, it was an environment where they all had their stories to tell and all had undergone the experience of losing a loved one. Together they were the vibrancy that was the NTO community—they were online kin—and we continued the dinner long into the night.

My research began with some central questions concerned with the motivation of members using online memorials in Vietnam. They sprang from the elementary questions, the how, when, why and where. But as demonstrated throughout this work, they are deceptively simple questions leading to profound examinations relating to how and why the dead are remembered and commemorated in society by individuals and larger groups. There is a vast spectrum of remembering within contemporary Vietnam and online memorialisation is a unique way of shedding light on online, offline and other world (the world of the dead) relationships.



During fieldwork I came across a huge variety of forms of death and dying which were challenging to talk about with people. It is imperative to emphasise that while the key themes of sharing emotions and finding support online may seem rather mundane and even simple—perhaps because we are so used to this now—these forms of expression and support are derived from the culture an individual lives within. How individuals and societies act when death takes place is contingent on this culture.

From a biological standpoint, death is (in the vast majority of instances, but not all) a fairly straight-forward affair with certain biological phenomenon relating to the functioning of the brain and heart, bringing about a pronouncement of death. Whether in a casket or as ashes, through sky-burial or a burning pyre, the body breaks down and all that once made its physicality is no more. Hertz, a well-known student of the French sociologist Durkheim, opened his well-known research on death stating:

We all believe we know what death is because it is a familiar event and one that arouses intense emotion. It seems both ridiculous and sacrilegious to question the value of this intimate knowledge and to wish to apply reason to a subject where only the heart is competent. (Hertz, 1960 [1909]:27)

Death for Hertz needed to be culturally examined and was distinct from a biological phenomenon, rather: “To the organic event is added a complex mass of beliefs, emotions and activities which give it its distinctive character” (ibid). From a social perspective the physical death of a person highlights and informs the world of the living in complex ways; it is a profoundly social event and one that is understood and engaged with far more broadly than the biological breakdown of the body. As stated by Huntington and Metcalf:

The issue of death throws into stark relief the most important cultural values by which people live their lives and evaluate their experiences. Life becomes transparent against the background of death, and the fundamental social and cultural issues are revealed... Peoples’ customary responses to death provide an important opportunity for sensitive probing into the nature of human life. (Huntington and Metcalf 1979:2)

Anthropologists have examined these “customary responses to death”, whether they be: the dynamic expression relating to loss; the borderlines between life and death and the cultural construction of death itself; the relationships with the deceased or lack thereof after death; the guidance of the departed in the other world often through forms of ancestor worship; the remembering and forgetting of the deceased; the community involvement after death; and the political, economic, religious, technological and cultural ways those now gone inform, and are used by, the living<sup>1</sup>. While these strands may seem disconnected, all of them distinctly play

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<sup>1</sup> For excellent volumes concerning the anthropology of death: Bloch and Parry 1982; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Robben 2004. For an overview see Kaufman and Morgan 2005.

into how death is understood and acted on within cultures. They play into how we emotionally conduct ourselves after the death of a loved one and the unwritten rules of grieving etiquette. They shape the way certain relationships with the deceased can be seen as ‘healthy’ and others as ‘pathological’. They are entangled in our forms of community after the death of someone and the people we choose, or are forced, to come in contact with because of it. They are grounded in our religious or secular values, through our cultural, political and mediated ideologies of what or whom is or is not worth remembering. This work takes as its starting point the understanding that online memorialisation is embedded in this whole gamut of remembering and social interaction.

In this initial chapter I introduce the themes of remembering, with a focus on how new communicative technologies and in particular the Internet are incorporated into recalling the deceased. This will lead the way to an illumination of what online memorials are and some of their defining characteristics, before a section introducing the key qualities of online memorials as vehicles to express grief and find support are examined. After these initial themes, the chapter will introduce the main focus of this thesis, *Nghĩa Trang Online*, and give an overview of the site content and the interactions members have with the living and the dead. From here, I set up a framework concerning the continuities and tensions involved in communication between the online, offline, and the other world in contemporary Vietnam. Rather than being cut off from the ‘real’, online interactions will be examined through the lens of simultaneity with the offline and the other world. Lastly, I will conclude with a layout of the chapters and the major themes of this work.

## **Mediums of remembrance**

How the dead are memorialised and integrated into the world of the living depends in part on the mediums of communication available. This work is concerned with how Vietnamese use a particular communication medium—the Internet—to remember and interact with both the living and the dead. While the Internet is at the recent end of the technological communications timeline, its impact on the remembering sphere is profound. Garde-Hansen, Hoskins and Reading (2009:1) observe, “the digital suggests that we may need to rethink how we conceive of memory; that we are changing what we consider to be the past; that the act of recall, of recollection and of remembering is changing in itself”. Similar sentiments have been posited by House and Churchill (2008:296), who note that what “is remembered individually and

collectively depends in part on technologies of memory and the associated socio-technical practices, which are changing radically”. Throughout this work I take the stance that the medium of the technology—being the Internet—brings forth new ways of interacting with those now gone and that it at times powerfully shapes the interactions possible. Meyrowitz for example notes:

The spread of printing, radio, television, telephone, computer networks, and other technologies have altered the nature of social interaction in ways that cannot be reduced to the content of the messages communicated through them. Yet the overwhelming majority of studies about “media” have tended to focus primarily on message content and the social forces that shape the content... Although it often appears that the impact of a new communication technology depends primarily on “who-communicates-what-through-it-for-what-purpose,” the more significant effects are usually in the overall change in the nature of social... interaction. (Meyrowitz 1997:59)

Online sites of memory are a fairly recent phenomenon in the history of the human species. The Internet in its modern form has been around since 1969, but was not accessible to the general public until 1990 with the launch of the World Wide Web, of which social networking sites, *Twitter*, and viral videos came even later. This is a rather slim slice of the human narrative, and yet the Internet is a communication technology which has brought about profound changes in our access to and handling of memory and the ways in which memory can be shared and preserved. It is not alone in this communicative journey—everything from the phone, camera, telegraph, television, and radio, to smoke signals and trained pigeons have modified the way information and communication can be carried across distance and time—but the Internet has become incorporated into the remembering fabric, and in part shapes remembering in ways unique in comparison to previous technologies. The focus of this work, online memorialisation, is one of these unique forms of remembering.

That the Internet is a resource utilised in dealings with death is well documented. Activities and information relating to death and dying is abundant online with everything from technical and educational information relating to death, to blogs and online memorials that facilitate the expression of grief, through to the documentation of the behaviours of people using search engines for death-related material (Dyer and Thompson 2000; Gibson 2007; Hutchings 2012; Sofka 1997; see for overview Gotved 2014; Walter, Hourizi, Moncur and Pitsillides 2011). Indeed it could be argued that the Internet is overflowing with memory, with sites created solely for memorialisation including online memorials, cemeteries, monuments and museums, and then those in which memory arises amongst all other aspects of life through blogging, *YouTube* videos, social networking sites such as *Facebook*, *Myspace*, *Twitter*, photo-sharing sites including *Tumblr* and fan-pages for television shows, musicians, artists, and celebrities. Online,

memories are dispersed via email, news sites, online worlds such as *Second Life*, and game worlds (known as MMORPGs)<sup>2</sup> including *World of Warcraft* and *EverQuest* (Garde-Hansen, Hoskins and Reading 2009:4; Gibbs, Mori, Arnold and Kohn 2012; Marschall 2013:195-196). In the same way that almost any aspect of ‘real life’ can interact with various ways of remembering, so can every online pixel.

### **Online memorials**

In 2004 a significant edition of *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* was published. The edition covered an eclectic array of research concerned with online memorialisation, including: research into the demographics of participation (de Vries and Rutherford 2004); grief and attachment between daughters and their deceased mothers (Nager and de Vries 2004); relationships sustained through online AIDS memorials (Blando, Graves-Ferrick and Goecke 2004); and the creation of communities through continuing relationships with the dead (Roberts 2004). While this edition was not the first research to evaluate online remembering (see Hollander 2001; Roberts and Vidal 2000; Sofka 1997), it comprehensively validated such areas of inquiry as important and legitimate. Even so, the question remained as to whether online memorials would stay for the long term. Were they just another passing fad, unique and exciting but ultimately unsustainable? In summarising the edition, Moss writes:

Web memorials are new venues in which the separate worlds of the living and the dead are integrated through memory and ritual. We can only speculate about Web memorials in the future... Whether and how Web memorials will continue to have an impact uniting the personal and public arenas of grief is to be seen. (Moss 2004:80)

Since *Omega*’s edition eleven years ago there has been a proliferation of research concerned with remembering the dead online from a wide array of disciplines. This cross-disciplinary interest converged in the first death online research symposium in 2014, in Durham University, England, which brought together an international group of scholars.

Much like cemeteries appear next to quiet country roads, and in the very heart of large cities, so too online memorials are progressively entwining themselves throughout the fabric of the Internet. Roberts (2012:55) points out that “as long as computers have been interconnected, the bereaved have made memorials to the dead in cyberspace. The first was a simple bulletin board, dedicated to a member of an online community that was started before the advent of the Internet”. A simple search of the Internet reveals a multitude of memorialisation options

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<sup>2</sup> Massive Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games

including: *VirtualMemorials.com*, *ilasting.com*, *OnlineMemorials.com*, *rememberedbyus.com*, *last-memories.com*, *Memory-of.com*, *LastingTribute.com*, *MuchLoved.com*, *ValleyofLife.com*, *Remembered-Forever.org*, *Legacy.com*, *Sadly-Missed.com*, and *Tributes.com*. The list continues, at times being exceedingly specific: for pets there are sites such as *critters.com*, *ilovedmypet.com*, and *pets-memories.com*; for pregnancy loss, websites include *unbornmemories.com*, *stillborn-angels*, *memory-of.com*; for those lost due to suicide online memorials include, *suicidemonumentgardens.com*, and for family and friends killed in traffic accidents *remembermemorials.org*. Apart from these distinct areas of remembrance, sites have also sprung up in relation to socio-political and historical events such as the very recent South Australian and Northern Territory's Returned Service League (RSL) Virtual War Memorial<sup>3</sup> (see also Chapter 7). These are only a sampling of memorial sites being set up, and a full listing in the English language alone would run to many pages.

Much of the interaction within online memorials is concerned with the continuation of a relationship with the dead, through the sharing and dissemination of memories involving the departed. This can be achieved at a basic level through text, images, audio and video. Through these sites the departed are sometimes directly conversed with, updated on current events, included in days of celebration (birthdays, wedding anniversaries, graduation days, Christmas), and made aware of the memories and events relating to them and others. De Vries and Rutherford (2004:12), who undertook a statistical and textual reading of memorials in *Virtual Memorial Gardens*, illuminate several ways in which the living communicate through letters to the deceased, eulogies, obituaries and tributes. Roberts (2004:61) highlights the variety of visitors to the sites *World Wide Cemetery*, *Dearly Departed*, and *Garden of Remembrance*, with spouses, daughters, sons, friends, daughter-in laws, and grandchildren all incorporating online remembering into their interactions with the dead. Roberts (ibid:59) also observes that deaths need not be recent to be memorialised; one memorialised individual in her study died in 1946. In these environments the communications can be multifaceted and evolving: survivors can "tell the dead how much they are missed, give them updates on recent activities and reminisce" (Roberts 2012:59); express thankfulness that the suffering is over for those now gone; relate experiences of guilt and anger (de Vries and Rutherford 2004:12-13); and communicate with "shocking directness and sincerity" (Geser 1998:7). As can be seen, online memorials are practical and varied in the social interactions sustained.

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<sup>3</sup> For information relating to the RSL virtual memorial see <http://www.rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au/>

Such sites allow a particular type of relationship with the dead and other people, in a way distinct from previous communication media. The print media, for example, generally follows “proscribed formats, have stringent restrictions on length, and allow little graphic embellishment” (Jones 2004:84-85). Online memorials in contrast offer more flexible forms of remembrance and allow effortless updating, compared to traditional obituaries. They are also easily accessible if one has an Internet connection, and often free of charge or relatively cheap (Jones 2004:84; Roberts and de Vries 2004:1).

Key among the literature is the desire of individuals to express their emotions and also find support within online memorials, with scholarly output demonstrating that they can be places where grief that is problematic and challenging to express in society, can find a voice (Blando et al. 2004; Chapple and Ziebland 2011; de Vries and Rutherford 2004; Finlay and Kreuger 2011; Hollander 2001; Roberts 2004). Some deaths are easier to share with others and talk about within society, while others can be problematic for the individual and groups involved<sup>4</sup>. De Vries and Rutherford (2004:6 see also de Vries and Moldaw 2012:136) argue that in a North American context grief is institutionalised within the medical sphere of hospitals and palliative care; online memorials in contrast radiate “the postmodern opportunity for ritual and remembrance” as “grief struggles to find its voice and to find its place in individual lives”. In this way, such places serve a function of “enfranchising grief that has not been socially sanctioned” (Moss 2004:78) and as Blando et al. (2004:28-29) poetically observe, within such sites “visitors bear witness to loved ones who are uploading grief and downloading compassion”. Similarly Roberts (2004:70) explores the way support and empathy for difficult to express loss became a powerful motivation for the continued presence of members, illuminated by the following posts:

It makes me feel good that others, including strangers, take the time to “meet” our son and are kind enough to take the time to write to us sending their condolences on our loss. (Ibid)















Since the creation of my son’s memorial site, I have met many parents through the Internet that have lost a child... My biggest fear was of someday forgetting, and by meeting these people through my son’s memorial page... they helped me to understand that we will never forget our little angel in Heaven. (Ibid)

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this work I utilise Doka’s (1999:37) definition of disenfranchised grief as “experienced by those who incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported”. Such deaths include violent deaths and socially challenging deaths more widely, such as by AIDS, suicide, homicide and perinatal death (ibid:10-14). Subsequently, “it can be much more difficult to mourn and reactions are often complicated” (ibid). This is in stark contrast to ‘enfranchised grief’ in which individuals feel their grief is sanctioned and supported by society, and that they are free to express it (Corr 2002:41).

Clearly, those wanting to remember the deceased have found a voice within the online sphere, whether it be those concerned with memorialisation and support after the death of children, babies, or perinatal death (Christensen and Sandvik 2013; Christensen and Sandvik 2014; Finlay and Kreuger 2011; Flohr Sørensen 2011; Godel 2007; Heathcote 2014; Kean 2009; Mitchell, Stephenson, Cadell, Macdonald and Ellen 2012), death through suicide (Bailey, Bell and Kennedy 2014; Chapple and Ziebland 2011; Hollander 2001), or from AIDS (Blando et al. 2004). This list is in no way exhaustive and identifies just some of the ways online environments are impacting post-death remembering that has problematic nuances.

I will now introduce the main online memorial which concerns this work, *Nghĩa Trang Online*, and will highlight the process of creating a tomb and member profile, while also noting the main areas members can access.

Cemetery Online				
		Last Post	Thread	Posts
Where your loved ones can be visited!				
	<b><u>General Cemetery</u></b> Place of burial to visit loved ones!		Hoang Thi	1,679 69,745
	<b><u>Artist's Cemetery</u></b> Place to visit artists, singers, musicians.  <u>Vietnamese artists</u>  <u>Artists from around the World</u>		Nguyen Anh Tuan (1982-2013)	209 2,629
	<b><u>Children's Cemetery</u></b> Place of burial and visitation of children from 1 month to 5 years old.  <u>Fetus grave</u>		Mother misses baby	1,895 92,209
	<b><u>Martyr's Cemetery</u></b> Place to visit heroic martyrs, revolutionary veterans and government officials.  <u>State Cemetery</u>  <u>Military and the People's Police Cemetery</u>  <u>News, information</u>		Revolutionary martyrs of Vietnam	378 4,851

**Image 1. Nghĩa Trang Online homepage** (the first four sections, translated, with minor details removed). Each cemetery section includes the name of the cemetery and basic information regarding it. Statistical information relating to the threads (tombs created) and the posts (written comments and offerings made by members) are also laid out. (Image [www.nhomai.vn](http://www.nhomai.vn))

It is night time when I first enter the cemetery. It seems vacant, stagnant, and I cannot see other visitors. Then the dark grey background reveals lists, categories, which I realise are tomb sections. I am tentative at first because it is my first time and I don't know where to turn, but after a while I start to comprehend the written communication and navigate effectively. At first, whispers: *Attention Hien, how are you child? I am missing you and I am so sorry. And more: Today I have lit incense for you and remember and miss you so much my darling child. We are going out later to meet with your uncle, I will tell him about this place.* Then alongside the written text, images of food and drink pass through the online portal, as well as images of



washing machines, clothing, iPhones, money, teddy bears, play-grounds, funeral wreaths. And then, poignantly, the faces of the dead.

I move further into the cemetery and see an obelisk rising up, the words: *The fatherland remembers your sacrifice* written along its edges. I follow the text: *Thank you for protecting our fatherland and for uniting the Vietnamese people. We will eternally remember our debt.* As my fingers move me through the online cemetery, all around are words written from the living. They write of missing the dead, of wanting them to continue and be healthy in the other world and of their times together. They also note the more mundane: money concerns, trips to the market, and worries about the health of family members. Reading still, members interact and thank each other for helping create a tomb, or for lighting virtual incense and candles for their friend, child, husband, grandparent. If it was the world of the dead I had entered, then it was the voices of the living which resounded.

Created in 2008, *Nghĩa Trang Online* currently has around 60,000<sup>5</sup> members. The website address is [www.nhomai.vn](http://www.nhomai.vn) and for members who use the site the title of the website resonates with their reasons for participating. In Vietnamese language *nhớ* is an expression for remembering and remembrance, and *mãi* means forever, or always; together they merge: remember forever. NTO certainly is a place of remembering, with cemetery sections spanning from the very beginnings of the conception of life in a section for fetuses, to historical Vietnamese figures thousands of years in antiquity. The options for remembering are plentiful, with sections set up for children and unborn fetuses, artists and musicians, police and historical figures, orphans and the lonely, foreigners and those killed in accidents and natural disasters, Catholics and Buddhists, revolutionary martyrs, as well as designated sections for pets, romantic relationships, and virtual personas<sup>6</sup> (see Image 1).

NTO members initially create an account through a nickname and an email which allows registration. From here each member has access to a profile homepage where they can list basic information about themselves, their interests, location, and profession. On the homepage members can communicate, sending messages of condolence to others and posting images relating to certain holidays in Vietnam<sup>7</sup>. Members can also thank each other for lighting incense

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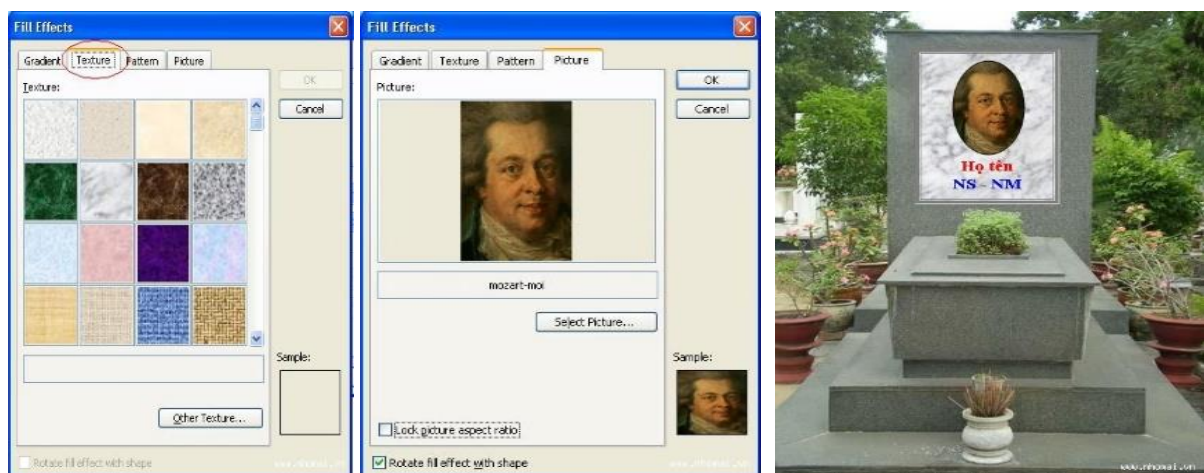
<sup>5</sup> As of 1/07/15

<sup>6</sup> NTO has a virtual cemetery section where member can ‘bury’ anything from video game characters and *Facebook* accounts to virtual personas and imaginary friends. This aspect of NTO was highly covered in the Vietnamese press but the least discussed among informants. While such publicity annoyed some members, many were content to see the site being advertised more broadly, stating that “we stay for a real person”.

<sup>7</sup> Members would occasionally contact me via the homepage and thank me for burning a candle for a loved one or send a message to catch up. Images were also sent to my homepage by members relating to Christmas,

on tombs they have created and can communicate through a private chat function. The profile homepage lists the statistics of the time spent online, including posts made and incense lit by particular members.

For some members online images and offerings formed an integral aspect of their time spent in the online cemetery. These could be both offered to the deceased or displayed on their tomb, or sent to other members of the site, on their homepage. Images used by members were exceedingly variant, with images of radiating Buddhas with praying monks, animated lakes, lotuses and chrysanthemums in the background. In other parts of the online cemetery (such as the Catholic cemetery) images of Jesus are displayed, and members write 'amen'. Yet more online tombs incorporate the dead into the world familiar to Vietnamese, whether these be Ha Long bay, the beaches of Nha Trang, Ba Na Hills in central Vietnam, or the cityscapes of Ho Chi Minh City or Hanoi. Members could also create online death portraits of the deceased which could be transferred to the online tomb (see Chapter 5).



**Image 2. Getting started: creating a tomb.** The background is first chosen before an image of the deceased is placed on it (in this case it is the classical composer Mozart). The image and the wording is then moved onto a pre-set background. (Images [www.nhomai.vn](http://www.nhomai.vn))

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Halloween, Easter, Lunar New Year (*Tết*) and the Mid-Autumn festival (*Tết Trung Thu*). Some of these holidays were native to my own culture, but others related to wider Vietnamese celebrations.



**Image 3. Pre-set tomb backgrounds** (from left to right). The first tomb is in the shape of a soccer jersey with a vase representing a soccer ball. The second tomb includes offerings of a toy elephant and a milk bottle. The third tomb is a traditional Vietnamese tomb with incense and flowers on it. From this initial pre-set tomb members can personalise it with a image of the deceased, and information relating to their life and death. They can also overlay it with offerings, candles and incense. (Images [www.nhomai.vn](http://www.nhomai.vn))

After creating the initial homepage members can choose to create tombs for loved ones. When first creating a tomb members are encouraged to read instructions on the site which specify in detail the way graves can be constructed<sup>8</sup>. Through the use of Microsoft Word and Paint (as well as other online resources) members create the textures of the online grave, the colour scheme, the wording, and the placement of the deceased image on the gravestone (see Image 2).

The online tomb generally consists of a picture of the departed, their name, the year and place of birth, the date of death, and the location of burial. Below the tomb members can ‘light’ incense and candles, leave written messages and ‘send’ online offerings. Online offerings are the uploading of digital pictures of an endless array—food, drink, money, clothes, toys, cars—which reflects ancestor worship in Vietnam, where votive paper offerings (*hàng mã*) are burnt and food is placed on the family ancestor altar (see Chapter 3). Members can also upload audio clips onto the tombs with everything from the sound of Buddhist chanting, to modern day music hits. Within the site there are a collection of tombs and backgrounds which members can choose from, including but not limited to, traditional Vietnamese, Catholic, and more personalised tombs (see Image 3 and 5). Incense, online offerings, praying emoticons, pictures of flowers and birds, and personalised messages can be layered on the image of the tomb. For example

<sup>8</sup> When joining up to the site members are made aware of the acceptable behaviours and usage of the site. These include, as stated on the site, appropriate behaviour, using correct Vietnamese diacritics, not being abusive or threatening to other members, not spamming or advertising on the site, and no discussions concerning religion and politics. Members are also notified that inappropriate behaviour on the site will lead to them being banned.

those creating children and baby tombs often add visual images including teddy bears, play gym equipment and bottled milk (see Image 5).

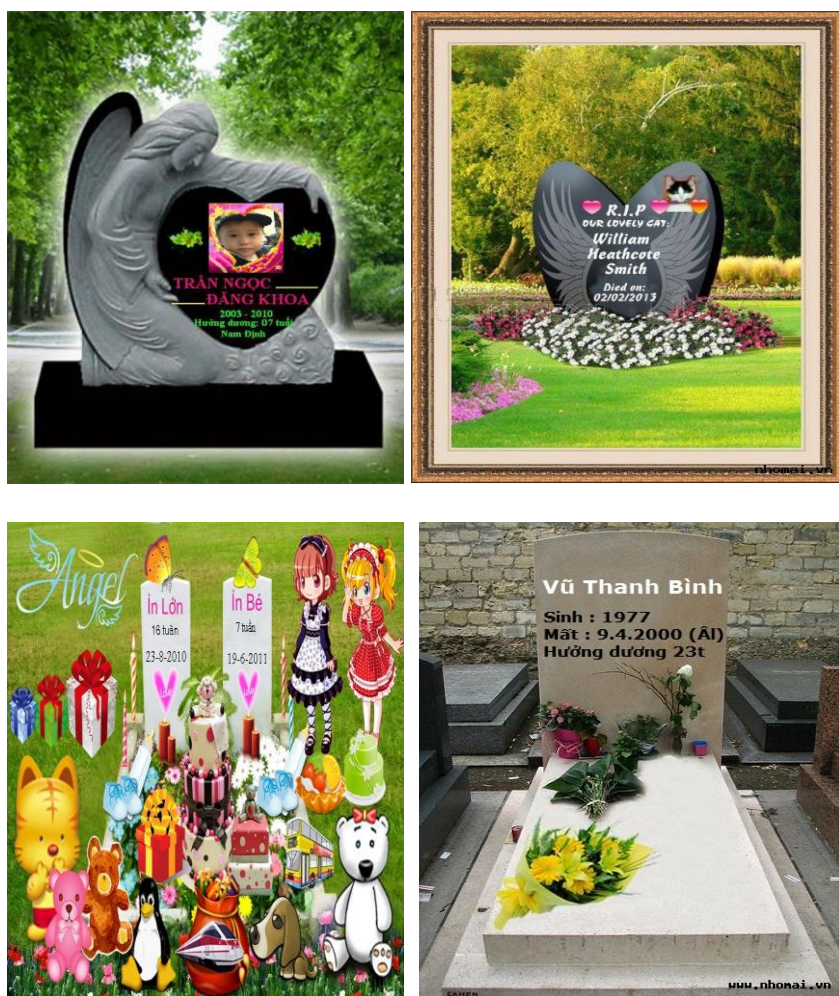


**Image 4: Online offerings** (top left to bottom right). Online offerings including a candle, incense, a praying emoticon with incense in hand, pho, tea, funeral wreath, iPhone, camcorder, washing machine, sport clothing, KFC chicken and hamburgers. Note that the first two rows are more traditional with items given at a funeral and on the ancestor altar. The subsequent two rows are modern consumer goods. Within NTO some but not all online candles flicker visually, replicating the movement of a candle burning. (Images [www.nhomai.vn](http://www.nhomai.vn))

Other areas of importance include: a forum for assistance in creating a tomb; a section for complaints and criticisms; funeral and cemetery services; charity outlets; a section for sharing stories, poetry and poems; an area for photo posting and discussion relating to offline get-togethers; a cemetery rules area; and statistics<sup>9</sup> relating to the times a tomb has been visited, posted on, and the candles lit.

<sup>9</sup> The post and thread statistics can be useful to illuminate the demographics of use by members in NTO. In general however I have been wary of using statistics throughout this work, as some cemeteries can be inundated by hundreds of posts by a single member; others may be smaller but more varied.





**Image 5. Tombs in *Nghĩa Trang Online*** (top left to bottom right). The first tomb is for a seven year old boy, the second for a cat who died in 2013, the third is for two fetuses aged 16 and 7 weeks, and the last is for an individual aged 23 years. Note that the tombs give information on the deceased but that they do not necessarily contain an image of them. Members also create online offerings for tombs. The 3<sup>rd</sup> tomb includes everything from teddy bears and toy trains to cakes and gifts. Also, while the 4<sup>th</sup> tomb is a photo of a physical tomb in Vietnam and the 3<sup>rd</sup> an image of it, the others are personalised with angels and a love heart. (Images [www.nhomai.vn](http://www.nhomai.vn))

*Nghĩa Trang Online*, from this brief introduction, appears to be a lively online memorial with various sections making up the whole. But these sections and their functionality merely hint at the content within. The home page and tomb sections, created in 2008, opened up a possible venue for remembering and communication, and the intervening years have seen a rapid increase in numbers of members and created tombs on the site. From the small roots of functionality, a larger tree of remembering and community has taken its place online. There clearly is an important function being served by *Nghĩa Trang Online*, for if not, its roots surely would have shrivelled in the time since its inception. Importantly, and key to this work, NTO is embedded in the Vietnamese cosmology relating to the dead, and thus the deceased are woven into the ongoing narratives of the memorial site. For NTO members there are three worlds they are interacting with (the online, offline and other world) and the following section

highlights the connections between these channels of communication and some of the tensions which arise from this.

### **The three worlds in this thesis**

In contemporary Vietnam how can one possibly find meaning in a virtual candle? This question was asked to me early on in my research by a Vietnamese neighbour when I displayed a flickering candle on my laptop. I explained that the candle was virtually lit by a member of NTO, in this case a daughter lighting one for her deceased father. However, for my neighbour, a real candle gave warmth, radiated an essence of heat, real plumes of smoke wafted through the air; it was physically lit and present. In contrast the online candle constituted a finger click, radiating emptiness and neutral coding. For this particular person there was a disconnect between the online practice and their own offline understandings of how the dead should be remembered and appeased. They were not alone in their sentiments and Vietnamese I met along the way brought their own questions about the memorial site. How could the living meaningfully interact with the dead in this way? Could the online realm be used to make connections with the offline and the other world? Why would Vietnamese share their emotions online with strangers, compared to real offline family and friends? What sorts of death could be remembered online? What exactly did this online practice have to do with the culture of Vietnam? And how could communication happen between the three worlds of the online, offline, and other world? These questions speak to several key analytical points which will be expanded on throughout this work.

Such tensions about new forms of communication are not unique to Vietnam. From a North American context, scholars have demonstrated an extended period of tension in the early days of Internet communication concerning the authenticity of online social interactions (Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1999; Wellman 2001). In such work, it was noted that while many individuals derived their feelings of what was authentic from the offline, online relationships and communities were emerging and were legitimate and valid for many others. Conversation remains about the legitimacy of online interactions, but as time has gone by, some of the deep concerns about this legitimacy have given way as people use the online more as a communication medium integrated with the rest of their medium ecology (for discussion see Chapter 4 and 5). In this, there has been a fading away of people concerned about whether the online is real or unreal, but such heightened anxieties did exist in the early days of the

technology. Part of that anxiety is pointed to in this work—concerning whether online memorialisation can be seen as real or not.

There has been excellent research which highlights the continuities of online and offline interactions (Agre 1992; Boellstorff 2008; Garcia, Alecea, Bechkoff and Cui 2009; Miller 2011; Miller and Slater 2000; Pearce 2009; Rheingold 1993). Miller and Slater's (2000) ethnographic research in Trinidad for example argues that individuals appropriate new mediums into their everyday culture. In their findings, Trinidadians brought with them a sense of cultural identity to their online encounters, arguing that while some of the relationships formed online became integrated into the Trinidadians' offline experiences, others were not. Just as the intensity of relationships varied, so "a surprising number of people framed special chat [online] relationships as very literal forms of the most conventional primary relationships" (ibid:68). In this sense Miller and Slater argue that there is:

no reason to suppose that these encounters dis-embed people from their particular place; or that they come to treat their real-world locations as less relevant to their encounters or identities; or that they construct new identities in relation to 'cyberspace' rather than projecting older spatial identities through new media and interactions. (Ibid:85)

By moving beyond the notion of 'real' or 'unreal' in relation to communication on the Internet, Miller and Slater demonstrate the varied ways in which Trinidadians inscribe their own understanding into social interactions through the Internet. This is not to suggest that individuals cannot or do not experiment with their ideas of identity and culture practices online, but rather that the Internet can be, to quote Wellman, Boase and Chen's (2002:153) poetic turn of phrase, "integrated into rhythms of daily life". Garcia et al. also state this nicely:

While some argue that the "virtual" world is a different "social space" than the "real world," we concur with those ethnographers who argue that there is one social world which contains both traditional and technologically advanced modes of communication and sites of social activity... "Virtual reality" is not a reality separate from other aspects of human action and experience, but rather a part of it. (Garcia et al. 2009:54)

So too, death and communicative media is brought into culture in distinctive ways, as has been demonstrated by a flourishing of online memorialisation research which will be integrated throughout this thesis. This research will draw from the rich well of literature concerning online remembering, continuing relationships, community and emotion, with its pulse on the communication between all three worlds.

In contemporary Vietnam there are a whole array of communication ecologies Vietnamese are now drawing on to remember and continue a relationship with the dead; some of these are offline including cemeteries, pagodas, family ancestor altars and the act of ancestor worship, but others are now online, including online memorialisation in NTO. Through these mediums

we find both public and cultural forms of remembering, through the tradition of ancestor worship and mourning customs, and also the more personal relationships Vietnamese have with the dead, and the rituals individuals seek to express their emotion and find support. Such communication and ways of remembering are connected to yet another world; that of the other world and the dead who continue on from their physical existence, while also intervening in the life of the living. The entanglement of mediated worlds and the commonalities and continuities, as well as the tensions which arise, are key to this work. As will be demonstrated, there have been rich discussions about how communication with the dead in Vietnam fits into people's everyday communication ecologies. Members of the online memorial site NTO help shine a light directly on how Vietnamese are now interacting and creating meaning within and between the communication mediums of all three worlds.

Throughout this thesis to help illuminate these themes I move from the micro (the personal experiences of undergoing grief and the kinds of support created from this; the death and remembering of a family member or friend) to the macro (the cultural discourses of how the dead should be cared for and how Vietnamese should express themselves and relate to each other; the national discourses of commemorating aborted or war dead). I draw on different kinds of death (the unborn, the historic, the bad death) to help bring to the surface the tensions between these worlds and to argue that all three worlds are vibrant and mutable; the online, offline and other world have transformed in Vietnam's history and continue to change. This vibrancy and mutability will be examined through the particular lenses of remembrance, continuing relationships, community, and emotion. In the following section I expand on these lenses and how they will be threaded throughout the work. I also note the lack of research into online memorialisation research in Vietnam and in an Asian context more widely.

## **Chapter layout**

The scholarly output concerning online memorialisation rises by the day, with several recent contributions demonstrating the quality and also important questions concerning the field of death, emotions, remembering, and the Internet (Christensen and Gotved 2014; Graham, Gibbs and Aceti 2013:139; Haverinen 2014; Moreman and Lewis 2014; Sofka, Cupit and Gilbert 2012). However in an introduction to a recent issue of *The Information Society: An International Journal* concerned specifically with online forms of remembering, the editors note a limitation of the research: that it is focused on 'developed' countries, as "the discourse



around the digital is also clearly a discourse of the developed world” (Graham, Gibbs and Aceti 2013:139). They continue:

SNPs [social networking platforms] are a global phenomenon, yet all the articles here are either not explicit about their publics or focused on publics in the Global North...For every article in the collection, questions can be asked about to what extent the observations and insights apply outside the developed North, among specifically comprised populations... Although the Internet and the post-Internet era are global, this collection makes only limited acknowledgment of this. Thus, we suggest that the theme that was identified as important in the call concerning intercultural issues with dying, death, afterlife, and technology needs some serious attention. (Ibid)

Similarly, in a literature overview of online practices involving death, mourning and the Internet, Walter et al. (2011:276) note “the literature relates primarily to advanced industrial societies; this review is likewise restricted to these, mainly Western, societies”. Other scholars have also observed the lack of online memorialisation research within a multitude of cultural contexts, and the benefits and need of such study (Carroll and Landry 2010; Kirk and Banks 2008; Kong 2011; Massimi and Baeker 2010). Online memorial research within an Asian context has been less demonstrated (see Kong 2011), and within Vietnam in particular there is limited ethnographic insight. While there has been a stream of online journalism (see Linh 2011), and some insightful overviews through personal blogs, long-term participant observation has not been undertaken until this present work. Though there is a burgeoning of research concerning relationships with the dead in Vietnam, how new mediums impact on these relationships is a fertile area for research. By embedding Vietnamese online memorialisation practices into the wider themes of remembering, continuing relationships, community, emotion, and the continuities and tensions which arise from this, it expands on previous work and points to new research directions.

Chapter 2 examines the origins of the research and early encounters with informants from NTO. It also reflexively explores the relationship between informants, researchers and the social space in the field, while introducing key methodology utilised throughout the fieldwork. The chapter initially describes my thoughts on the country of Vietnam when I travelled there for the first time as a tourist. From here it notes the initial stages of setting up the research project through the writing of a proposal and ethics application for Adelaide University. It then examines how I gained entry into the NTO community and my early encounters with informants, both from Australia and in Vietnam. The initial part of this chapter discusses the multi-sited nature of the fieldwork (both online and offline), the writing of fieldnotes, as well as the sensitive nature of the research for both researcher and informants. Beneficial qualities of such research are also highlighted.

The chapter then examines an interruption to the primary research and reflexively explores the emotions, senses and the social space that are shared between researcher and informants. There has been an expanding body of academic research in the last three decades which has reflected on the emotional encounter of the researcher in the field. Within online memorial research however there is little work pertaining to these experiences. This chapter draws on a body of research which places the emotional experience of the anthropologist directly within the social space being studied. This chapter argues that evoking the emotional journey of the research can not only enrich the understanding of the researcher's social space within the field, but also strengthen the research results.

This will be explored through the experiences mid-way through the research of returning home to my mother who had been diagnosed with cancer. Through the heightened emotional experience of coming home and being with my mother, amplified by the dulling of senses within the hospital walls and the monotony of illness, I shared similar experiences as many informants. It will be argued that when returning to Vietnam, a new social space opened up where I could empathise with the emotions associated with having a family member close to death, and was accepted in a new way by informants.

Chapter 3 introduces the key cultural relationship Vietnamese have with the dead, the practice of ancestor worship. It will firstly introduce the theory of continuing bonds by Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996) who note that individuals can have meaningful connections with those now gone. This will be contrasted with previous influential psychological, psychoanalytical and psychiatric research which underscored such emotional connections with the dead as impeding recovery and the grief process.

From here, the chapter examines ancestor worship in contemporary Vietnam, establishing the role of ancestors in families, and the reciprocal relations between the living and the dead. It will also examine ancestor offerings which are given through food, drink and votive paper offerings. The chapter will then conceptualise ancestor relationships through the lens of 'good' and 'bad' deaths and demonstrate the important role of burial and remembrance in mortuary rituals. For those dead not ritually attended to, their existence becomes hellishly caught between this world and the other as they manifest as hungry ghosts, cut off from ritual appeasement.

Moving on, the chapter embeds ancestor worship in the wider historical and political circumstances of Vietnam's recent history. From the mid-1940s there was a shift in the

governing body of Vietnam and some spiritual practices within the country, including elements of ancestor worship, were labelled as ‘superstitious’ and ‘backward’. Key thinkers in Vietnam spoke of the need to break down old traditions, including relationships between the living and the dead.

This initial cultural and political understanding of ancestor worship is necessary to gain an appreciation for online counterparts. Though there is uniqueness to the interactions NTO members have with the dead and others, it is problematic to approach the online as separate from the ‘real world’. NTO members bring to their online relationships customs and beliefs that are embedded in their society and culture more widely. For example, without an understanding of ancestor offerings, online offerings would be problematic to conceptualise as would be the motivating factors for the online relationship. Socio-political changes in Vietnam also importantly feed into questions posed later in Chapter 5, concerning the distinction between real and unreal, cultural and untraditional. Thus, it is the goal to give the reader a solid understanding of these relationships and recent transformations before moving forwards with the work.

While Chapter 3 is concerned with the cultural practice of ancestor worship and the formal rituals undertaken by Vietnamese, Chapter 4 examines the more private and personal ways Vietnamese express emotion and connect with others after the death of a loved one. While Vietnamese culture brings its own forms of remembrance there are private forms of grief, in which individuals aim to seek emotional support from other people. There is the business of relating to the dead but there is also the business of relating to the living. Chapter 4 examines how Vietnamese interact with one another through these experiences, and share their emotions online.

The opening section to Chapter 4 examines important elements in defining community, while also noting the ambiguousness of the term. Drawing on work by Cohen (1985) who defined community through a symbolic boundary, and Anderson (1991) who influentially noted communities as *imagined*, I then contextualise this with Amit’s (2002) work which highlights the role of social interaction, shared place and experience in the creation of community. Community is a central theoretical consideration to anthropologists studying social interactions on the Internet and scholars have examined the ways community as a concept is changing; no longer simply bound by physical location or concepts of otherness, community becomes ensconced within the interactions of individuals and the meanings they create (Amit 2002; Amit and Rapport 2002; Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

From here, a discussion pertaining to the use of community in relation to online interactions will help frame just why it is a concept so many feel comfortable with online. Particular examples will be made through the work of Miller (2011) and *Facebook* usage in Trinidad, as well as online memorials created for family and friends affected by the death of a loved one through suicide. This initial section demonstrates just how adaptable the concept of community is, as it moves between the online and the offline.

The chapter will then turn its attention to a wider discussion concerning the expression of emotion in Vietnam after death, and relate the community response through family-gatherings, funerals, ancestor worship and death anniversaries. This section aims to set up a discussion concerning just how Vietnamese are comforted after the death of a loved one, through the sharing of sadness and grief.

With this initial background in mind, I examine how Vietnamese express emotions online and the kinds of support offered. For members of NTO, interactions with others indelibly impacted on their perceptions of community and family. The connections between online and offline interactions will also be demonstrated, through the example of NTO members caring for each other outside of the Internet site. It will be argued that members are both focused on continuing a relationship with the deceased, but also with the living.

Chapter 5 explores the continuities and tensions between communication of the online, offline and the other world in Vietnam. Through the perspectives of NTO members, but also those who find the site inappropriate, it will examine the way Vietnamese negotiate online remembering within a wider framework of ancestor worship. I argue that while online memorials may appear untraditional and inappropriate, they remain deeply embedded in offline practices of ancestor worship, and that ancestor worship is a practice which continues to transform through technological and economic changes in the country.

The chapter firstly explores online memorial scholarship from a North American context which examines ambivalent and negative reactions to them, including anti-social behaviours within online memorials and abuse towards the deceased. The chapter will incorporate work by Leonard and Toller (2012) who conclude that in certain online memorials the dead are abused by the living. It will also draw on Marwick and Ellison's (2010) research into *Facebook* memorialisation, which highlights the differing reactions individuals have to online grief; some find it self-absorbed and less meaningful than offline physical help for family and survivors left behind.

I then introduce the voices of Vietnamese who feel the online realm is unable to communicate with the other world and the cultural practices associated with ancestor worship. During fieldwork, a primary issue relating to NTO concerned disrespect to the ancestors themselves. How could online offerings and comments be meaningful to the departed? Could comments and offerings get through to the other world? And with such a rich history, who were members of NTO to recreate what had been ‘stable’ within the country for thousands of years? “How dare they interact this way and bother the dead!” was a sentiment often encountered from Vietnamese who believed that the online realm could not substitute for genuine relationships with the dead.

With this conversation in mind, the chapter embeds Vietnamese relationships with the dead into an online, offline and other world landscape. Through the example of recent cemeteries in Vietnam where the deceased can be ritually attended to through Internet transactions, and economic reforms known as the renovation (*đổi mới*) which was introduced into Vietnam in 1986, I argue that economic and technological changes profoundly impact on forms of remembering the dead in Vietnam and wider interaction with the spirit realm.

The chapter then contends that communication ecologies are inherently linked for NTO members through the key acts of photoshopping the deceased, online offerings, and offline interactions. The chapter illuminates how the dead are being photoshopped on NTO to give those who have passed away ‘another world’ filled with the many experiences foregone through an early death. This will be examined in particular through the narrative of a member who lost a class-mate through suicide, and the relationship members had with a young baby who died after being abandoned outside a hospital in Ho Chi Minh City. From here, the chapter examines online offerings and their connection to votive paper offerings, before teasing out some of the ways members feel the dead ‘cross over’ from the other world through the portal of NTO. All of these online practices will be contextualised with offline ancestor worship in Vietnam to show the profound simultaneity of their co-existence.

From these initial chapters concerned with the creation of community and the simultaneity of online, offline and other world interactions with the dead in NTO, Chapters 6 and 7 embed online memorialisation within wider macro levels of social-political issues in Vietnam, while also examining the micro level of experiencing grief and remembering. Chapter 6 argues that abortion is a sensitive subject in Vietnam, embedded in moral ambiguities concerning youth sexual activities and the ancestral relationship the Vietnamese have with the dead. The deceased fetus is not easily reconciled with the act of ancestor worship and questions arise as

to how women should express their grief and if a continuing relationship should be sustained with the fetus. I argue that that some Vietnamese women are continuing a relationship with their fetus within NTO as a way of performing ancestor worship and expressing their grief after a abortion. Through the theory of durable biography and disenfranchised grief, I contend that a continuing relationship is formed through communication and online offerings to express grief, ask for forgiveness, share past and present experiences, and through prayer and guidance for the fetus in the other world.

The chapter will utilise Walter's (1996) concept of durable biography, wherein the deceased are meaningfully woven back into the life of the living through conversations with others. It will demonstrate that the experience of pregnancy loss can be profoundly challenging to express with others and that the medium of the Internet can facilitate the expression of emotion for some individuals. The sharing of grief, the continuation of a relationship and the providing of support online—by this point a recurring argument—are key to the chapter.

Chapter 7 examines online and offline memorialisation with regard to the American/Vietnam War<sup>10</sup>. It focuses on the collective remembering of revolutionary martyrs in Vietnam—those who fought against the Americans and their allies in the war—and contrasts this with the collective forgetting of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN, who were the South Vietnamese army fighting alongside America). The chapter brings many of the themes outlined throughout the thesis together, such as community and the expression of emotion online, and folds them into a larger political question of who is, and who is not, memorialised in society. It then teases out some of the ways the medium of the Internet has allowed a voice previously unavailable for many Vietnamese.

The chapter will firstly examine 'collective memory' through the work of Halbwachs (1992 [1952]) who argues that far from being private and internal, our collective memories of the past are shaped by the societies we live in and the cultural scripts which we participate in. The chapter will then note that even though 'collective memory' is an exceedingly fruitful way of thinking about remembering, scholars have argued 'collective remembering' and 'collective remembrance' better evoke the transmission of the past. Drawing on research by Winter (2006) and Winter and Sivan (1999), it will be argued that far from having a single collective memory

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<sup>10</sup> Being positioned within a Vietnamese context has made it imperative for me to be aware of the language and perspective of Vietnamese who formed this research. In this context the terminology of American/Vietnam War, while not perfect, is more appropriate than what is better known in countries such as American, England, New Zealand and Australia as the Vietnam War.

within culture, individuals bring their own forms of remembering from unique vantage points. The chapter will explore collective remembering alongside the medium of the Internet which, by its very nature, lends itself to augmenting opportunities for remembrance, from the archiving of information online, to discussions on social networking sites that may capture previously transient thoughts and discussions. To demonstrate this I will firstly draw on the work of Kaelber (2010) who argues the Internet is being used to remember children killed through ‘euthanasia’ in Nazi Germany, while challenging institutions which deny participation in these killings. In contrast Drinot’s (2011) research will demonstrate how online sites can cement nationalistic discourse and remembering practices, through the example of comments left on *YouTube* by Bolivians, Chileans and Peruvians regarding the mini-series *Epopéya* which is based on the Chilean war.

The chapter will then turn its attention to Vietnamese forms of remembering and forgetting. Revolutionary martyrs who fought for the Vietnamese Communist Party are nationally enshrined through memorials, cemeteries, museums, and a host of other representations. This will be explored through the work of Malarney (2001; 2002) concerning the commemoration of revolutionary martyrs in the Thinh Liet commune in Northern Vietnam.

Chapter 7 then turns its attention to the use of *Facebook* in Vietnam in remembering revolutionary martyrs. *Facebook* is the most visited social networking site in the country and during fieldwork, on the occasions of National Day of Independence and the Anniversary of War Invalids and Revolutionary Martyrs Day, *Facebook* was used by Vietnamese to facilitate remember of revolutionary martyrs. Commemorating both of these days online, it will be argued that some Vietnamese using *Facebook* and NTO feed into wider discussions pertaining to national narratives of remembering and forgetting.

This chapter will then demonstrate how some family members of ARVN soldiers killed in the war are using NTO to remember those otherwise forgotten or called traitors in the public sphere. As will be discussed, the remembering sphere is transforming and in recent years there has been an expansion and relaxation in some ways of remembering ARVN members. However there is still limited opportunity for remembrance relating to those who fought for the ‘wrong side’. ARVN soldiers become in essence hungry ghosts within the country, caught between public and official remembrance, and that of family members left behind.

Chapter 8 will conclude the thesis. It will firstly reiterate the main themes of this work through the final vignette of NTO members celebrating a marriage of fellow members. Through this, I

will note how the NTO community comes together through shared experiences, the expression of emotion, support for one another, and the remembrance of those now gone. I will also examine my own experiences in the field, demonstrating that while online memorials can be profoundly sad and unsettling places, they are also filled with the key ingredients of companionship and support. From here, I note future questions for online memorialisation research in Vietnam. The work will end with a summary of the contribution this work makes, embedding the online, offline and the other world into the wider themes and tensions of remembrance, continuing relationships, community and emotion.



## **Chapter 2. The research journey: entering *Nghĩa Trang Online***

### **Introduction**

From the beginning of the PhD process when I signed the scholarship forms and started my new researcher's life, until recently with the completion of this work, it has been in all senses of the word, a journey. Deep in that journey was my fieldwork experience and it is important to reflect on some of my initial encounters in the research. How did I gain access to the NTO community? Was I welcomed with open arms or was there hesitancy? What were some of the initial hurdles? Did I feel as if I was enfolded within the community? And how could a postgraduate student from Australia who had only seen death on the television screen, bring his own emotional connections to the field?

This chapter firstly examines the origin of the research when visiting the country as a tourist. From initial thoughts of the project with colleagues back in Australia, I describe how the research was put together through a research proposal and ethics application, and how communication was made with NTO members while still in Australia. From here I note my experiences of arriving in Vietnam for research and introductory meetings with members. For those members I was observing and participating with, it was important to demonstrate my interest in their site and several early encounters helped shape subsequent participation by those members. In this initial section I also describe the nature of the field sites from an online and offline perspective, the key methodology, and some of the ethical issues brought up through the sensitive material handled.

I then reflexively examine the difficult journey for an apprentice anthropologist in the field, with emphasis placed on the emotional aspect of the research process, and my social space both in and out of the field. The fieldwork was underscored by an emotional intensity I was unfamiliar with, and one which at times was profoundly challenging. Four months into the research my mother was diagnosed with leukaemia and I immediately returned home. The chapter will explore the impact of the interruption to my primary research, and reflexively examine the emotions, senses and social space that are shared between researcher and informant.

In having my mother so critically ill, and spending a month at her hospital bedside, I had shared similar experiences as many informants. Consequently when returning to Vietnam, a new social space opened up where I could empathise with the emotions associated with having a family member close to death, and I was accepted in a new way by informants. The interruption

to my research transformed it. By reflexively engaging with these experiences and exploring emotion, senses and space, this chapter contributes to a growing body of research concerned with encounters in (and out) the field, and the simultaneity of researcher and informant experiences.

### **Origins of the research**

I had travelled to Vietnam before endeavouring to undertake research there. Coming down the main highway from the airport in Hanoi for the first time, a wholly unfamiliar landscape emerged: rice paddies pocketed between buildings, a never before seen number of motorcycles, elderly Vietnamese women wearing the conical hats that evoked something ancient, classic. Subsequent visits would reveal the explosion of ‘development’, the rice paddies receding from the outskirts of cities, and the proliferation of modern dress and fast-food. But it is in no way homogenised; it remains quintessentially itself to the new visitor.

Some fortuitous timing was afoot on this, my first visit to Vietnam and its capital. I arrived a few months before the mass celebrations of the Millennial Anniversary of Hanoi (*Đại lễ 1000 năm Thăng Long-Hà Nội*) and banners surrounded Hoàn Kiếm Lake, in Hanoi, announcing the upcoming celebrations. It was an exciting time to talk to locals about their country that was only taught to me in school through the lens of the ‘domino effect’, that I had only thought about in Hollywood terms: dog-tags and Chinook helicopters, the journey down the river to find Kurtz and his horror in the well-known Hollywood rendition *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Vietnam was not so much a country as ‘a war’, as fostered by Australian remembering traditions and narratives, the media I consumed, and my own ignorance. Now standing on Vietnamese soil, in the dynamic old quarter of Hanoi, I planned to actually discover the country: ancient Ha Long Bay with its 2000 islets, the bright red sand and windsurfing of Mui Ne, the cocktails on Bùi Viện Street in Ho Chi Minh City. One visit was simply not enough.

It was on a return visit to Ho Chi Minh City that I first became aware that Vietnamese were using online forms of remembering alongside offline practices. I met people whose friend had died in a traffic accident and they were using the online memorial *Nghĩa Trang Online* to remember her. I was curious, and on a laptop in a cafe they showed me images of the young woman’s memorial site, and translated for me some of the condolence messages left by her friends and family. At this time I took note of the many candles which had been lit and the images which has been posted on her memorial page. I did not know much else, but after a few

days of looking for literature on the site (of which I could only find online news articles and blog entries), I realised it was a very rich field for future research.

Returning home, colleagues were supportive of my venture to research Vietnamese online memorials. I had delved into such environments in previous research, with a particular emphasis on the online world<sup>11</sup> *Second Life*. That research had been undertaken primarily in front of a computer screen, where sole communication was formed through the keyboard, and knowledge too was formed from information downloaded online. Thus, the question arose with colleagues as to what an online field site actually entailed in Vietnam. Would I meet physically the Vietnamese with whom I was conducting fieldwork? Was it realistic to draw links between ancestor worship and online forms of remembering? Was the online space in Vietnam different from traditional practices? How would I be able to get in touch with members of an online memorial?

As I noted to fellow postgrads and lecturers early into my new research venture, whether it was *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*, or dating and social networking sites, the Internet was being interwoven into the lives of people and their culture in profound ways. I explained that ethnographic accounts had demonstrated that the Internet was an important field of study and a legitimate area of inquiry for ‘real’ social interactions, demonstrating that more often than not individuals wanted to be themselves online (Boellstorff 2008; Garcia, Alecea, Bechhoff and Cui 2009; Miller 2011; Miller and Slater 2000; Pearce 2009). As an example I noted how Miller and Slater’s (2000) ethnography among the Trinidadians revealed the Internet as just another form of communicating in everyday practice. Rather than creating a false dichotomy where the Internet was either ‘real’ or ‘unreal’, Miller and Slater highlighted online social interaction as a meaningful form of communication, believing such labels unnecessary (see also Miller 2011). But the question still remained, who were these Vietnamese who used NTO, and how exactly would I engage with them and ethnographically approach the subject matter?

After gaining support from my supervisors Susan and Sal for the research project, I then had to create a research proposal for several staff members of the Anthropology and Development Department. The research proposal laid out the field sites of research, a project summary, aims

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<sup>11</sup> Online worlds are three-dimensional Internet environments. While online environments often look graphically similar (e.g. *Second Life* and *EverQuest*) there is a significant difference between online worlds and online game worlds. For example, popular forms of online game worlds are primarily based around game-play mechanics and social interaction. These include *World of Warcraft* and *EverQuest*. This is distinct from *Second Life*, for example, an online world which allows members to create content within it; thus there is no specific game goal, rather it is a social environment (for an introduction to online worlds see Boellstorff 2008:32-60).

of the research and associated costs, introductory literature, the significance and contribution the work would make to the scholarly literature, as well as the theoretical frameworks and methodologies used throughout. Thinking through such issues was a good exercise for the years to come, and brought with it a solid initial scaffolding. Of course it was early days yet and many of the ideas within the research proposal did not find their way into the finished work, while others not encountered early on have threaded their way throughout the discussions in this thesis. At the same time I also undertook work on an ethics application for the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee. This document required that I examine the research from a human ethical standpoint and included discussion on who the participants in the study would be, the ethical implications and risks of the research on participants and the researcher, as well as the nature of informed consent and confidentiality for those involved. Both the ethics application and the research proposal took roughly 8 months.

During this time I was assisted by a Vietnamese colleague in Adelaide who was eager to help me in the early stages of the research project. This colleague was themselves undertaking research in contemporary Vietnam and so with the help of their native language skills and expertise in Vietnamese culture, I created an NTO account and homepage and asked those in the community who might be interested to participate in my research to contact me. I wrote a brief message for members to read on NTO, noting that I was powerfully moved by interactions on the site. I also noted that support from someone with English as a second language was highly desirable. From these initial messages I was contacted by a moderator of the site, Linh (previously mentioned), who was extremely helpful and eager for me to be a part of NTO.

Linh was single when I met her and 39 years of age. She was fluent in both Vietnamese and English and fascinated with the Chinese language as well. She lived in the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City, and noted that she was an avid internet user years before NTO arrived on the scene. The internet for her was already something that created communication to people all around the globe, though the intimacy of NTO was something new for her. She was one of the first members of NTO in 2008; when she started there were only 200 members, with an increase to 60,000 in the years since. When visiting NTO the first time Linh noted:

I felt happy and sad the first time I went to NTO. I became a member because of family, I have a father who died of cancer. My father's grave is very far from here so I cannot visit it regularly, so I made a tomb for my father on NTO and visit it every day, to pray for him and light candles. Every day. (Linh)

The idea of not being able to visit her father's grave regularly was difficult and so it was a desire to remember which first brought Linh to NTO, but within a few months she began to

meet the living as well. Through the chat function she would write back and forth for hours, speaking of her experiences and aspirations, where she came from and her reasons for participating in the online cemetery. She also met offline with members she became acquainted with through NTO gathering, charity events, and casual coffees. She had met many individuals and become quite close to them, all while studying two times a week and working outside of the city. And so for Linh, NTO became an extension of the offline; she remembered her father at Church with a Catholic upbringing, but also participated in death days and pagoda visits with friends and other family. Linh noted, “when I go to the grave it is only I and a few [family or friends] who remember my father but online many people pray for my father every day”.

For Linh, NTO became more than a memorial for her father and she was exceedingly active within it. Her commitment was noted by other members; in lunch hours it was noted by Tuan, a key administrator of the site, she would sometimes scan the newspapers for those who had died and create a tomb for them; at night it was stated by Oanh, she would burn online incense for her father and then move through the cemetery lighting even more for those she had learnt about and those newly memorialised. Sometimes, even more members noted, she would spend time lighting candles for the tombs with little visitation and remembrance. These members highlighted just how critical member integration could be and clearly Linh was a solid first contact for myself, and one whom opened up many possibilities throughout the research.

We conversed through NTO, *Facebook* and *Yahoo*, and she began to recommend NTO members and topics to aid my research. An early and heartening message reads:

Dear Anthony, there are many friends who enjoy online memorials the same as me. They will share with you about their thinking and experiences. When you come to Hcm [Ho Chi Minh] city, we'll have a small offline meeting to talk with you. Hope you're always healthy and happy. Linh. (*Facebook* message)

While conversing with Linh I was invited to be a member of the NTO *Facebook* page, which was a general gathering for mostly moderators and administrators<sup>12</sup>. This page was used for: organising NTO offline meetings; raising awareness of social issues in the country such as illness among poor Vietnamese and abortion among young Vietnamese; and disseminating a whole array of photos and comments relating to birthdays, weddings, death day anniversaries

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<sup>12</sup> Moderators are members who oversee the editing and content of tomb sections within NTO. For example, in the Buddhist Cemetery there are moderators who see all comments left by members. In contrast, administrators have control over the creation and deletion of online tombs and accounts. They also assign moderators and have the final say on the style and content of the website.

and other events for members of the site. *Facebook* was also used for moderators and administrators to contact each other in regards to problems on the site, from gravestones not appearing to problematic members. From these initial encounters I felt confident that the project could begin. I had read about the entry into new cultures many times over the years and yet, to be actually packing my bags now with research goals still freshly written up and scrutinised by my fellow colleagues, felt fresh and exciting, while also daunting.

In stepping into the country of Vietnam I also had the companionship of my partner Bernadette. For most of this work I do not thread Bernadette's presence into it, unless it is for a specific purpose. I realise that the non-inclusion of partners in the field, where they are often present though not acknowledged, panders to a certain caricature of the researcher: the image of the lone anthropologist in the field, complete in their isolation. However as will be discussed throughout this chapter, reflexive material has shed light on the very emotional and personal experiences of anthropologists in the field as well as the various relationships encountered, which has brought transparency to subject matters not traditionally covered in ethnographic material (recent contributions include Hockey 2007; Johnson 2009; Valentine 2007; Woodthorpe 2007; 2009). There are undoubtedly a number of times that I had access to informants and invitations because I was in a relationship. Many times it was both of us who were invited to meet with NTO participants, be it dinner or a tennis match. One female participant, for example, grew quite close to Bernadette stemming from their discussions where she was having some complications with her partner; such discussions and subsequent closeness would not have transpired otherwise. This everyday conversation led to interesting insights on dating, divorce and step-children, and the types of relationships that are felt by some as not ideal, and therefore something to be kept secret. However, while relationships in the field certainly impact on access, they can also be problematic. At times, for example, members of NTO noted our living together unmarried to be against the Vietnamese norm; this in itself may have hindered further contact. Perhaps in this culture, like many others, the approach of the single male may have opened some doors, and closed others. Travelling and living with someone else for long stretches has aided the researcher in both concrete and emotional ways, but there has also had to be compromise along the way.

### **Early engagements in the field**

I arrived with Bernadette in Ho Chi Minh City in early 2012. Ho Chi Minh City was where several moderators who had been in contact with me lived as well as one of the creators of the

site, and thus it felt a suitable starting destination. After spending several weeks in a hotel room in the main tourist street of Bùi Viện, we discovered through a website for foreign visitors to the country accommodation available further out of the city in District 12 (*Quận 12*). This district was an area known primarily for its large software ‘city’ which loomed over the small street where we lived. It was far enough away from the city centre that I no longer felt myself a tourist, but close enough that it was an easy bus trip back in if ever participants wanted to catch up there. Monthly rent was also much cheaper, and hence more viable than the more expensive apartments in the city centre. After finding accommodation Bernadette and I went about making ourselves at home in our exceedingly small one bedroom apartment, with a loft which was slightly too low for me to stand up in, and a kitchen which promised very early on to make any cooking encounters ones to be remembered. It was exhilarating meeting the new neighbours, several of whom spoke good English for communication and others enough so that I could practice my Vietnamese language skills with them. Walking the streets, the vibrancy of the food stores and the local market made me feel as if I truly was in the field, the living, breathing, city of Ho Chi Minh.

In contrast to all the exhilaration of moving to a new country I did find it difficult to enter into the NTO community and some of the initial excitement was compromised by lack of entry into the site. Not only was I its ‘first Westerner’ but also, initially, my English language was a barrier. NTO did have several international Vietnamese members. As was written by a member on the *Facebook* NTO homepage, “NTO is now spreading around the world. Countries Angola, Algerian, Macao, Morocco, England, France, Greece, the Netherlands, Finland, etc... All have members on NTO. Congratulations!!!” (translation). Having a member of NTO from overseas was not unusual but having a non-Vietnamese researcher from Australia certainly was.

Several moderators of the site advised that I should not use English within NTO because of its occasional foul use by others and also for the very practical reason that those being memorialised would not understand what I was writing. My messages in English went against the protocol of NTO, in a strict regulation sense, as members were asked to write in Vietnamese with correct diacritics. This stated, members often wrote to me in English and in time moderators spoke of feeling comfortable with such communication. It is also worth mentioning that while some moderators had a strict sense of what was allowable in the online memorial, many Vietnamese would at times use English in their online communications. As one of the creators of the site noted, “we have English in the title of our site”, which spoke to the wider enmeshment of English in Vietnamese language especially in regards to online language. For

example *Nghĩa Trang Online* mixes both the Vietnamese for cemetery (*Nghĩa Trang*) and ‘Online’ in English. Taking my developing Vietnamese language into account, it was negotiated that English could be used when talking to members but when expressing my thoughts to the dead, Vietnamese language would be needed if those who had passed did not know English; thus I was rapidly enfolded into the Vietnamese language of remembering and loss.

It was not long into the research process that a meeting was organised among key NTO moderators and administrators, over a coffee on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City near where I lived in District 12. As I was new to the city they suggested that they could meet close to me in what was a very thoughtful consideration. The message placed on NTO by a moderator states:

Dear all forum members of nhomai.vn! To welcome a new member who has flown from Australia to Vietnam to learn about the activities of the Cemetery Online (NTO) we offer for this group to have an offline mini reunion where members of NTO can interact, make friends, and share their feelings about NTO with this member... We hope you have a decent command of English to join us and to make a bridge between Vietnam and Australia. (Translation)

Making my way down the chaotic street of Phan Huy Ích Street in the Tân Bình District, I passed cigarette sellers, bundles of chickens tied together on the backs of motorbikes, children running, café after café, mobile phone and phở sellers, and much else besides. It was an exciting time in the research but I was nervous as to how many NTO members would be there, and if they would be interested in discussing their practices with me.

I found the rendezvous point, a huge café at the end of the street. I sat and pulled out a little bound folder, re-reading questions I had prepared. I eagerly waited. And then waited some more. And then after waiting even a little longer I moved to various sections of the café, double-checking that I had found the correct meeting place. Perhaps, I thought, the offline would not materialise. And then they arrived in a flood, about ten people, both men and women, between 20 and 50 years old, carrying each other on the back of their bikes. We introduced each other and some I recognised from photographs on NTO and *Facebook*. Suddenly the online interactions became real, much more than the few pages that made up my research proposal, and though many of them were initially shy, perhaps nervous too, I soon felt very comforted by their friendliness and openness.

After ordering Vietnamese coffee, I talked to them about my research plans and who I was, a then 28-year-old Australian who had worked in libraries for several years while pursuing a degree in anthropology at Adelaide University. I spoke of the literature I had read concerning



online memorialisation in Australia, England, America, and some European countries, and noted that such sites were well studied. However, I pointed out that there was little research concerning these practices in Vietnam. In showing my interest in their activities, I hoped to demonstrate that I was not completely unsuitable for such a project, that though there were many hurdles to overcome I cared for and respected their site. I was still a young apprentice but I hoped that my eagerness to elaborate ethnographically on their online practices, and willingness to be incorporated into their community, would bring with it an acceptance and even excitement regarding the research.

I spoke to them about their motivation for participation, and of their everyday life, work and family. I was not concerned with focusing exclusively on NTO activity, but was open to much broader experiences of members as to augment research routes and to provide a fuller picture of participants. At this initial meeting, several members brought out their mobile phones and showed me images of tombs which they had created or ones belonging to friends and others. I was soon made aware of stories of several members who had fallen in love through joining the site, and the upcoming wedding of one couple who had met through the online memorial. NTO members would receive a table to themselves.

Clearly, there was a great deal of intimacy and warmth throughout this community that I was soon to share in. Whilst there were certainly research hurdles following this meeting, they were all surmountable and did not endanger the core research project, probably in part because of key relationships that were formed over that coffee. This meeting cemented my enthusiasm for the project. More than anything, I wanted to feel incorporated into the pulse of NTO which had brought me several thousand kilometres from my home city of Adelaide. After making plans for future meet-ups and events, I arrived home later to Bernadette, elated at the initial meeting, and rambling about it throughout the evening.

A second critical early meeting was with Tuan, a key administrator of the site, where I was invited to meet up with him, his partner Phuong, and several friends from the site for a dinner near where he worked. I write of the energy of this initial meeting and quote at length from my fieldnotes to demonstrate how thoroughly I was enfolded into the fieldwork experience, and the natural movements between talking with informants about NTO and their lives overall:

We enter the large restaurant with staff out the front welcoming us in. The restaurant has a thatched ceiling with pictures of the Vietnamese countryside on the walls. I am with Tuan and Phuong, who are in a relationship, and we sit comfortably as they order food. They are eager to show me how to eat more efficiently with chopsticks, as we share thoughts on the food being served and the various other restaurants in the area. Soon, Hien and Ha arrive, who are also members of the site. They are older, with adult

children from previous marriages, and say they are ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend.’ Hien has travelled 6 hours by bus to meet Ha here in Ho Chi Minh City. Later in the night Hien tells me that he met Ha through NTO after he set up a tomb for his mother. Ha had lost her long-time friend (“my sister”); it was a “terrible death” she would later iterate, through illness lasting many years. Soon after, the online presence of Ngoc’s parents, mentioned at the beginning of this work, found its way into their own online interactions and both of them lit candles and left comments for the young woman. They met each other for the first time at a death day for Ngoc, and afterwards they sent messages and offerings to each other’s departed ones. “Romance in the cemetery”, Tuan humorously pointed out. I ask Ha if when she burns the ‘virtual candles’ she believes it is real and she says yes and then elaborates on the sort of images she sends; teddies and toys for children, favourite foods for her friend. We talk of the everyday: my family in Australia and plans for me and Bernadette. Afterwards we move out to the street, even more alive with the cooler night than when we went in to eat, and we sit at a street-shop where a woman cooks up fresh seafood for us, snails and mussels, and we drink beer. Tuan says that he only drinks beer when he has guests, “never alone”. Only “two times a month,” to which Phuong nudges him, lightly suggesting this is not true. Hien and Ha seem curious that we are not married, and that Bernadette is fine with this; Hien laughs and says to Ha that in Australia you don’t have to get married. Ha isn’t happy that Hien is smoking as he has recently had some heart trouble. It is nearly midnight when we go to leave, before a forty minute taxi home. (Fieldnotes)

In these initial meetings I had countless questions and thoughts about where the research could possibly head. Already, important themes of social interaction had become obvious through the relationships being sustained on and off the site. Tuan, Phuong and their friends from NTO opened up channels which would have otherwise been unknown and difficult to obtain, such as the experience of a NTO charity trip towards the end of the fieldwork and several death day anniversaries.

These early engagements in the field opened up a promising area of research. Whilst it was a gradual accumulation and some participants withdrew along the way, there were roughly 25-30 informants who shared their experiences during the research. This included members who used the site both regularly and irregularly, members who no longer interacted in the site but stayed engaged with those they had met in NTO, and significantly, some active moderators and administrators.

### **Online anonymity and field sites**

Online research is often difficult to make anonymous. In a study testing such anonymity, Gatson and Zweerink (2004:181) note that while they had difficulty accessing the location of some online ethnographies, a host of others soon revealed themselves. They also raise the point that it is “questionable how anonymous ethnographic sites have ever been” (ibid). While certain

online sites do raise questions of whether they should remain anonymous, it would have been near impossible for me to disguise the online field sites in my research. *Nghĩa Trang Online* is the largest online memorial in Vietnam and while there are various other online memorials and information pages, in relation to revolutionary martyrs for example (see Chapter 7), it would not have taken much detective work to unravel my online whereabouts. I also feel that it would have been a disservice to the members of NTO I participated with, who openly encouraged me to share knowledge of their website.

This research removed itself from a single bound ‘field’ by necessity and was multi-sited (Marcus 1995), as it moved within and between online and offline sites of intersection. Online research was conducted among several websites, including NTO, *Yahoo*, *YouTube*, *Skype* and *Facebook*. Conversations could be within one website, or simultaneously across several platforms; it was not unusual for participants to be chatting and sharing statuses on *Facebook* whilst interacting on NTO.

At times I was deeply immersed in the field, spending whole days on the computer within NTO, or offline with informants. At other times I was less focused on the NTO site and my time revolved around learning the language, visiting memorials, national commemorations, museums, temples, pagodas and cemeteries. Informants were busy with their own everyday life and so interviews often had to be planned for distant dates. Schwenkel (2009) writes of her research undertaken on contemporary remembrance practices in Vietnam relating to the American/Vietnam War:

Since I could not inhabit my field sites in the more traditional sense of immersion, but continuously travelled to and from and between them, my opportunities to engage in ‘deep’ participant observation were more limited and necessitated a different kind of field immersion that had less to do with absorption and inclusion in fixed sites than with recurring encounters over the long term in spaces through which historical memories flowed and intersected. (Ibid:15)

In a similar way, though always with an eye on participant observation, the online and offline encounters allowed for a unique way of interacting in the field, with both small encounters—spending an hour chatting online with an NTO member or visiting them for coffee—and large encounters—death day anniversaries, travelling with members to an orphanage in the Mekong—making impressions on the work.

Interviews took place where informants felt comfortable, usually in coffee lounges, or the parks which thread their way throughout the main cities of Vietnam. Follow-up interviews were arranged in Australia through email, NTO, *Skype*, *Yahoo* and *Facebook*. Offline research also

incorporated Vietnamese national holidays, and social gatherings including death day anniversaries (*ngày giỗ*) and weddings. In general I accepted offline invitations to engage with members even if they were seemingly outside the scope of the research itself, such as fundraising events and tennis outings. While learning how bad my tennis swing is, these events were a crucial method to build rapport and engage in the topic from a perspective which otherwise would have been missed.

## **Fieldnotes**

Fieldnotes have been immensely helpful and have been essential to this research. They have not always been easy writing, nor easy re-reading, but they have unfailingly been illuminating both in the early and later days, as well as for expressing demanding aspects of the research process. While keeping a record of observations, they have been usefully applied retrospectively in reflexive thinking about my time spent in Vietnam.

Though I would like to say that the writing of fieldnotes was a diligent nightly occurrence, this would be false. Rather there were particular themes that would resound, spawning a barrage of fieldnotes before a less fertile period might strike, consisting of photos and direct research within NTO. Similar to Avieli (2012:256-257) in his research concerned with food practices in Hoi An, I started to “write notes about specific events that were more salient and unusual” instead of writing of the “normal and routine”.

Fieldnotes were documented in a variety of ways. At times they were taken during an event, jotted down on napkins while having coffee, in notebooks, and on my laptop. I followed a colleague’s advice early in the process about being a vacuum cleaner while undertaking fieldwork; everything and anything was a source of inquiry, and data which seemed of limited value early on has often become highly relevant several years later. As I look through the material which informs this research, an avalanche of material appears: tourism and museum brochures, pamphlets, wedding invitations, newspaper clippings, several volumes of photographs, postcards, travel itineraries, DVDs and CDs; a whole host of ephemera.

## **Ethical considerations**

Throughout fieldwork, there was an emphasis placed on how Vietnamese emotionally express themselves online and it was therefore imperative for me to be aware of the possible distress

and anxiety my research may have elicited. While interviewing I tried to stay aware of the emotional state of the participant and if they grew uncomfortable or distressed, I would change topic or my approach. To suspend interactions on the first sign of distress would have been over-cautious but I was aware of the sensitivity of my research. It is worth noting that online interviews and chats with informants were sometimes more productive than face-to-face ones, with sometimes exceedingly delicate and challenging subjects and experiences being shared.

While ethical considerations surrounding grief and bereavement research is necessary, there are also positive experiences associated with participating in such study. Several grief and bereavement researchers and advocates have indicated the beneficial qualities of sharing experiences and stories, as well as the importance and necessity of sensitive research (Buckle, Dwyer and Jackson 2010; Cook and Bosley 1995; Dyregrov 2004). Many informants spoke of the beneficial qualities of speaking with me about those who had passed, as someone interested in experiences which may otherwise have been challenging to articulate to others. While I was content to be able to give voice to such experiences and memories, they also took a toll on me early on in the research, and throughout, as I was unprepared for the scope of the material I would be encountering. I envisioned it would be ‘difficult’ at times, I contemplated some possible ‘sensitive’ interactions, but in truth I was woefully lacking in foresight on the impact it would have on me.

### ***A turning inwards: reflexivity and emotions***

The detachment of the scientific observer... by itself can never be sufficient; there has to be a way of providing for readers imaginative access to the emotional significance of events as felt by the informants... One has to become inward with a culture, and one possible avenue here is by a confrontation of one’s own emotional responses with those of the people with whom one lives. (Watson 1999:144)

Why fieldwork? The answer comes quickly from colleagues: “Because it is what anthropologists do... It is the stuff we work with... Because anthropology *is* fieldwork... It is going overseas to be immersed in your study... Because it’s through long-term participant observation that we can research interests”. Such comments demonstrate that fieldwork is an integral aspect of anthropology. We go to the ‘field’ to encounter ‘the other’ and gather our precious data; our thick descriptions in fieldnotes which like clay within the artist’s hands is something we mould, revealing the nuggets of insight within, being our ethnography. The ethnography becomes a prized possession, tightly bound with validating fieldnotes.

It is not long after talking with anthropologists arriving home from the field that the emotional experiences—otherwise often left out—become apparent. After a presentation one morning by a fellow researcher, a presentation they had woven “to take out all the messiness”, we discussed the reality. Far from the serene gaze of the anthropologist, looking out over some tropical island lagoon, they admitted, “Yeah we don’t talk about it, but it really was just terrible at times”. It was much besides, but a reflexive understanding—or to quote Hemer (2013:8), “a little self-reflection”—can strengthen the research material and help illuminate important anthropological insights.

Reflexivity, as defined by Davies (1999:4) is “a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference”. In this way:

The relationships between ethnographer and informants in the field, which form the bases of subsequent theorizing and conclusions, are expressed through social interaction in which the ethnographer participates; thus ethnographers help to construct the observations that become their data... In its most transparent guise, reflexivity expresses researchers’ awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effects upon it. (Ibid:5-7)

Such an awareness of our positionality in the field has at times been unwelcome within anthropology, as these experiences and relationships have been understood as a contaminating influence and outside of an objective scientific world view (Clifford 2013 [1988]:483; Rabinow 1977:5-7). However, in the last thirty years there has been a broadening of reflexive anthropological work, with many anthropologists concurring that by being reflexive about our positionality, experiences, relationships and emotions in the field, insight can be gained into our own relationships with the material and the research findings themselves (Davies 2010; Rosaldo 2004 [1989]; Watson 1999a; 1999b).

Researching material closely aligned with death and dying can be an emotionally heightened experience. As noted by Davies (2005:x), death is a subject matter which is “unlike the interest we possess in other subjects. This one is infused with emotion, whether that of the experience of bereavement or of its anticipation, or of the thought of our own mortality”. And as Verdery (1999:31) writes, “For human beings, death is the quintessential cosmic issue, one that brings us all face to face with ultimate questions about what it means to be—and to stop being—human, about where we have come from and where we are going”. No person or people can hope to dissuade death, they may temporarily block it but death stares back blankly in its finality.

Researchers are reflexively engaging with the themes of death and dying, whether they be: researching the experience of patients in palliative care and residential aging homes (Hockey

2007; Lawton 2000:vi-viii), cemeteries in England (Woodthorpe 2007; 2009), organ transfer research (Shaw 2011), or Holocaust photography (Liss 1998:v-vii). This list is not exhaustive, with a growing body of research now interrogating the researcher's personal contact with death and dying, and the deeply unsettling experiences and emotions relating to it (see also Johnson 2009; Valentine 2007).

Woodthorpe (2007:3) in her doctoral fieldwork among cemeteries in England notes that the subject matter was difficult to research, making her at times feel "so exhausted, lonely, fed up etc". The research was a "highly charged activity" (ibid) which had an influence on her motivation and state of mind, as it was "emotionally draining and physically exhausting" (ibid:4). She argues that social researchers should remember that they are working among emotionally sentient beings: "Emotion cannot be left out of the ethnographic picture. It informs the way we negotiate, interpret and communicate our reality" and subsequently a reflexive stance can "enable emotions to be incorporated and identified as a key analytical strength in our interpretation of the social world" (ibid:8). Throughout the research I engaged with my own emotional encounters in relation to the research, as both an outsider looking in and as an active participant trying to better appreciate and understand online memorialisation in Vietnam.

### **The initial months of fieldwork and social space**

With informants or alone, I visited cemeteries, pagodas, war museums and what Tumarkin (2005:12) calls 'traumascapes', which she defines as "places across the world marked by traumatic legacies of violence, suffering and loss". All of them were emotionally charged and at times deeply unsettling. Reading and listening to the experiences of NTO members occasionally left me feeling physically unwell, and at times I questioned if I could continue the research project. Re-examining fieldnotes now takes me back into a world where I describe feeling numbed by the subject matter, at other times anxious and depressed. After one interview I noted that "perhaps I am the wrong person for the job":

I am finding fieldnotes difficult to write. Today when meeting with Ha, she stated that her brother was killed during a war with Cambodia and had his throat cut. She made the sign with her hand. And as for her cousins, she would never create an online memorial for them because it was too awful, it was worse than that. She went silent after telling me this and the conversation did not continue easily. I felt like an imposter, prying into a subject matter so sensitive. The whole experience was draining, awful. Perhaps I am the wrong person for the job. (Fieldnotes)

Another fieldnote entry after talking with a Vietnamese woman about her experiences of abortion left me feeling similarly disconnected and anxious:

After meeting with Phuong I had difficulty keeping myself together. She became visibly distressed towards the end of our discussion and I had to end it early. This is a very intense situation and it made me wonder why I thought I could even deal with this. These are people's lives now, this is real to them. Who am I? (Fieldnotes)

At times of particular intensity I would neglect to write fieldnotes at all after key events, which led to anxiety about not fulfilling my postgraduate duties. I felt profoundly removed from the emotional realities I was encountering.

Anxiety was compounded by feeling I was removed from the *social space* being studied. Rabinow (1977:79) in his seminal reflexive work in Morocco, writes that "however much one moves in the direction of participation, it is always the case that one is still both an outsider and an observer". I was particularly aware that my experiences fell completely outside of those whom I was studying. Who was I to delve into the emotional experience of losing a loved one, especially with deaths so deeply painful and disenfranchised? I have lived most of my life in Adelaide, which is according to recent surveys one of the most liveable cities in the world<sup>13</sup>. While I might have been visited upon by teenage angst and feelings of rebellion, there were no bombs falling. When my grandparents died, to reverse Thomas Dylan's poetry, they *did* go gently into that good night. In sum, my own life experiences felt smooth and uneventful in comparison to those which I was researching.

It was during the initial months of fieldwork that I became acquainted with Linh, whom I have mentioned previously. Linh had memorialised her father on *Nghĩa Trang Online* and also used the site to inform members about the health of her niece Thuc, who was seriously ill and in hospital. A page on NTO was created where members could light an online candle for the sick child and leave comments, such as 'I hope she gets better soon' and 'I am thinking of you'. Linh related how she was feeling about her own poor health and about the sickness of Thuc. She spoke of long days sitting next to her niece in hospital, and the things she had done to brighten up the room for her. She also spoke of the emotional turmoil this brought about in her family, as members had to find ways around their usual work and studying routines, all the while concerned for their sick child. While I was concerned about the health of Thuc and felt sympathy, the experience of having a family member ill in hospital was one I was unfamiliar with. I was interested in how Linh used NTO to communicate but there was an emotional disconnection, as I could sympathise but not empathise. Four months into the fieldwork I received a message which profoundly impacted these early relationships.

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<sup>13</sup><http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/south-australia/adelaide-ranked-the-fifthmost-liveable-city-in-the-world/story-fni6uo1m-1226705860297?nk=a79637ea4b28fcf50f4bf587f7352981>. Accessed 04/09/14



## Returning home

My four months in Vietnam had been a sensorial avalanche. Travelling the country, each meal was a new flavour and texture, from take-away phở (Vietnamese noodle soup) in a plastic bag for breakfast, to sidewalk beer hoi and the chanting of một, hai, ba, YO! ('1, 2, 3 cheers' whilst hoisting beer or 'bia') before each drink. The initially overpowering coffee: the strength in flavour, the sweetness of the milk. The traffic, its intoxicating cacophony, and the smell of burning votive paper offerings wafting down the street. So many senses were virtually replicated in my studies also, as online candles were 'lit' and online food, beer, clothing, utensils, accessories and money were 'sent' to deceased loved ones on *Nghĩa Trang Online*. The days of being emotionally daunted by the subject matter took place in this new and exciting environment. Online and offline, physically and intellectually, Vietnam was incredibly stimulating, and it was all to end just as I felt it was beginning.

*Hi Anthony, please contact Ben, Dad or myself ASAP, IT'S important, ASAP it's very important.* These words from my sister appeared on a chat screen on my laptop while sitting down for morning breakfast. The lack of context, the brevity and the repetition could not be the usual negotiation of a *Skype* session with family at home. That my mother was not mentioned as someone to contact did not occur to me at the time. Half an hour later I was sitting in a phone booth in the local post office and heard the words, "It's not good mate. Mum is sick". And by sick, my brother stated, she was very sick: leukaemia. It was getting worse and in the doctor's opinion, I should return home quickly. The words were not said but the message was clear: she could die. Everything after was a whirlwind of booking flights, the emptying and cleaning of a newly-leased apartment, confused goodbyes to new and very kind neighbours, and being unable to sleep on the long flight. I did not know what would await me. With Bernadette by my side, and both of us very much in shock, the trip home was the longest of my life.

Back home, I encountered the white sterility of my mother's hospital room, the regulated beeping of machines. While I had undergone an onslaught of experience, nothing had changed at home except for the overwhelming fact of her illness; it was all my family talked about. Her white blood count was so precarious that she was confined to a tiny hospital room and had to be kept sterile. She was to be there for nearly one month. Vietnam's colour, noise and tastes juxtaposed against Adelaide made it seem as though the sterility had bled beyond that hospital room, blanching my surroundings: the orderliness of the traffic, the mindless flicking through

TV channels. While mum ate her carefully weighed hospital food, we would eat only for utility at home. There was even an absence of touch as I was too fearful to hug her lest I infect her, or create more of the blue-black bruises that covered her body; I stood at the door of her room with a hospital mask on. The emotions and senses converged and pretty much everything induced anxiety: the smell of disinfectant, the sound of footsteps in the corridor not knowing if there was a doctor bringing bad news, the near-constant ambulance sirens outside.

Where Vietnam had been all senses, and a disconnection of emotions from those I was in contact with, returning home was a blunting of the senses with an amplification of emotions. The stress and worry, the difficult emotion of seeing my mother in severe pain and not knowing if it would end or get worse. Life settled into a routine that revolved around hospital visits, the logistics of car usage and parking and, when she was home, the provision of a litany of drugs several times a day, and talk of what she could and could not eat.

The response from NTO members was almost instantaneous, with messages received via *Facebook*, NTO and email in the following days of leaving Vietnam:

Hello Anthony. Is your mom's health getting well? I hope it'll end soon. Best regards for you and your mom. Hiep.

How are you? I've just heard about your mother's health. Your mẹ<sup>14</sup>! I'm very sorry to hear... I hope that she will be treated well and have progress soon. Please give her my words. Best wishes! Phuong.

NTO is an example of a community, a group of online kin as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, who articulate their fears, anxieties and grief relating to the loss of a loved one, and some members effortlessly drew me into their community of reciprocation of feelings. On my birthday, a particularly exhausting day, Linh emailed me:

How is your birthday today? I hope you have been enjoying a great time of birthday though I know it must be hard today. I think about you much, especially on this day. It is a difficult time. I have been busy recently for my working and studying. We hope to see you soon and your mother well again. Regards. Linh.

For Linh, whose niece was seriously ill in hospital, she was empathising with my own situation of caring for a loved one, knowing all too well how long an hour spent in hospital lasts. Though our emotional reactions would be different, it was reassuring to have support from an informant who themselves was undergoing a similar experience. It was the beginning of a transformation which would continue when returning to the field.

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<sup>14</sup> Vietnamese for mother

## Back to the field

I returned back to Vietnam two months after the diagnosis of my mother's illness. I was emotionally exhausted and felt guilty in returning to Vietnam while she was stable but still very ill. I was back and stimulated when just taking a walk down the street, or chatting to staff when ordering a meal. In comparison my mother needed to be removed from the senses, avoiding interactions with people for fear of infection to her low immune system, forcing herself to eat food that tasted metallic or had no taste at all. After spending several hours on NTO one particular day, I came across a memorial of a mother and was hit with an emotional intensity which was different than before. As noted in the fieldnotes:

Today I stumbled across an online memorial for a mother, similar in age to my own. I look at her face and the comments below. She looks so young, so youthful, just like my own mother... I move myself away from the computer, looking for anything, fresh air, something, anything but this. (Fieldnotes)

Another day I interviewed a moderator of the site who asked about the health of my mother, and my fieldnotes reveal anxiety about *being* in Vietnam at all.

Thinking about mum again. It is hard being a world away. Skype is good but it cannot start to bridge the barrier of not seeing her. Mum, how are you doing? What a wretched thing to have. No one deserves this. (Fieldnotes)

Without being aware of it at the time, a shift had occurred in the research. I was sharing *similar experiences* as my informants who talked of the powerful emotional experiences they had while on the memorial site. My social space with informants had irrevocably changed. Hastrup writes:

The difference between 'knowing' and 'understanding'... amounts to a difference between an intimate and implicit 'native' knowledge, and an external and explicit 'expert' understanding. The point of doing anthropology is to bridge the two. *The key factor is the sharing of experience* and the making of ethnography. This making implies both an implicit knowing and an explicit understanding of the other world. We 'know' the social space as participants and we 'understand' it as detached analysts. The important thing is to note that this is not a linear process, but a simultaneity. And the scope of our comprehending others remains dual: anthropology is about the discovery of a definitional reality. (Hastrup 1993:175; my italics)

The social space I came to 'know' was that of the emotional experience of nearly losing someone, and being aware of death. Before, our relationship was one-sided, and I could in no way share in such experienced subjectivities, and felt disconnected. Now there could be a shared empathy—not only sympathy—that transformed my relationship with many informants.

When talking with Huong, whose father passed away at an early age, she would ask about my mother and relate how she felt when her father died. On returning to Vietnam she stated:

We were surprised when you came here to research NTO because we think that westerners do not think about their old people, they have a place<sup>15</sup> for them when they are old... It is very different for us here. When you went home I prayed for your mother every day. How is your mother now?

The act of going home demonstrated to Huong that we were alike in that I too cared deeply for my parents and perceived NTO—where many parents who had passed away were memorialised—as a valid area of research. Huong was visibly moved as we discussed our parents, and I spoke of how challenging it was being away from home at that time. I showed her a photo of my mother I had been emailed (see Image 6). In the picture my mother is standing outside in the Mount Lofty Botanic Gardens in the Adelaide Hills region, with a beanie on to keep her warm since she had lost her hair. Huong showed me pictures of herself with her father at a young age which she had placed on the memorial site, and invited me to light a candle for her father in the future. This sharing of photos took place alongside my research questions about NTO and Vietnamese memorialisation more generally, but there was no solid demarcation between our talking about our parents, or the website; there was a natural movement back and forth.



**Image 6. Sharing a photograph in the field.** A photo taken of my mother and sent to me from Australia. This became a source of conversations with informants, leading to further discussion about their own loved ones. (Photo taken by Michael Heathcote)

With my enhanced emotional understanding I believe I engaged more comprehensively with the primary research. The digital reflections of offline memorialisation seemed to resonate

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<sup>15</sup> As the conversation continued, Huong explained that she had seen these places, which were retirement homes, in movies.

more with me, whereas before I may have been simply gathering data. After returning to Vietnam I could more readily feel the two-dimensional replications of online offerings, and see them as extensions of individuals going through pain, or sadly remembering a loved one. I could appreciate the comfort that simulated smoke and offerings would give.

This new understanding of online memorialisation, and the site's sensorial landscape, was brought about through empathy, and by ongoing engagements with offline memorialisation and attending death days. Undertaken yearly to commemorate the death of an individual, the death day anniversary is a time of family reunion where family, friends and neighbours feast with the dead and each other, remembering them and also importantly including them in the celebration. It is also deeply intertwined into the lunar calendar. While some scholars have noted that death day takes place on the day before the person's death, so as to "celebrate the actual living presence of the deceased" (Kwon 2006:62), the day of the death on the lunar calendar<sup>16</sup> more generally provides the significant date in Vietnam.

This was made relevant to me by several informants. As one informant remarked, "In my country it is very important to remember the dead... In our country the death day is the most important day. We do respect the dead people. On that day we invite them to eat with us, we share food with family, with neighbours, with the dead". This resonates with Kwon's research when he notes:

The dead, in this system, are expected to take part in the ritualized present by asserting their own particular historical vitality, expressing their aspirations and grievances, eating and talking together with the living, and sharing their sorrows and joy. Vietnamese popular culture emphasizes the supreme importance of remembering the dead, but its emphasis is on the dead person's *living* presence rather than the memory of this person. (Kwon 2006:63)

Attending several death day anniversaries I was struck by the interactions between this world and the other. Not only were the ancestors attended to, but also the ghosts of the street (where food and incense is provided for them so as to stop them interfering with the occasion), the ground, the work place and the trees. The ancestors were incorporated into a deeply social

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<sup>16</sup> Derks expands on the lunar calendar in the Vietnamese cosmology:

The Vietnamese lunar calendar (âm lịch) is based on the rotations of the Moon around the Earth and of the Earth around the Sun. The days of the month, such as the first and the fifteenth, are based on the new and full moons, called sóc and vọng. A lunar month is twenty-nine to thirty days, which is the time required for the moon to complete its orbit around the Earth. A lunar year is made up of twelve months, linked to annual climatic periods based on the Earth's rotation around the Sun that provide the foundation for the yearly agricultural cycle. The lunar calendar is eleven days shorter than the solar calendar. To remedy the difference between the lunar and the solar calendars, an intercalary month (tháng nhuận) is added every third or fourth year. (Derks 2015:4-5)

event, full of votive paper burnings, invigorating conversation, card playing, as well as eating and drinking. For a grandparent long past, it could be a time of buoyant celebration and festivity, or for a recent or tragic death, a more somber reflection.

One death day I attended for a grandparent of an informant felt more like a celebration. There were quiet moments praying upstairs at the family altar, but for the most part, it was loud and festive. Female family members prepared the bounty of food from early morning, friends and neighbours walked in with slabs of beer. After eating, some went to another room to play the card game *Tiến lên*, and gamble. Some went outside to burn votive paper offerings. The senses came alive and upon reflection, this added a sensory dimension to the online memorial I was researching. Though I had experienced the senses of online and offline memorialisation before returning home for my mother's illness, the addition of empathy and my feeling more secure in the social space, allowed for a more thorough engagement after returning.

A death day towards the end of my fieldwork was for the young woman killed in a traffic accident (as described at the beginning of Chapter 1). It was her second death day, sombre and at times heartbreaking. Sitting around the table lined with food, I reflected on how I would react to the loss of my own mother. Would I create an online memorial for her? Would my grief be challenging to express? Would an online memorial for my mother give me any sense of solace and enfold me in a wider community? In essence, how would I express grief within my own society and would anyone be there to listen? Just as my previous understanding of cancer was that it happened 'to other people', so too the mother of the daughter at this death day said such accidents "happened to other people, not our daughter". It was through NTO that I was connected to this mother, and though our experiences were literally and figuratively a world apart, we had forged an emotional connection and shared a social space.

## **Conclusion**

It has been three years since my mother was diagnosed with leukaemia and the heavy medications and intrusive procedures have come to an end. As a family we move forward with the hope that she will one day soon be completely free of the cancer. Writing this chapter in itself has been an emotional act: my memories of both Vietnam the country and my PhD are tied to her illness. Writing has also been cathartic, the act of reflexivity helping make sense of my experiences in new ways. I have had a life altering experience since—the birth of my daughter Eleanor, named after my mother—and in contact with informants they now ask about

my daughter, and the health of my mother, as I ask about their families and online kin from NTO. Writing up the research and listening to my infant daughter alternatively laugh and cry from the next room, opens up a whole new aspect of empathy when I think of the hug I shared with the parents of the young woman who died in the traffic accident.

I went to Vietnam with a great deal of academic knowledge but little personal insight into loss and grief. The reality of death and the emotionality of remembering was something I was unprepared for. My research proposal, written for the University before travelling overseas, was encapsulated on thirty pieces of paper: complete, thorough. In the bustling centre of Ho Chi Minh City I was a whole sensorial world away from those papers which seemed so safe and succinct, and in an emotional world on *Nghĩa Trang Online* that I could not connect to. My research was interrupted with my mother's illness but after returning to it, I was positioned within a new social space. The sensorial extravaganza of fieldwork—online in NTO, on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, at death day anniversaries—gave me solid ethnographic research. However, my experiential understanding profoundly enhanced these sensations thereafter. My experiences, when shared with informants, in turn allowed them to share more with me; we shared the same social space through simultaneity of emotions and senses.

The empathy that allowed an engagement in the research, which before had been absent, was a starting point to better understanding the experience of Vietnamese using online memorials. So too, it was vital to have a grounded understanding of relationships Vietnamese have with the departed through ancestor worship, and the cultural and political transformations which have impacted on these relationships. This background is the focus of the following chapter.

### **Chapter 3. *When drinking water, remember its source: Vietnamese relationships with the dead***

The dead, in a way, live on everywhere in Vietnam. For the Kinh [the Viet people], the final social transition that all individuals make is from the living to the dead. At death, the corporeal body dies, but the soul lives on, becoming a component of the ancestral spirit. Once that happens, the soul is poised to make the defining journey of its postcorporeal existence, but what that journey will be and the quality of existence the soul will subsequently enjoy depend on the actions of the living. (Malarney 2003:185)

Dead people, in popular Vietnamese culture, can be powerfully sentient and salient beings who entertain emotions, intentions, and historical awareness. (Kwon 2007:11)

#### **Introduction**

This chapter establishes the cultural context in which Vietnamese relate to the dead. The practice of ancestor worship is the central relationship Vietnamese have with the dead, and it is an act with a rich heritage but also one that is not immutable to change. An examination of ancestor worship, forms of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ death, the cosmology of ghosts, and the socio-political context in which ancestor relationships emerges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, will thoroughly conceptualise how the living relate to and sustain relations with the dead.

The chapter begins with a discussion concerning continuing bonds with the dead in society. It will point out that the act of continuing a relationship with the dead has not always been viewed as a healthy one, with early ‘Western’ psychological, psychoanalytical and psychiatric models of grief speaking more about ‘moving on’ from the deceased and severing emotional ties. However recent literature, including work by Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996), highlights the forms a continuing relationship with the dead can take.

From here I delve into the Vietnamese cosmology of ancestor worship. This will include a discussion about the obligation to remember ancestors through filial piety, and the defining role the ancestor has in the family, as both someone to remember and respect, and as someone *present* in the everyday life of family members. I then examine concepts of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ death in Vietnam. In dominant Vietnamese belief systems the dead are powerful entities and without proper ritual attendance they can become caught between the world of the living and the dead, roaming as hungry ghosts and haunting those left behind. This will be explored in particular through the example of ghosts deriving from ‘bad deaths’ and recent warfare in Vietnam. In this initial section I deal with the religion, rituals and beliefs concerning the dead,



but less with the emotion and grief which will be the focus of Chapter 4, and subsequent chapters in this work.

The second part of this chapter unpacks political transformations in the country—through revolution and state policies—and examines how ancestor worship has been impacted by these events. Within Vietnam changes in the governing body from the mid-1940s shaped understandings of what was desirable and allowable in regards to remembering the dead, creating tensions which in part continue to the present. Overall the chapter gives an introduction to post-death relationships while also setting up a context for key threads—continuing relationships, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ deaths, ancestor offerings and appeasement—which help frame this thesis.

### **Continuing relationships**

One of the key findings relating to death in the anthropological literature is the continuation of a relationship after death (Danforth 1982; Francis, Kellaher and Neophytou 2005; Hertz 1960 [1907]; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). Many of the practices associated with death have often been concerned with guiding the departed through the other world in various forms (Hertz 1960 [1907]). Anthropologists have also highlighted the ways continuing relationships can have social applications for individuals. As Danforth (1982:147) points out, when the bereaved women of Potamia in Greece visit the graves of loved ones, they “talk casually of everyday matters: their family, their crops, their household chores. They also discuss death in general, as well as the particular deaths that have touched them and their emotional responses to these deaths”<sup>17</sup>. In this way, while death ends a physical relationship, research has recognised the important bonds, both emotional and social, which can continue between the living and the dead (Howarth 2000; Klass et al. 1996; Valentine 2008; 2009; Walter 1996).

While anthropologists and others have demonstrated how relationships are continued between the living and the dead, previous psychological, psychoanalytical and psychiatric models of grief and bereavement, through a mainly ‘Western’ cultural paradigm, argued that after death, survivors had to detach themselves from relations with the dead through the untangling of emotional ties (Parkes 1986; Klass et al. 1996:5-14). Such a paradigm defined the process of

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<sup>17</sup> This is not to suggest that all cultures have embarked on post-death relationships. Walter (1999:26) remarks that the Hopi Indians of Arizona actively disdain an ongoing relationship with the departed, where a process of forgetting and disengagement from the deceased is paramount to their relationship (see also Conklin 2001).

grief as being something which needed “to be eventually ‘resolved’ by ‘detaching’, ‘letting go’ and ‘moving on’” from the deceased (Walter 1999:xi). Klass et al. note:

The view of grief most accepted in this century holds that for successful mourning to take place the mourner must disengage from the deceased, and let go of the past... To experience a continuing bond with the deceased in the present has been thought of as symptomatic of psychological problems. (Klass et al. 1996:4)

Klass et al. (1996) coined the term ‘continuing bonds’ to express the meaningful ways individuals could continue a relationship with the dead, and were in part responsible for the shift in bereavement literature which argues that the dead can be incorporated back into the life of the living.

The concept of continuing bonds has not been without its disputes. Klass (2006:844) for example remarks that he never meant to imply that a continuing relationship with the dead is necessarily a positive thing—he refers to such a misconception as “the causality thesis”—and that his efforts to understand continuing bonds have been cited incorrectly in statements which take for granted that continuing bonds “support better adjustment” (see also Valentine (2006) for overview). In Klass’s own ethnographic research within parent groups who had lost a child, some found the continuation of a relationship healthy, while others did not (ibid:845). From a psychological perspective, the relinquishing of continuing bonds can often be associated with relationships which were difficult and conflicted for an individual in life (Stroebe and Schut 2005:482); thus the *separation* from a relationship after death can often be just as purposeful as a continuation.

When considering continuing bonds a myriad of influences outside of ‘traditional culture’ have dramatic effects on how one interacts with the dead. Valentine (2009:6), who interviewed 17 bereaved Japanese, argues that traditional relationships with the dead through ancestor worship “exist alongside those promoted by contemporary institutions such as medical and funeral professions, religious institutions, bereavement support organisations and the media, together with popular wisdom and everyday socialisation”. In this sense notions of “individualising, privatising and secularising” were often incorporated into Japanese associations and practices of death in a way which did not easily fit traditional values (ibid:9). One individual Valentine interviewed felt at odds with burying the ashes of her parent, which is traditionally done on the 49<sup>th</sup> day, and kept them for several years (ibid). Another spoke of the need to incorporate private and individual spaces for the dead, which gradually diminished with time (ibid:11).

## **Ancestor worship**

On my first visit to Vietnam in early 2010, before I had envisioned research in the country, I remember looking into certain rooms or areas in people's homes and shops and seeing pictures of deceased family members. I remember the candles, the incense, the beautiful fruit and extravagant votive paper offerings—houses and cars—that sat in front of altars and thought it strange, perhaps ghoulish, that the dead were kept so visible and in such proximity to the living and their everyday lives. Stepping back to the slender side-streets that threaded through the city, so boxed in with urban walls they were dark with shade, I was intrigued, finding the images powerful in their ubiquity and connection to death. It was not something I was familiar with and though my own culture had more in common with Vietnamese ancestor worship than I first realised, it was still a long journey to becoming conversant with Vietnamese relationships with the dead. My ignorance of votive paper offerings and votive paper money was such that on first seeing a huge bundle of photocopied \$100 American notes in the market of Hoi An, I was curious as to what fraud was being committed with them. I can still remember the glee and outright laughter from the women working in the market to see my curious expression. As for the paper jackets, hats, houses and motorbikes, the cakes, fruits, wine, choco pies and beer that surround family ancestor altars, it took many conversations for me to learn precisely how votive paper offerings were to be burnt and so transmute to the other world and be used by the ancestors, and how food and drink were offered for direct consumption<sup>18</sup>.

Vietnam is a country flourishing with the spirit realm. Whether it is shrines to guardian tutelary spirits, deities, ancestors and ghosts, or temples for heroic military generals, for the Trung sisters or kings, or altars dedicated to the seas, earth, sky and trees, the spirits are omnipresent. Gods and goddesses appear in busy metropolitan squares and on walks among the rice fields of the provinces. On Lunar holidays, the crowds form long lines outside Buddhist pagodas, thick with the smell of incense. There are a dazzling variety of conceptions of what it means to be religious in Vietnam.

Religion in Vietnam can be loosely conceptualised as a flow and exchange within several main religious traditions. These include Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, and more recently Catholicism. Other religions in Vietnam include Hòa Hảo Buddhism, Caodaism, and to an even smaller extent, ethnic minority religions. It is an eclectic corpus and there is no single definition of what it is to be religious in Vietnam. Rather there are main traditions and a diverse heritage

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<sup>18</sup> After a short period the food and drink is considered consumed by the ancestors, and can then be removed to be consumed by the living.

of beliefs in spirits and animism, relating to the souls of the ocean, trees, and animals among others, to which ancestor worship is fundamental.

Ancestor worship (*thờ cúng tổ tiên*)—‘remembering the moral debt’—is the “moral cornerstone of Vietnamese philosophy, religion and cultural life” (Phan 1993:161). In Vietnamese cosmology the dead continue their existence in the other world (*thế giới khác*) as family members light incense, and provide food, drink and votive paper offerings at the ancestor altar. Family members in turn ask for assistance from their ancestors, provided in the form of good luck and guidance (see Bich 1998:221-223; Endres and Lauser 2011:124-125; Kwon 2007:91-93). For Vietnamese it is imperative to ‘remember the moral debt’ to the ancestors and to be aware of one’s role in the fabric of the family tapestry, as revealed through the proverb: ‘when drinking water, remember its source’ (*uống nước nhớ nguồn*). Derived in large part from Confucian teachings of filial piety (*hiếu*), traditionally ancestor worship has been embedded in the lineage of the family which included the living and the dead in a “single fabric of spiritual unity and material well-being” (Jamieson 1995:22). As stated by an informant:

In all of the human virtues filial piety is the top honour. The child can sacrifice everything, even their life to keep filial piety. On the other side, ancestors hold a mirror up for the children to follow... When the family has important times such as a wedding, has a baby, build a house, long-distance journey, examination, Vietnamese offer incense and make offerings to ancestors. They ask the ancestor to bless and give thanks for successful work. The essence of worship is from the trust that the living and the dead have, it links them and they support each other. Descendants visit and pray to ancestors and ancestors are sheltered and led to posterity. The ancestors are remembered, as family show their respect for the departed souls.

Within Vietnam children are educated about the importance of moral conduct and filial piety in order to influence their own future endeavours, and to also enhance their family’s reputation and prosperity (ibid:22-23; see also Phan 1993:186-187). Phan (1993:187) comments that this is demonstrated in the Vietnamese saying: “In his lifetime, if the father eats salty foods, his sons shall be thirsty for water in their lifetime”.

Endres and Lauser (2011:124-125) remark that filial piety “is inseparably intertwined with the belief that the ancestors depend on the living for their well-being in the other world”. It is the “reciprocal relationship” which becomes important, as the living ask for “ancestral benevolence” and “blessed gifts” and in return provide offerings for the ancestors (ibid). Jellema (2007a:472) notes that offerings to the dead constitute a “magical capacity for augmentation” wherein food eaten from the altar “is transformed from ordinary fare into

something called *lộc*, a blessing or gift from the other world which carries not only nutritional value but also spiritual beneficence” (see also Soucy 2006).



**Image 7. Ancestor offerings.** The first image shows offerings for ancestors on a death day anniversary. Notice the abundance of beer (known as Ba Ba Ba ('333') beer within the country), chicken and rice, as well as fruit, votive paper offerings, and joss sticks. After sharing this meal with the ancestors, the items will be in turn consumed by the living. The second image is a collection of votive paper offerings for a young child. Items include a pen, toy gun, binoculars, video game player, shoes, glasses and a backpack. The third image is a votive paper house, which is complete with a car and interior furniture including a bed, cupboard, and table. In the last image, several Vietnamese can be seen burning votive paper offerings at a death anniversary consisting of paper money, hats, gold bars, shoes, shirts, glasses, shavers, pens, mobile phones and a cigarette packet. (Photographs by the author)

Votive paper offerings—which are primarily made of bamboo and paper to facilitate burning and the consequent transmutation to the other world—include everyday objects such as umbrellas, toothbrushes, combs and money, as well as the latest consumer goods, including motorbikes, electrical appliances and iPhones (see Image 7)<sup>19</sup>. All of these can be used in the afterlife. As an informant noted:

<sup>19</sup>For example, next to my book case at home I have several votive paper offerings, including male offerings of a suit with a bow tie and buttons attached, cigarettes for the 'smoothness above all else' and a cigarette lighter, \$100 American money, shaver, several bars of pure gold, Rolex watch, gold ring, mobile phone, Mercedes Benz red car, gold radiating Buddha, sun glasses and a iPhone. Female offerings include a belt, sandals, comb, lipstick, perfume, brooch, an iPhone and phone credit, wristwatch, earrings, necklace, gold bars and a casual shirt. For

There are a variety of papers people burn to their ancestor. Basically, we would burn money, gold, and house to ancestor as we believe that there is still life after death, and these are basic needs of daily life. However, nowadays people create a lot more like scooter, car, etc. What we are having in real life could be made in paper burnt to the ancestors... We believe the dead live in the other world but that they have needs just like this life. So for this reason we take care of our ancestors.

It was a regular occurrence to see the burning of votive paper offerings on lunar days and death day anniversaries. Walking the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, smoke would rise up from the votive paper money being burnt and offered to the spirit realm at different times of the day.

Votive paper offerings are incorporated into everyday interactions with the dead. Nguyen (2006:130) tells the story of Mrs Lan, whose deceased father was described by a medium as being “very busy in the other world because he also had a very important job assisting a president”. After receiving this advice Mrs Lan “bought her father a votive cell phone as an offering, thinking it would give him more flexibility with his busy schedule in the invisible world” (ibid). Paper offerings also relate directly to requests for ancestors to intercede into the world of the living, or they can be less specific, and some moments are more pertinent than others to ask for and receive blessings from the ancestors. Everything from back-aches, nightmares, and fortune or misfortune within the workforce can potentially be a reason for heightened offerings to the spirit realm (Kwon 2007:79). To not make offerings to the ancestors creates the potential of punishment and ill luck for the family. Malarney (2002:92; see also Jamieson 1995:23-24) has described the reprimand family members receive through sickness and financial woes for failing to offer ancestors “life essentials” including new forms of money and paper clothing. Similarly numerous informants expressed the opinion that the dead should not be left behind in the other world, rather they should be constantly updated with the latest goods, much like the living. Votive paper offerings have changed over time and the recent market reforms and rise of income have encouraged a wider array of expenditure for the ancestors (see Chapter 5).

Whether it be potential or actual concerns and problems, or changes relating to work and relationships, ancestors are woven into the vicissitudes of the family. Jellema (2007a), based on fieldwork within Dinh Bang in the Red River Delta, North Vietnam, notes that ancestors are incorporated into everyday matters through the narratives of her informant Mrs Thuy. For Thuy, her deceased parents became active participants in her life who could read prayers and

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younger children items include a gaming system, Barbie doll, toy gun, children’s clothing, backpack, and sunglasses.

give support (ibid:473-474). Thuy used the services of spirit mediums to interact with her mother and was informed by the medium of her mother's ancestral worship requirements (ibid). Speaking candidly about how her continuing relationship customs were often seen as superstitious by the government, Thuy nonetheless pointed out the important role her parents played in her life and how government stances did not disturb her more personal experiences with them (ibid:474-475).

During fieldwork, it was unusual to meet someone who did not participate in ancestor worship. While there were Vietnamese who spoke of different variations of what was important or not relating to ancestor worship, many more voiced the need to remember the ancestor from their heart (*tâm*) and the importance of ancestor worship in their culture. One informant expressed:

Well it's traditional, that's the right thing to do. Apart from that it's also a way to pray for good things, ask for something and have them watch over you, protect you... We believe that there is another world for dead people. In order to pay tribute to our ancestors, we burn *hang ma* and believe that they will receive it in the other world. It could be money, gold, house, maid... We are wishing that they have a good and wealthy life in there.

Another informant noted the role ancestors played in their life:

We think that we have a life like today due to our ancestor's hard work. You know in Vietnam, my grandfather, he worked hard for all his life to bring up his children, and then his children had their own family, he took care of his grandsons and granddaughters. He even prevented nuisances for his children and his grandchildren after his death.

And Tam, stated through *Facebook* chat:

I think that comes from our culture that we value and honour families very much. For example in the West, when parents get older, nursing home is usually a place to go. But here in Vietnam, it is the children's obligation to take care of the elders. Also, religions can be a big part of it too. In the West, Christianity is a major religion, and the Bible stated that you worship no one but the Lord your God. In Vietnam, Christianity is a minor religion, so people basically worship anything, including the dead. They believe that they can receive blessings from dead souls, ghosts etc.

In these comments, the power of the ancestor in everyday life becomes apparent, as someone who continues to play a role in the family and has continuing influence in the world of the living. However in death not all ancestors are equal, as the difference between a 'good death' and 'bad death' can profoundly change the way Vietnamese understand their relations with the other world.

## Good and bad deaths

How an individual exits this world can have deep implications concerning how they are remembered and appropriated by the living. In Vietnam there is a powerful thread running through mortuary rituals which acknowledges the importance of the burial of the body and the manner in which the individual has died. A crucial distinction between “displaced wandering ghosts and ritually appropriated ancestors and deities located in designated places” (Kwon 2006:12) is the distinction between a bad and good death.

In Vietnam a bad death (*chết đường*, ‘death on the street’) is a life cut short before it is fulfilled, a death far away from home, where the body is mutilated and not physically intact, with a particular emphasis on violent and accidental death (Kwon 2006:13). One informant explained that “bad death is to die because of accidents, to die alone, die without full body. The dead person doesn't willingly go. That's why people usually call them homeless and hungry ghost or wandering souls”.

Tragic death in Vietnam can come in many guises. Kwon (2006:13) identifies that “the classical literature and the traditional ritual knowledge of Vietnam list at least seventy-two such categories... which constitute a vast spectrum of human destiny stretching from death on the battlefield to death by a mad buffalo”. A bad death in Vietnamese cosmology leads to an afterlife where the soul (*linh hồn*) of the person cannot be released to the other world; victims of such death are transformed into hungry ghosts (*con ma*) who roam in search of ritual appeasement, such as food for hunger and a proper burial, unavailable to them<sup>20</sup>. Bad deaths within a Vietnamese cosmological understanding are problematic to ritually attend to, in part because such a death is often directly related to one's moral actions in life (Malarney 2002:95). Thus when the daughter of two of my informants died they were advised by a Buddhist monk that this was related to actions in her previous life. However, this is not always the case as those

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<sup>20</sup> Cross-cultural research has similarly demonstrated the social castration and the consequent dangerous entities born from a bad death. Winzeler (2011:154-155) remarks that the Roti of Indonesia who have undergone bad deaths are buried away from those who have died a good death; those who died badly become malevolent spirits, the end of their life carrying over to a pitiful other world experience. Among the Lugbara of the Congo, spirits of the ‘bad dead’ are “wild with fear and rage”, subsequently being “not pleasant to encounter when it tries to find its way home or to its next destination” (Kastenbaum 2004:47). Hertz (ibid:85) writes of those killed among the Dayak within Borneo in violent circumstances: “their bodies inspire the most intense horror and are got rid of precipitately... Their unquiet and spiteful souls roam the earth forever”. Those who die a bad death, in short, become dangerous to the social order and are to be feared by the living in these particular communities.



deemed to have died violently and badly but of good moral character are often classified in terms of their fate (Malarney 2002:95).

In comparison to bad death, a good death is encapsulated in the expression of death in the home (*chết nhà*) which refers to a state of “being advanced in years, having many surviving children, dying a quick, painless death, and dying at home” (Malarney 2002:179; see also Kwon 2006:12-16). Good death represents a death where the soul of the living can move to the other world through proper burial of a complete body, its journey unhindered by the violence and disorientation of a bad death (for discussion see Kwon 2006:12-16). In the words of an informant, “they are surrounded by friends and family, they die in happiness”.

Conceptualisation of the nature of a person’s death, and its central place in Vietnamese cosmology, will become particularly relevant later in this thesis in the investigation of online memorialisation of ‘difficult’ deaths, such as death of the unborn through abortion (see Chapter 6). I will now elaborate on victims of bad death in Vietnam, who become ghosts in this world and the other.

## **Ghosts in Vietnam**

*Tonight I had dinner with Bao in a beer hall, sparsely furnished and decorated, full of large tables of Vietnamese men talking loudly and joyfully as they drank their beer and ate nuts. It was raining hard and people came in off their bikes to escape it and have a beer. The tin of the shed roof heightened the sound of the rain as Bao and I sat eating beef, a specialty for this place. When we were eating I tapped my chopsticks on the bowl rhythmically and Bao suddenly looked at me. Quietly he said, “You should stop that, you do not want to invite the hungry ghost in”. I stopped tapping and asked him to explain. “When I was a child,” he said “I used to play with chopsticks as well because the bowl made a sound, and my mother warned me that I was inviting the hungry ghost to eat with us”. This was never a good thing, he explained, as hungry ghosts were all around and if invited they would bring bad luck. He mentioned that my tapping may have displeased people in this eatery, particularly older Vietnamese. He then relayed the story he heard while growing up:*

*A long time ago when I was a child, my mother saw a big pig like a cow which had red eyes and moved fast. She was very frightened and the pig went to the end of the street and disappeared. Because the time was early morning, she stayed where she was until the sun had risen and asked neighbours living around my house, “Did they have a pig like this?”, and none of them did but they said that so many people died in there, where my mother saw the pig and they usually heard someone crying, laughing, talking... They*

*say the big pig was a ghost. The story is absolutely true... I think this is hard to explain by science because it is felt by the soul.*

*“Perhaps”, Bao added, “some young Vietnamese do not believe this so much”. After this I refrained from tapping my chopsticks on anything. (Fieldnotes)*

Hungry ghosts permeate cultural practices in ways which are sometimes not so obvious to those newly arrived in Vietnam. A simple innocent act in a beer hall could be for others a reminder of the spirit world all around them. In Vietnam, ghosts are conceptualised as existing in a world between the living and the dead: not able to be incorporated into the other world, and not able to leave the world of living.

In Vietnam recent warfare has contributed to an explosion of the number of hungry ghosts. During the American/Vietnam War millions of Vietnamese died deaths far removed from a good death, and there were up to 300,000 bodies never accounted for; the number of grievous dead was exponential (Gustafsson 2007:57; Schlecker and Endres 2011:7). Cut off from family and by extension ritual transformation, such entities, in the words of a participant, “are hungry and they fly around, they are in the trees, the ground, they are looking for their family but they are lost”. This became traumatic for Vietnamese families during the war and continues to be so to the present day; some Vietnamese are afflicted with ghosts and the traumatic memories relating to them<sup>21</sup> (Gustafsson 2007; 2009; Kwon 2006; Malarney 2002).

Gustafsson writes powerfully about the trauma felt in families because of unavailable ritual appeasement:

Survivors, in addition to having to rebuild shattered lives after years of upheaval and amid economic disaster, also had to worry about their dead returning as angry ghosts. The manner of death suffered by *liet si* (revolutionary martyrs) and *tu si* (war dead) was precisely the kind that sent a freshly dead soul straight to hell: violent, far from home, at a young age, and in ways that left the body dismembered or disintegrated into nothingness. The families and friends of those killed were then perfect targets for the rage and misery of their loved ones (Gustafsson 2007:66).

The lack of a solid physical place for burial became an “unforgiving presence” for many families who were haunted by ancestors (ibid:57). Gustafsson highlights the way many

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<sup>21</sup> The Vietnamese novelist Doung Thu Huong (1993) evokes the need to keep a body intact after death in her work ‘Novel without a Name’. As a young North Vietnamese soldier is walking alone he comes across a skeleton completely intact and after contemplating the gory nature of decomposition, “the immaculate skeleton looked at me, laughing, as if to say, “So, I’m still whole. Magnificent, isn’t it, companion?” (ibid:53). Likewise, in ‘The Sorrow of War’ which is surely one of the most horrifying books in relation to the American/Vietnam War ever written, the author notes destruction of bodies without a proper burial: “Broken bodies, bodies blown apart, bodies vaporised... After the battle no one mentioned Battalion 27 anymore, though numerous souls of ghosts and devils were born in that deadly defeat. They were still loose, wandering in every corner and bush in the jungle, drifting along the stream, refusing to depart for the Other World” (Ninh 1998:3).

Vietnamese linked their current ailments (bad dreams, skin disorders, hallucinations, physical and mental pains) directly to the death of deceased family members who were killed during the American War without a proper burial (ibid:61). Family members would go to extraordinary lengths to appease their ancestors. This could consist of talking to comrades of the deceased and asking for the exact place where the family member died so as to retrieve the bones of the deceased and rebury them, as well as visiting mediums and spirit priests for information relating to the body of the dead (ibid:64; see also Schlecker and Endres 2011). Malarney (2003:181) also notes that many Vietnamese believed that knowing the day of death was essential for their post death rituals; the knowledge could allow prompt “funerary rites for the deceased... although they could not act on it immediately, many families wanted to know the location of death in the hopes that at some future point they could retrieve the corpse and give it a proper burial”.

While the ghost of war brought much suffering and continue to inflict trauma on survivors, ghosts in Vietnam should not be simply conceptualised as malicious entities forever bound to terrorise the living. Ghosts seem to ebb and flow and their presence for various Vietnamese can be quite distinct. As Kwon (2006:86) states about the ghosts in relation to the My Lai massacre: “it appeared to me that the village ghosts...led lives with their own ups and downs, and that the fluctuations of their lives were intertwined with the rhythms of life among their living neighbours”. Many individuals Kwon observed noted that ghosts had an agency of their own and were deeply imbedded in the world of the living, feeling pain and grief, akin to the living (ibid:85-87).

So far this chapter has introduced concepts that are intrinsic to Vietnamese cosmologies of the dead: ancestor worship, good and bad deaths, the wandering ghost and its relentless search to be appropriately remembered and commemorated. Such background is necessary to gain an understanding of just how consequential and far-reaching death and its aftermath are to Vietnamese; the deceased are so very *present* in everyday lives. The following section of this chapter aims to conceptualise key socio-political transformations in Vietnam which have impacted on the spirit realm. Vietnamese cosmologies—unique hybrids of so many religions—and ways of comprehending the dead, did not arrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century untouched, and so some appreciation of the past is required, particularly the country’s recent history.

### ***Backward practices and superstition<sup>22</sup>: spiritual reforms in Vietnam***

Movements based around the need for a conscientious national change to the status quo at all levels of society had been fermenting within the intellectual Vietnamese sphere since at least the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with numerous Vietnamese arguing that old traditions were “worthless or inimical to progress” (Ninh 2002:58). In a large part such thinking derived from experiences under French colonialism<sup>23</sup>, illustrated by such thinkers as Phan Boi Chau in the 1907 work, *Call for the Vietnamese to Awaken* (in Hunt 2010:5-6). In this iconic document Phan Boi Chau refers to Vietnamese as having slave mentalities with an “inveterate habit of depending on others for over two thousand years”, while emphasising that modernisation could bring an end to French colonialism: “after modernization we shall determine the domestic as well as foreign affairs of our country. The work of civilization will go on, day after day, and our country’s status in the world will be heightened” (ibid).

After the ascension of the Vietnamese Communist Party in the mid-1940s, the future was to be built on ideals which would be progressive (*tiến bộ*) as opposed to backward (*lạc hậu*), scientific as opposed to superstitious (*mê tín dị đoan*), with the removal of wasteful traditions seen to be indulged by religious and spiritual practices (Choi 2007:103; Malarney 2002). Change was the seed of the future, change of cultural practice and ways of envisioning the world devoid of unequal relationships and relics of a colonised and feudal past. A secular world view was to be disseminated, society and culture were to be reordered, as the “creation of an egalitarian society necessitated the elimination of elements in many rituals which reproduced relations of inequality” (Malarney 1997:542). Ninh (2002:63) reports that this was highlighted

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<sup>22</sup> Vietnam, Ministry of Culture (1975:1 in Malarney 2002:80)

<sup>23</sup> The country of Vietnam was fertile for merchants from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and it was during the 17<sup>th</sup> century that French missionaries made their way into the country (Young, Fitzgerald and Grunfeld 2003:13). But what might have been acknowledged as an effort to convert Vietnamese to Catholicism became deeply tied to ideas pertaining to imperialism and colonialism by French forces. While Vietnam early on was not thought to hold luxurious wealth in comparison to European countries or some of their Asian counterparts, as France colonised more of Asia, Vietnam became increasingly important to their endeavours. Hostility by French forces began after Vietnamese opposition to French missionaries in the country, and by 1858 the French were set to gain control of South Vietnam (Lawrence 2010:10-11; Young et al. 2003:13). This was in part spurred on by the rhetoric of a ‘civilising mission’, but in reality the French presence in Vietnam was tied to expansionism and economic underpinnings. These were particularly achieved by the French through the exportation of rice and rubber, as well as mining endeavours (Marr 1984:5). The transformation of Vietnamese society was profound:

The French transformed Vietnamese society from the inside out, introducing new forms of taxation, new patterns of landowning, new industries that exploited the land, and new social classes. At the top of these new social classes were French civil servants, at the bottom, Vietnamese peasants, many now landless farmers. (Young et al. 2003:13)

While some Vietnamese gained economic benefits from this endeavour, for many others immense hardship, suffering and poverty lay in wake.

in a document written in 1945, entitled *A New Culture (Một nền văn hóa mới)*. In this the authors Nguyen Huu Dang and Nguyen Dinh Thai observe:

As in other spheres, the task of construction in the cultural arena has to begin with destruction: for a new culture to develop, it needs a cleared piece of land that contains no vestiges of feudalism or colonialism. The first task, therefore, is to completely eradicate the poisonous venom of the feudalists and colonialists. (Ibid)

Much of the drive for change was ignited by a concern towards aspects of “excess” and “status obsessions” inherent in religious and spiritual practices (Malarney 1996:541). A central aspect of the reform from the mid-1940s by the Communist Party was the systematically enforced policies against ‘superstitious’ and ‘feudalistic’ customs, heavily accentuated in relationships between the living and the dead (Malarney 2002:81). Such a relationship had to be severed, with a ban on the “calling of the spirits (*goi ma*), the calling of souls of the dead (*goi hon*), spirit mediumship (*dong bong*), the use of protective magical amulets (*bua*), the burning of paper objects (*hang ma*) for the dead, and all forms of divination (*boi toan*)” (Malarney 1996:543).

Reform was sought to be achieved by eliminating the sacredness involved with religious and spiritual traditions through the “destruction, closure or conversion” (Malarney 2007:529) of spaces promoting a connection with this world and the other. The religious fabric for many Vietnamese was ransacked as sacred sites, deities and beliefs were outlawed among a flurry of slogans and sentiments concerned with modernisation and industrialisation (ibid; see also Pham 2009; Roszko 2012:27). The once sublime was converted into the merely practical; village communal temples (*đình*) where spirits once dwelled became grain storage houses (Roszko 2012:27-28). Choi writes:

After the success of the revolution, the state pushed ahead with the reform of traditional rituals as part of its socialist modernization... The Communist Party identified for reform cultural practices that were seen as inconsistent with its modernizing agenda. Elaborate sacrifices at communal houses, the worship of tutelary deities and competitive feasting among village elites were to be eliminated. (Choi 2007:103)

Within this ideology religious figures such as monks had to leave elements of their traditions behind, their new worlds transformed from previously held religious practices in pursuit of a more secular existence (Roszko 2012:28). The spirit world was exorcised as “the previous fabric of meaning, in which supernatural entities influenced and often determined the flux and flow of human life, was to be replaced by a faith in rational secularism propagated by a paternal state” (Malarney 2007:529). Spirit practitioners and mediums were outed by the government as frauds, leeches on already wasteful practices (Malarney 2002:83). The reforms placed on

funerals starting in 1954 were drastic and connections to the other world through the deceased were discouraged (Malarney 1997:542)<sup>24</sup>.

However through such drastic changes Malarney (2002:107) suggests that “the doors to the supernatural were never completely closed” in part because of the Communist Party’s “contradiction in that despite the fact they preached atheistic creed, they still allowed for the worship of ancestors and national heroes”. For those who disrespected the ancestors and spirits during this reform, retribution lay in wait (Fjelstad and Nguyen 2011:68; Kwon 2006; Malarney 2002). Villagers of Son My (site of the My Lai Massacre) noted the revenge and wrath of “indignant ancestors or an animist deity” and the subsequent punishment of Vietnamese who partook in the desecration of sacred places (Kwon 2006:107). As one of Malarney’s (2002:92-95) informants comments, “the ancestors both support and punish”, illuminated through a young Vietnamese male who urinated on the Giap Tu communal house; the youth subsequently could not relieve himself, in a condition which was only cured through ritual amendments for his offensive behaviour.

The changes which came about through policies during this time profoundly affected the ways Vietnamese interacted with the dead and they still reverberate in contemporary Vietnam. This is a theme that reoccurs in Chapter 5, where I unpack communication between the world of the living and the world of the dead in regards to economic and technological changes in Vietnam.

## **Conclusion**

Ancestor worship for Vietnamese is a reciprocal relationship, wherein the living continue to look after the soul of the departed and are in return blessed with good luck and guidance. Such relationships also rely on the type of death, and ideas pertaining to ‘good’ and ‘bad’ death in the Vietnamese cosmology indelibly impact on these relationships. For Vietnamese, ghosts born from ‘bad’ deaths are not symbolic or mere metaphor, but tangible creatures that reach

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<sup>24</sup> Though some aspects of funeral practices in contemporary Northern Vietnam have been revived in the years since, other restrictions during the reforms made a more lasting impact. Malarney (1997:551-553) notes that funerals are now vastly shorter in duration, displays of ostentatious wealth are less visible, and there has been a renewed interests in discussing funeral practices more broadly in relation to “wastage” and “consumption” (ibid). Malarney states:

Elaborate caskets, the long term display of the casket, the construction of tombs and mausoleums, the hiring of dozens of pallbearers, the renting of wailers, the use of geomancers to find auspicious grave sites have been eliminated by party reforms and have undergone no resurgence... One does see increasingly grand headstones in village graveyards, as well as significant amounts of money spent to build walled burial plots for lineage mates, but these have not returned to the imposing proportions of the pre-revolutionary periods. (Ibid:552)

into the world of the living. And in this, we can see how critical it is to the majority of Vietnamese that ancestral relationships are honoured for countless years following a death, and that memorialisation from the time of death must be appropriate and faithful. Relationships with the dead in Vietnam have also been intertwined with the ascent of the Vietnamese Communist Party, through policies which labelled the religious and spiritual sphere in part as a superstitious and backwards entity. Instead society was to be built on ideals of progress, modernisation and science. All of these play into how one interacts with the dead in contemporary Vietnam.

As this work transitions it is necessary to point out how the themes in this chapter are extended into Chapter 4. This chapter has focused on the cultural ways relationships with the dead are envisioned in contemporary Vietnam. While this gives a solid background, Vietnamese also bring to their interactions their own personal modes of remembrance and emotional expression. The next chapter aims to build on this cultural context by demonstrating the more personal ways Vietnamese express emotion, and how they establish communities of support during and after this time. Thus, Chapter 4's focus changes from people's cultural relationship with the dead to people's more private emotional grief and their relationships with the living. In Chapter 5 I return to how Vietnamese interact specifically with the dead, and examine the tensions that play out when the cultural practice of ancestor worship comes in contact with online memorialisation.

## Chapter 4. *We come for the dead but it is the living we stay for*: community in NTO

NTO is a special community where many people can come together and think about the person who passed away. We can pray for them and then try our best to make the best for life, for the person who is dead and those alive. People at NTO can share feelings, happiness and sorrow, creating friendship... It is like a big family with love, sharing and caring. Its contents are happy and sorrow, smiles and tears. Many people originally come to NTO with curiosity, but are increasingly fascinated by the great humanity of it. NTO occasionally raises some problems, but these are quickly resolved... Love and sharing is equally important. (Linh, moderator of *Nghĩa Trang Online*)

As each new facet of the internet is examined in the research, skeptics reiterate concerns about the depth of internet interactions and fears that the internet will become a feeble substitute for face-to-face contact. In the area of Web memorialization, they will ask “Is there really community in the virtual cemetery?” (Roberts 2004:58)

### Introduction

Community is a difficult word to define but its meaning for those who use it is often not challenging to grasp. For members of NTO, the word community feeds into their reasons for participating online and ultimately the motivations for interacting with others. It was a community members felt they were in, and key to their interactions were the sharing of grief, the remembering of the deceased, and the support and friendships which began and flourished within the site. This chapter contends that for members of NTO, community has meaning.

The chapter begins with an introduction to the term community and teases out some of the anthropological understandings of the concept. I demonstrate how community has been thought of as symbolising boundaries and nation-making, and then weave in Amit's (2002) concept of community which is concerned with the sharing of places and experiences. From here, a discussion pertaining to the use of community in relation to online interactions will help frame just why it is a concept so many feel comfortable with. Particular examples will be made through the work of Miller (2011) and *Facebook* usage in Trinidad, as well as online memorials created for family and friends affected by the death of a loved one through suicide. This initial section demonstrates just how adaptable the concept of community is, as it moves between the online and the offline.

After this initial discussion the chapter frames members of *Nghĩa Trang Online* within a community. It will relate how members form community through key experiences of loss and the emotionality which arises from this. Offline emotional expression and support after the death of a loved one will be discussed in relation to family gatherings, funerals, ancestor worship and death day anniversaries. Just how Vietnamese are comforted when losing



someone, through the sharing of sadness and grief (*chia buồn*), highlights the practices within an online medium.

For members of NTO, their relationships indelibly impacted on their perceptions of community. It was these relationships which Vietnamese thought of as community, and also expressed as family. Interactions carried over offline, in ways specific to the medium of online memorials in Vietnam. While this chapter does not argue that online forms of community eclipse forms of community offline, or derail potential support from other friends and family, it does suggest that the online community can be meaningfully and uniquely woven into post-death relationships, emotions and support.

### **Defining community**

Community as a concept is notoriously challenging to define; there is no one simple and concrete definition. As Rapport and Overing write:

The concept of community has been one of the widest and most frequently used in social science. At the same time a precise definition of the term has proved elusive... In 1955, Hillery could compile 94 social-scientific attempts at definitions whose only substantive overlap was that all dealt with people. (Rapport and Overing 2004:60)

Amit and Rapport (2002:13) reiterate this sentiment concerning the ambiguousness of the concept, as does Cohen who posits that (1985:11) “community is one of those words... bandied around in ordinary, everyday speech, apparently readily intelligible to speaker and listener, which, when imported into the discourse of social science, however, causes immense difficulty”. Is community a way of discussing any and all human interactions? What are some key characteristics of the concept which can be meaningfully unpacked? And more importantly, why use the concept of community at all?

Work by Cohen (1985) defined community in terms of boundaries and symbolic usage, in which community is defined by its opposition and differences. Cohen states:

A reasonable interpretation of the word's use would seem to imply two related suggestions: that the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups. (Ibid:12)

In this sense community becomes an expression of difference and inclusion, demarcating what Cohen refers to as the *boundary*. Similarly Gupta and Ferguson (1992:13) write: “‘community’ is never simply the recognition of cultural similarity or social contiguity but a categorical identity that is premised on various forms of exclusion and construction of otherness”.

Another influential strand in the community literature concerns Anderson's (1991) envisioning of community as *being imagined*. Through the coming of nationalism, Anderson notes that nations are "imagined political communities, because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (ibid:6). In a large part due to the printing press, community became possible and imagined by individuals who would never meet each other, indeed could not meet each other, directly.

Both Cohen and Anderson bring valuable ways of thinking through sociality and community. NTO members are entangled in boundaries and otherness through the membership of the group and their experiences and membership do make them different. Anderson is certainly relevant in the sense that while the vast majority of those who visit NTO will never meet each other, in his words taken out of their nationalistic context, "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (ibid). However, for the purposes of this work I am concerned with scholarship that examines the social connectedness of communities and how they can be created through shared social interactions, commonality and experiences.

Throughout my time in Vietnam, informants overwhelmingly spoke of being connected by their experiences. The sentiment of community resonated powerfully with them, as they expressed the feeling of being together and helping one another through difficult times, of remembering those now gone together. The important thread I located in this was the 'togetherness' aspect, as opposed to an online community which might forge ties through 'otherness' and 'boundaries'. In this choice I am selective and do not want to suggest that other definitions and theoretical underpinnings of community cannot be teased out. However, for the purposes of this research, it is the themes of togetherness and sharing which resonated most powerfully with those I communicated with. As Rapport and Overing (2004:65) note, "anthropologists in short, continue studying 'community' ... because this is what their subjects inform them that they live in and cherish".

Amit (2002:15) suggests that the attachment felt by many in a community comes from "felt, embodied and 'emplaced' connections arising out of shared experiences, relationships, histories, territories and practices". In more recent work by Cohen in an epilogue to a volume on community, he notes that community may mean even more to people as previous forms of physical interaction recede:

'Community', then, has become a way of designating that something is shared among a group of people at a time when we no longer assume that anything is necessarily shared... Community seems to have remained a compelling idea, perhaps indicating a

yearning for a degree of commonality and for a focus on those social features which conjoin people rather than those which divide them. (Cohen 2002:169)

Indeed, such concepts of community “persist in usage because they evoke a thick assortment of meanings, presumptions and images” (Amit and Rapport 2002:13). While such assortments of meaning do not necessarily help in creating a concrete definition of community, they nonetheless “help ensure that the invocation of ‘community’ is likely to have a far more emotional resonance than a more utilitarian term like ‘group’” (ibid). While the terminology of ‘human interactions’ and ‘online memorial members’ are a way of defining certain qualities inherent in the interactions people sustain they do, in the sense noted lose the rich evocation associated with community. The following section explores how community can be meaningfully applied to those who participate in the online realm.

### **Online community**

Whether it be in the online environments *Second Life*, *World of Warcraft*, *EverQuest*, and *Whyville*, or social networking sites such as *Myspace* and *Facebook*, the Internet allows for a myriad of spaces where individuals can socially interact and create community (Boellstorff 2008; Carter 2005; Chen 2008; Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007; Fields and Kafai 2009; Humphreys 2005; Jakobsson and Taylor 2003; Kendell 2011). As Chakyo (2008:4) states, “very little is stronger than our desire to form social bonds and groupings—a social culture—with one another”. Chakyo continues:

We routinely form connections with people from whom we are separated by space or even by time, and we will use almost any means at our disposal to do so. Print and electronic mass media, phones, computers, and all kinds of communication devices provide us with highly effective means of “getting to know one another,” even across great distances. At the same time, these technologies assist us in expressing ourselves, in extending and revealing ourselves to one another, and in creating our societies. (Ibid)

As straight forward and taken for granted as Chakyo’s statement may seem several decades after the ascension of the Internet, many early writers concerned with these interactions felt cause to defend the legitimacy of the social interactions and relationships taking place online (Agre 1999; Argyle 1996; Barlow 1998; Baym 1998; Rheingold 1994; Turkle 1999; Wellman and Gulia 1999; Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Gulia and Haythornthwaite 1996). Such scholarship was an antidote for writings which portrayed online interactions as less real and meaningful than offline interactions, and as a refuge for the socially isolated, immature and awkward individual (Fernback 1997; Lockard 1997; Sardar 2000; Snyder 1996; see Gruz, Wellman and Takhteyev 2011 for discussion). There has been a rich body of debate regarding

the use of the concept of community ever since, pointing to the powerful views the concept evokes (Postill 2008; Wellman, Boase and Chen 2002; Wilson and Peterson 2002).

What particularly fascinated some of these early thinkers was the way people were using technology to socially interact and connect with others. As Turkle (1999:9) stated when online communicating was still a recent phenomenon, “we may find ourselves alone as we navigate virtual oceans, unravel virtual mysteries, and engineer virtual skyscrapers. But increasingly, when we step through the looking glass, other people are there as well” (see also Wellman, Boase and Chen 2002; Wellman 2004:3). Rheingold (1993) was also an early writer who suggested that online interactions were social, based on his time spent within *The Well* (an Internet site set up for intellectual discussion). In Rheingold’s (ibid:57) oft-quoted definition of ‘virtual’ communities he remarks that they are “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace”. This highlights an important aspect of community which can often be overlooked in favour of ‘bound communities’ where proximity and face-to-face interaction are defining features. It is the *human feeling* which becomes central and it is the emotional resonance of a community that can become its defining feature. Wellman (2001:228) has similarly illuminated online community as “networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity”. These thinkers are converging on a conception of community which prioritises shared human connections and experiences over physical place and location. As Baym (1998:35) notes, “for many observers and informants the word ‘community’ seemed appropriate for the new social realms emerging through this on-line interaction, capturing a sense of interpersonal interaction”. Put more directly, community as a concept is used by researchers in relation to online interactions because “it *feels* right” (Watson 1997:105).

More recently Miller (2011) argues that communities can be understood through their online and offline counterparts. Based on fieldwork in Trinidad, Miller explores the way his informants connect their offline and online experiences within the social networking site *Facebook*. Finding the question of whether or not *Facebook* itself is a community as unhelpful, Miller instead questions what it means to be a part of a community, pointing out that many of the traits people define as being unwelcome on *Facebook*, such as lack of privacy, are actually *incorporated* into and very much fulfil a sense of offline community for Trinidadians (ibid:27). Miller (ibid) argues that *Facebook* is “pretty extraordinary”, stating that “at the start of the twenty-first century, we can see in *Facebook* a dramatic reversal of the general decline in

community that had preceded it for a century”. In what follows, I provide a background for scholarship concerning online memorials as a vehicle for the expression of grief after suicide, and the forms of support and community found afterwards.

### ***Uploading grief and downloading compassion*<sup>25</sup>: expressing grief and finding support**

The titles of online memorials (in this case based on Australian, English and American websites), suggest a common theme within: loss inextricably joined with remembrance. *Sadlymissed.com* for example, creates “loving and enduring online memorials”, where members can “remember them as they were, express your true feelings, and cherish and share your memories”<sup>26</sup>. The sentiments of remembrance and sharing echo across the whole gamut of the online memorial tapestry: “An online memorial website is a fantastic way to pay tribute to your loved ones”<sup>27</sup>; “An online memorial offers an enduring form of commemoration that can be accessed by todays and future generations... It provides tangible evidence of a life lived, and a sense of focus for the bereaved to remember and reflect after the funeral/celebration of life process has ended”<sup>28</sup>; “A memorial helps to form a link between the past, present and future. For many people, it plays an important part in the grieving process”<sup>29</sup>; “Your online centre for healing”<sup>30</sup>; “It has almost been like a type of therapy for me”<sup>31</sup>. A testimonial for one site remarks: “It has helped me to deal with my loss and writing down my memories of her has even brought a smile to my face at times. Thank you so much for giving me a place to share my feelings and my memories”<sup>32</sup>. The testimonials reveal that online memorials are places of remembering, connecting, expressing loss, and finding succour. The implication is that these are not so easily accessed outside of the websites themselves.

Though the above statements regarding online memorialisation could be construed simply as advertising, research has illuminated such environments as places where grief that is problematic and challenging to express in society, can find a voice (Blando et al. 2004; Chapple and Ziebland 2011; de Vries and Rutherford 2004; Finlay and Kreuger 2011; Heathcote 2014; Hollander 2001; Roberts 2004). An early researcher of Internet support groups, Hollander (2001) found online interactions to be a valuable source for social interaction and community

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<sup>25</sup> Blando et al. 2004:23

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.sadly-missed.com>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.remembered-forever.org>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.onlinememorials.com.au>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.onlinememorials.com.au>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.memory-of.com/Public>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.remembered-forever.org/testimonials>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.remembered-forever.org/testimonials>

for a friend whose child had committed suicide. At the funeral many people struggled to find a way to communicate their sense of loss. Hollander (ibid:135) was “struck by the immense efforts of the mourners to say something, anything, that would help make some sense of the tragedy and give some solace to those left behind”. One of the places people were expressing their loss soon became apparent: the Internet. Through e-mail support groups, Hollander came to understand the way social interactions were a fundamental part of expressing grief. Members noted that it was demanding to relate their experiences and grief to people who had not undergone such an experience, finding their grief to be marginalised or amplified by a society where the expression of grief—especially in relation to suicide—was often “out of social bounds” (ibid:141). Hollander’s research specifically related to people who had lost family or friends to suicide, a form of death often not discussed, and one which can leave people feeling isolated and stigmatised (Moore and Freeman 1995). A user of an online support group in Hollander’s research remarked:

When my son committed suicide, I experienced the same things that all other suicide families experience—friends avoiding us, people judging us, little “pep talks” from clueless co-workers about “moving on” and maintaining a “professional attitude” at work... The grief sites on the Internet... are open 24/7 so you can dump what you need to dump when you need to dump it... Practically everyone who comes to these sites has been through it, and has some idea how bad we feel (unlike the rest of this culture)... It certainly helps us feel less freakish, and that reduces the stigma... *I don’t think I could have survived my son’s suicide without the Web.* (Hollander 2001:140-141. Italics my own)

The member of this online support group is not alone in their sentiments. Chapple and Ziebland (2010:178-179) argue that individuals in their study perceived the Internet as a helpful place to let others know about the deceased through social networking pages, and as a place of support through the sharing of stories and emotions. As one of their informants states, “to be able to go on there and to post messages about how terrible I feel... [and] to be met only with love and comfort and support from people who are suffering in the same way is truly amazing” (ibid:179). The living may come to interact with the dead, but often it is those they meet online, their online kin and community, which the living stay for.

For those who participated in this research, their interactions were strongly anchored in the experience of loss. The following section demonstrates some of the key ways Vietnamese express emotion after the death of a loved one and access support, before examining how this plays out from an online perspective.

## Funerals, emotions and *chia buồn* in Vietnam

Whether it be burial dancing among the Nyakyusa people of Africa (Metcalf and Huntington 1991), construction of tomb houses and weeping statues among the Jrai and Bahnars in the Central highlands of Vietnam, the cannibalisation of the departed by the Wari of the Amazon Rainforest (Conklin 2001), or the singing through sadness of the Yolmo Sherpa in Nepal (Desjarlais 1991), the emotional processes involved in loss have been explored by anthropologists who have observed their social and cultural dimensions (Conklin 2001; Danforth 1982; Hemer 2010; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Rosaldo 2004 [1989]; Scheper-Hughes 1992; van Gennep 2004 [1909]). Radcliffe-Brown (1964 [1922]) for example analysed ritual weeping among the Andamanese as primarily a social construction, wherein the Andamanese would weep on demand even if they were not upset. Rather the ferocity of their tears, or at times lack of, spoke to a larger cultural understanding ingrained in their death traditions and responses. Similarly Wellenkamp (1988:495) in research among the Toraja of Indonesia noted that wailing customs, as observed through understandings of hot and cold emotions, are “culturally structured and stylized: conventions and regulations exist regarding the timing, location, and manner in which wailing is conducted”. Such emotions are powerful indicators of cultural influence; in countries including American, England and Australia, the terms bereavement, grief and mourning can be highly charged, at one end of the spectrum becoming medicalised and pathologised, at the other, exoticised (Harris 2009; Valentine 2006).

In what follows, I draw on exceedingly rich ethnographic material to demonstrate some of the key aspects of grief, and how Vietnamese console each other in the hardest of times through funeral ceremonies, family gatherings, ancestor worship and death day anniversaries<sup>33</sup>. While these renderings of emotion are also particular to the person, such a discussion is necessary to help inform the wider way Vietnamese interact online to express emotion, give and receive support, and continue a relationship with the departed.

Ethnographic accounts highlight the profound ways Vietnamese express emotion after the death of a loved one, and how such emotion is situated within the wider cultural treatment of the dead (Avieli 2007; Dinh, Kemp and Rasbridge 2000; Kwon 2006; Malarney 2001; 2003). Malarney (2003:188-190) notes that as soon as the news of death is spread within rural

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<sup>33</sup> The treatment of the body, funeral preceding, burial, mourning attire, and continued ancestor rituals within the Vietnamese cosmology are elaborate and distinct practices, all of which could be discussed at length (see Malarney 2002:108-148; Phan 1993). Within this work however I concentrate particularly on the social dimensions of these practices, finding them a more fruitful discussion relating to online memorialisation and the experience of informants with whom I interacted.

communities in Vietnam, the coming together of people is a pivotal interaction. The sadness of losing a loved one is not to be undergone in isolation, but rather “people soon begin to visit the deceased’s home to offer their condolences and provide assistance” (ibid). This is something which continues into the evening: “most homes holding a funeral are filled with guests who keep the aggrieved company and help out with the funeral arrangements” (ibid). In this, the coming together of friends and family is an important first step; they are not there to take away the sadness—as was noted by an informant, “nothing can”—but to help in its mitigation, as well as to demonstrate social standings within the community. It is support which continues through the funeral proceedings themselves where Vietnamese express heightened emotions and social ties to those now gone:

during the burial event, regardless of religion, many Vietnamese believe that strong emotions during the walk to and moments before the burial demonstrate the importance of the deceased. In Vietnam, people used to hire mourners to join them in the expression of grief during the burial process. The more mourners and expressions of emotions, the greater the deceased’s significance. (Dinh, Kemp and Rasbridge 2000:116)

The strong emotions noted above have been highlighted by Kwon (2006) in the city of Da Nang in central Vietnam. In Kwon’s ethnographic account:

the mourners may wail, roll around on the dusty red soil, grab the legs of the pallbearers, and block the advance of the funeral party. The close relatives of the deceased may prostrate themselves on the ground in front of the funeral procession until they are gently pulled away by distant relatives to make way for the must-be-departed... Part of this funeral fight is voluntary and genuine, and part of it is theatrical and customary. The idea is to demonstrate publicly the conflict between the fateful separation and the desire to deny it. (Ibid:20)

However, while a time of heightened emotions, Dinh, Kemp and Rasbridge (2000:116; see also Malarney 2003:193) note that “funerals and other commemorative events are not necessarily somber throughout, as there is emphasis on family reunification and feasting and, especially for Buddhists, celebration that the deceased’s soul will now be joining the ancestors”. It is the funeral after all, which moves the living physical presence of the deceased towards their new life in the other world, where they will continue to be involved in the world of the living.

After the funeral and burial of the body, support continues for the family as the casket of the departed is covered<sup>34</sup>. There is a family gathering in the home of the deceased, where those present at the funeral remember together and give support to the family, while helping with the

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<sup>34</sup> In parts of North Vietnam a secondary funeral is also conducted after three years wherein “family members return to the cemetery, exhume the casket, remove and clean the bones, and transfer them into a smaller urn for reburial” (Malarney 2003:195).



feast for the dead (Malarney 2003:193). It is a gathering which speaks to the past and the memory of the person now gone, but one that is also engaged with the continued presence of the deceased. Key in these interactions are support of the family during this difficult time, where friends and family “help clean up and remain at the home to provide company for the grieving family” (ibid). Taking care of someone in their sadness and grief, and consoling and sympathising with them was to informants in my research regarded as *chia buồn*. This is a well-known expression in the Vietnamese idiom which translates to ‘sharing/dividing the grief/sadness’. Hanh, a member of NTO, noted: “People in our country have many ways of sharing the sadness with other people by action, by speaking to help the other pass away the pain. This is *chia buồn*, it is the action of expressing your consideration for her/his sadness”. The expression of *chia buồn* is clearly an important one during this time for those who have been impacted by death, and it is one which continues through ancestor rites and worship practices into the future.

Avieli (2007:130), whose research in Hoi An in central Vietnam focuses on the social interactions and rituals concerning food consumption and preparation in regards to death anniversaries, notes, “while ancestor worship rituals... are explicitly dedicated to the dead, these gatherings serve as areas of social interaction that goes well beyond the dead and are concerned mainly with the living family members and in the interactions among them”. Avieli continues: “First and foremost, ancestor worship rituals are the most frequent occasions in which the boundaries of inclusion of the extended family are manifested and where belonging to a specific social group is expressed, maintained and intensified” (ibid). Additionally:

an important aspect of ancestor worship seems to be the psychological support offered to the deceased’s immediate relatives by their guests, which is clearly augmented by the festive setting. On the day on which the memory of the dead is conjured up, relatives and friends gather to share the grief. (ibid:146)

Such sharing, as Avieli points out, does not necessarily have to be sad and sombre, but can actually be formative, joyful and light hearted (ibid).

It is worth noting that many Vietnamese I interacted with openly talked about death and found it a subject matter they were comfortable with; remembering online was at times a subject which could be talked about in a casual setting and in a wistful and relaxed manner. It became another venue of remembrance, and not the sole anchor of memory in their life. Online and offline, the deceased was meaningfully entwined into their forms of memory, and emotion was expressed through both mediums of communication. However, access to those who could sympathise was not always easy for informants, especially through bad forms of deaths which

tore away from the fabric of how one should exit this world and move onto the next. This was, for many who interacted in this research, a reason for using online memorialisation as online they could communicate with others and express the immediacy of pain after the death of a loved one, or the way they felt after many years had passed.

In the following section I particularly concentrate on feelings of grief and sadness as expressed to me by informants. During my experience in Vietnam and online in NTO, the whole gamut of emotion was displayed. At times members spoke of immense happiness they could express to the departed and others, bringing them into family life events such as weddings, reminiscing of times gone past, or joyful changes in economic circumstances. One informant for example would write to her deceased father-in-law on NTO of dreams she'd recently had regarding his grandchildren and him together. In a very real way she felt the dream world connected with the other world and would express much joy in these happenings. At other times informants spoke of immense shame and regret in regards to memorialisation after an abortion, which was distinct from the experience of losing a loved one for many informants (see Chapter 6). In other situations those who came to NTO were not that emotionally connected to those who were dead and came more out of interest for those memorialised online. One member came to visit the tomb of his grandmother who he did not know well in life and had only the vaguest recollections about. The tomb was set up by an older sibling and visiting the memorial for him was not really connected to expressing emotion and remembrance, but rather out of interest. NTO is a multifarious environment of emotion and recall, and I do not want to suggest that deep feelings of sadness were the only form of communication and expression. They clearly were not. But a key aspect of members' time in NTO which I observed was related to the expression of emotion, which at times could be deeply painful for those visiting the memorial, and the support and community offered.

### **Kim's story: entering *Nghĩa Trang Online***

Kim was 21 years old when I met her in Ho Chi Minh City. She was working at a Japanese restaurant but was dissatisfied and looking for a different position, an air-hostess perhaps, though she was afraid of heights. She had a degree in business but like several of her friends in Vietnam, she was finding it difficult to gain a more professional position. Kim was introduced to me through a key moderator of *Nghĩa Trang Online* and had agreed to show me more of Ho Chi Minh City. On the back of her motorbike we visited pagodas and temples, and meandered through the city streets and parks. Sometimes she brought her little brother along, and once we

stopped to watch the filming of chef Bobby Chinn's TV show outside the Reunification Palace, in the heart of the city. At each step, with the curious anthropologist asking her question after question about the billboards on the walls, or the line of monks walking and chanting down the road, she was extremely generous with her time and knowledge. Over time I got to know Kim's story, and the reasons for her participation in NTO.

In 2011 Kim's father died suddenly from a stroke, leaving her family in shock. It was the hardest thing she had ever gone through. Soon after the funeral, as they tended the grave of her father, her Auntie came along with a camera in hand and pictures were taken. At the time Kim did not think much about it—after all many Vietnamese took such photos to share with family and friends in other parts of the country and overseas. She did know her Auntie was already a member of some “strange site” that was “about the dead”, and she soon learnt that the photos were posted online. But why would she want to be involved in such a site, and even more pressing, why integrate her father? Her Auntie talked to Kim about the online cemetery, saying she had created a tomb for him and that she prayed there every day online, lighting candles and leaving comments for him. Her Auntie encouraged her to visit the site but Kim felt uncomfortable. She did not like ‘real’ cemeteries, let alone strange ‘pretend’ ones. Nonetheless the next time she met her Auntie they visited NTO together on a mobile phone. With her father's face looking at her from the screen, her Auntie showed Kim how to light a candle and write a comment to him. At the time she was adamant that she did not want to visit such a “strange” site again. However, after a period of not wanting to be included, Kim found herself visiting the online memorial: “I wanted to see what people were writing. There were many comments and friends would leave stories about their time with him. I started to discover things I didn't know about my father, some of them were funny, and others were about his generosity”.

Across the span of approximately one year, *Nghĩa Trang Online* has been incorporated into Kim's remembering practices. She visits the site regularly, reading the comments of others, and at times ‘burns’ online candles and incense for her father. It is significant to her and she says she finds much comfort from it. When she is busy, she does not visit the online tomb as much as she would like to but she says it is not only a “convenience”. Her mother has seen the website and though she has never used a computer she likes it and finds appeal in looking at the site with her daughter. However for the most part her mother only “wants to clean his real tomb and altar”. NTO has become cemented in the rich tapestry of remembering her father. For Kim NTO is another way of remembering her father, easily accessible, and a place where she can share her story with others and express emotions relating from loss. She also sometimes meets members from NTO at offline gatherings, and has become close to several members.

Another member lost a father to a stroke and sometimes they go and visit the graves of their fathers' together offline.

### ***We come to share the sadness: tâm sự and chia buồn in Nghĩa Trang Online***

From the beginning of this research, informants noted that the online portal was one where they could remember and recall the deceased. As noted earlier in this thesis, the website title *www.nhomai.vn*—‘remember forever’—powerfully intertwines memory and time: online the dead would be remembered endlessly, forever.

In remembering the dead members wrote of being fond of, attached, and carrying much love in their heart for those now gone. Informants spoke of the intense pain that could be written about to the departed and other members, described by some as a deep pain and mourning, an immense and excruciating pain, and profound sadness. For some members it was a feeling which was physically and spiritually painful, and one which left them feeling empty, restless and tired when thinking about the future.

Along with emotions being expressed through messages to the dead and other members, profile images were also used to relate how members felt (see Image 8). As mentioned earlier in this work, each member creates a profile image when they join the site. Hang, who lost a young child, used a tear as her profile picture. Another's profile image consisted of a simple message, ‘I love you forever’, and a rose as her profile, as a message to her mother. Others had pictures of the deceased as their profile, either by themselves or with others. The mother of Ngoc for example, whose narrative begins this work, used her profile image to show an important occasion she shared with her daughter, a trip to Hue several years ago.



**Image 8. Expressing emotion through profile images** (from left to right). The first image reads ‘mother loves child’ (Mẹ yêu con!) and we see the hands stroking the feet of a baby. The second image shows a young woman with her head buried in her hands. The third image, has a similar stance with a woman looking towards the ground and slumped over. The fourth image is that of someone crying and the fifth image shows a family together, in this case representing the family that would not be, and the sadness which transpired from this. (Images *www.nhomai.vn*)

In experiencing loss, members noted that confiding (*tâm sự*) in others and speaking of their grief was central to their time in the online memorial. As noted by a young woman supporting her friend whose child died in infancy, “empathy and sorrow together are the most important things” (translation). For her *tâm sự* was to release her inner feelings, to really open up and express what was in her heart with another person. Within NTO an affinity was created, an inner conviction that remembering and empathy could be forged together. It became “a very significant web site” for this member, even though at times she could not bear to read some of the difficult narratives. And in this expression, as difficult as it could be, members were threaded into a larger community. Kim, who was introduced earlier, spoke of her early interactions with members and the feeling derived from meeting others who had undergone similar experiences. She said that NTO encapsulated the idea of community (*cộng đồng*). This was a term for her which evoked the intimacy of the smaller towns which thread their way through Vietnam, as contrasted with the larger but somewhat faceless population of Ho Chi Minh City. In experiencing pain she also experienced community.

Talking from the experience of losing a long-time friend to suicide Hein noted, “when he died it was so distressing and regretful. I feel sad and mourn and feel so much grief and alone as I lose someone so important. It is difficult for me to talk with other people”. Hanh, who became friends with Kim, introduced previously, stated “After my father died I joined NTO to create a grave... to remember my father and to show my loss. When my father died, I was sad and devastated”. As noted above, the expression *chia buồn* is one which resonated with her: “It is where I meet people with the same pain. We have a similar situation, the pain should be shared with other members so as to overcome the loss”.

The expression of *chia buồn* was reiterated personally to me after returning home to Adelaide from the field for the final time. My partner Bernadette and I had to make the painful decision to euthanise our sick cat William. I talked casually to NTO members about this and was encouraged to remember William within the online Pet Cemetery (*Nghĩa trang dành cho thú nuôi*). This particular resting place was for beloved pets and included everything from dogs (*chó*) and cats (*mèo*), to mice (*chuột*) and birds (*chim*), and much in between. A moderator of the site created a tomb for William in the shape of a love heart and angel wings. On the tomb was a photo of William with the words “R.I.P Our lovely Cat”. People lit candles for William with one stating “rest in peace (*An nghỉ nhé*) William” and another, “Chia buồn với Anthony và Bern”, which translates to ‘sharing the sadness with Anthony and Bern’. As part of sharing the sadness, members also contributed their own memories of pets and their losses. One member noted that on seeing the grave of William in NTO it reminded them of a pet they knew

who was hit by a vehicle and died. And while there was part of me that was initially hesitant to memorialise William in this way—being ‘just a cat’ in comparison to some extremely tragic stories I knew—I was thankful I did, as it was insightful in a limited way to ‘sharing the sadness’.

Sometimes this sharing was an individual act though occasionally members would visit the tomb of a loved one together. Kim, mentioned previously, visited the tomb of her father with both her mother and younger brother, reading together comments left by others, and taking note of the amount of posts made and incense lit. While they knew many of these members offline, many more they did not know and would never meet offline. They also wrote their own messages to their deceased father and husband, sometimes speaking of what they were up to, at other moments mentioning that they missed him.

Comments, prayers and offerings were a vital link between members who felt that an unremembered online tomb would be as useless and sad as a tomb left uncleaned and without offerings during the Lunar New Year (*Tết*) for example, or a house where the family no longer remembered the ancestors. When visiting online tombs and spending many hours working through the multitude of comments, prayers and offerings for a single individual, the way the deceased are integrated into the world of the living becomes clear. After spending hours on a tomb for a young teacher, I wrote in my fieldnotes about how he was integrated into the ongoing events, and very much a living *presence*:

Today I spent several hours exploring the online tomb of a young teacher. Comments revolve around him, his achievements but also the loss felt by his parents and friends, who live now without him. Thus his birthday comes and goes, as does Teacher’s Day. Death day anniversaries are particular times of heightened offerings... We read of the sadness of his fellow teachers, and how he is missed by the children, as well as longings from his parents, and the very many condolences. Members write of their own journeys to charities and ask for his blessings on the road ahead, while also keeping him updated on the love and support within the memorial. (Fieldnotes)

NTO becomes a place of prayer and mourning, of interactions within a wider set of relationships, and it also becomes a home. In Vietnam, tombs are often represented as houses, where the ancestors are invited to interact with the living. Kwon (2006:13) states that the house in Vietnamese cosmology “refers to two separate but interrelated forms of dwelling”. He elaborates on this:

The tomb is a house for the dead that shelters the body and demonstrates the deceased’s social identity, and this is made explicit in Vietnamese mortuary art, in which the place of the dead is built in the form of a house. Ideally, people should exhale their last breath under the roof of the living house and move to the roofed tomb to live their life after death. In both places, the dead are not alone but surrounded by relatives. (Ibid)

While there is no physical body online, NTO becomes a place where this teacher, and those who cared for him deeply, share a space wherein he is surrounded.

Members communicated their empathy and sympathy for the pain of survivors powerfully; they would commemorate with comments including “sending condolences to the family” and “sincere condolences”. Members also provided support for those on NTO by sending messages to the deceased, by praying for them and wishing them the best in the other world. Such expressions as “farewell”, “everyone will always remember you friend”, “to pray for” and “salvation” were commonly expressed by informants.

### **Thanh’s story: *the sorrow is deep inside the heart***

I first met Thanh in a small café just outside the main city of Da Nang in central Vietnam. It was a main road and there was a constant beeping of motorbikes and the roar of trucks with dust in their wake. In the distance the Bà Nà Hills rose over the flat land and tourist buses streamed towards them, full of Vietnamese and foreigners. Thanh was a young university student studying economics in Da Nang and she had heard about my research and request for participants through a message I had placed on *Facebook*. She was 23 years old, lived just outside of the main city near the large Marble Mountain which was found on the way from Da Nang to the smaller town of Hoi An, and worked at a small bar on the beachside. She also practiced Buddhism with her parents, and regularly attended pagoda visits with them. While wanting to elaborate on what NTO meant to her, she also saw the meeting as a way of interacting with someone from Australia. She noted that it was beneficial to practice her English language skills with ‘the real speaker’ while I noted her English was exceedingly well spoken.

After some initial discussion she quite soon started to talk about her experiences of losing a friend and fellow student to suicide. She and numerous others in the class had joined NTO after his unexpected and shocking death. As stated by a moderator on the circumstances of his death:

He died by suicide after being blamed by his teachers. He was an excellent student... but after being misunderstood, he was so shocked that he decided to end his life. That’s a sad story. His family members and classmates still love him too much so they make a grave for him on NTO.

Thanh and her school friends had heard about *Nghĩa Trang Online* through various social networking sites and not long after the suicide they joined together to create an online tomb “for his memory”.

Thanh now visits NTO several times a week and lights candles for her friend and fellow classmate. She writes on the friend's wall, speaking not only to him but also to other members who read it. She also photoshops him into alternative afterlives (see Chapter 5). Thanh explained that emotion can be difficult to express at times: "People in Vietnam sometimes keep emotion of the dead inside, they do not talk of the dead but on the Internet they can write... Every day they think about the dead and they want a place to share the memory". For Thanh, while emotions certainly could be expressed at a funeral, at other times such emotional display was not easily attained. On a separate occasion Thanh reiterated this to me and spoke of the solace within the online community:

It's always a hard time to accept the truth when someone's gone and writing on it [NTO] can be a good way to express emotion. You know that not everyone can easily share their sadness. This is the same in Vietnam too. Someone keeps their emotions inside, especially if the situation seems a big shock. And so we go to NTO to share our sadness and feel better. The sorrow is deep inside the heart, each one has their own way to express.

As noted earlier in this work, bad deaths in Vietnam are particularly difficult to commemorate, and the social existence of these dead is not so easily entwined into the world of the living. Suicide was a death not easily expressed with others in Vietnam. Thanh's friend was not a 'good death'; he would not grow old, would not leave a lineage of children to continue ancestor worship after his passing, and would not experience all that Thanh and her fellow schoolmates would. His death was violent, a life cut short. It was in some respects similar to deaths explored later in this thesis, including those through abortion (see Chapter 6) and warfare (see Chapter 7). For Thanh, the online realm could go some way to consoling those who knew him. Thus, in the words of Thanh: "The sorrow is deep inside the heart, each one has their own way to express". Along with online memorialisation, Thanh would sometimes visit the physical tomb of the young man, usually with friends if they had free time outside of study, work and family responsibilities.

In this we can see that the online memorial is a comfort to Thanh, and others, but it is not the only form of mitigating grief. For many, NTO was used to complement their offline practices, along with visiting physical tombs at certain times of the year, praying at pagodas, death day anniversaries, and (when the deceased was a direct family member) the veneration on a home altar. Similar findings have been found from online memorials in a North American context, in the *World Wide Cemetery*, *Dearly Departed*, and *Garden of Remembrance* (Roberts 2004). Within these sites individuals find powerful sources of support as part of their remembering practices. Roberts notes of the participants in her study:



When asked about the support they had been receiving when they decided to create their Web memorial... few had any complaints, noting that most of the people in their lives had been at least somewhat supportive. However, their Web acquaintances were considered most supportive of their grief at the time our participants decided to create their Web memorial. Creating and sharing their memorial generated more support from most of the people they knew, but the most supportive of their efforts were their online friends. Thus, it appears that our survey respondents created their Web memorials not because they were receiving inadequate support for their bereavement at home, but rather because some of the most beneficial support they were already receiving was coming from the Web. The Web memorial simply furthered a dialogue that already had begun. (Ibid:69-70)

For some NTO members their loved ones' death were exceptional and exceedingly challenging to express elsewhere. However many other informants felt that while NTO played an important place in their remembering practices and was a good site for emotional expression, it was not always the only vehicle for remembrance and there were varied avenues of support.

### ***A new window for me about life: community and family***

While I have established the emotional expression members found within the online memorial, there have been views that online expression could perhaps prolong or enhance grief. Linh (2011, translation), in an online news article argues that perhaps NTO is a "double-edged sword", as Vietnamese can remember the dead and express their emotions but in doing this, are also perhaps consumed by these emotions: "The virtual cemetery is a great idea to help people remember and visit the dead from anywhere and at any time as long as there is the Internet. But it seems the virtual cemetery is also a double-edged sword which can easily push people to sink into grief". Linh writes that such an environment is a place where young people can "bury their sadness", but that in such memorialisation "the pain that haunted and followed them is persistent" (ibid; see also Chapter 6). This sentiment was likewise expressed by several informants.

Tam, an art teacher in Ho Chi Minh City, knew about NTO because her father used it to memorialise his own father. She was not a member herself and felt that an online memorial took people away from the necessary activities of visiting and tending the actual grave, or praying at the family altar. For Tam, it was vital for the bereaved to undertake "real and practical deeds". Tam elaborated on this:

In my personal idea, this site drags people back from moving on with their own life. Every day, they spend too much time crying and moaning online. I know losing a loved one hurts but in life you need to continue. If they didn't post their loved one's grave on that site, they would spend less time burning incense/candles and crying over things.

Instead they would do something more joyful with their family. We are sad that the person dies but we don't linger on... I prefer things that are real and practical.

Another participant (whom I met through *Facebook*) noted similar concerns:

I could never imagine people doing that for their beloved ones... I'd prefer to be reminded of loved ones in my heart, to visit their tomb some time during the year and especially on holidays (Tet holiday). In this we can gather our family together in the cemetery, clean the tombs and express our feelings.

Such statements reflect a dichotomy between 'real' and 'unreal', between an individual and a communal act, and questions the purposefulness of online remembering and emotion. However, for informants in this research, a recurring theme was that of remembering alongside others; they did not see themselves as sinking within their grief within NTO, so much as releasing them from its pain through the act of expression. As Christensen and Gotved (2014:5-6) note of those who participate in online memorials, "the increase in online memorial strategies in relation to death reflect that grieving processes are emotional, affective, cognitive, and intellectual but, above all, social". For members of NTO, social interactions were central to their time online, and the words 'community' and 'family' meaningfully describe their feelings of each other. This was made clear to me in a volunteer trip I took with some members of NTO.

Towards the end of the fieldwork, I volunteered to spend three days on a charity trip for impoverished children throughout areas of the Mekong Delta. The group was organised through several members of NTO and I saw this opportunity as one which would allow me to see the country, spend time with members, and to try and do some good work for others. During the bus drive, as I sat in the back with several large cardboard boxes filled with items for the children rattling dangerously above my head, I talked to Kim about our usual conversation: NTO.

Kim, who noted previously that NTO resonated with the conception of community, also noted that the idea of community was intertwined with the notion of family (*gia đình*); both community and family were places you could find support among the locals and people you knew and cherished. Kim explained:

To every Vietnamese, family is very important and meaningful. That is the place where we can share all the problems and difficulties we get in life, where we can receive encouragement, comfort as well as love from other members in our family. Someone said that no family is perfect. We argue, we fight. We even stop talking with each other at times, but in end, family is family.

That these words were spoken on a trip organised by members for the purpose of helping children, some of who had no family of their own, was particularly poignant.

This family connection was reiterated in the words of Linh, introduced earlier in this work as a moderator for NTO. Linh compellingly noted: “We are brother, sister, a member of a big family so we come to NTO to say our feelings to encourage together”. This echoes the language Vietnamese use to address each other, as a large family woven together with older and younger brothers and sisters, children and parents, grandparents and ancestors. For Linh NTO was a place where those on the site “don’t lie down... don’t be so sad, the life is not the ending, and NTO help people, don’t want people so sad”. It was for numerous members a new beginning where they could meet others, converse, reminisce, remember, and express emotions: “NTO moves many people to tears. Lots of people feel that their life is terrible, we want to continue together, if there are any problems happening we help together, assisting, talk about our problems, find the best solution”. In Linh’s sentiments ‘we’ becomes key, as Vietnamese are not alone in the online memorial; “we are brother and sister”, “we don’t lie down”, “we want to continue together”, “we help together”. For her, NTO became a “balance” in her life and a place she could come and pray to her father every day. It powerfully created a “new window” for her. She says of her “new window on life”, her new perspective: “I don’t have the most terrible life in the world. Many people do not have jobs, are homeless, have more grief than me, have many more family pass”. NTO helped build for Linh and for others a view outside of aloneness and despair; it linked her to a wider body of travellers in the land of loss and grief. Linh states:

NTO makes a new window for me about life, a new window to know many many people, to know when I have some difficult problem, when I feel so sad I think about the people I know on NTO, they help and we share problem, I know that I cannot fall... I want to stand up, yes, it makes me strong again, it makes me stand up again.

NTO reverberates with the spectrum of human experiences, of pain, happiness, joy and even laughter. It was also, as the following section argues, not cut off from the offline and the other world, so much as embedded and sown into them.

### **Online and offline interactions in *Nghĩa Trang Online***

During my time in Vietnam, members did not exclusively contain their interactions to the online site, and many created relationships which materialised offline. While there were countless members of the site who did not interact with others offline, for the purposes of this section I am concerned with members who did regularly meet offline and in the words of an informant, “form stronger friendships”. The need to connect offline was anticipated by the co-maker of the site in its creation, with an offline meeting section built into the memorial. From

his experiences with online charity work, members of such sites would often meet up offline and form relationships. The experiences of Linh, previously mentioned in this chapter, helps expand on such offline interaction.

For Linh, it was her position within a wider NTO community which helped to shape her offline interactions and even subsequent friendships. When members wrote something “unusual” or “particularly saddening” she would phone them:

I make many friends this way. Sometimes I see the members that I know and they write some sad thing on the Internet. If I see I call them and say let’s get coffee, what is wrong? I help them solve problem. I have very close friends, in real life I help them, we help each other. I sit and listen to their feelings.

On one particular occasion:

One moderator, I see her write to her father’s tomb [on NTO] “I am very tired”. I call her and ask “how are you and where are you now?” After this me and Hien go to the hospital and take care of her. We go to doctor to hear about her sickness. Together with the doctor we ask how we can treat her that time. She very sad, and did not know what to do... We asked the doctor to take her out of hospital back home, and the doctor helped to take her to a better hospital for better treatment. Now her health is good again and she can go to work. Every day I see her on Yahoo and we talk. Now we have a good friendship.

Linh reports that the moderator is once again in good health, and both her and several members regularly check on her. Such active intervention in people’s lives is not unusual for Linh within the NTO community.

At the beginning of this thesis there was a vignette of a young woman who was killed on her way home in a traffic accident. As recounted, the parents found some solace in the online memorial where friends, family and fellow members could relive the memories of her and also connect. Linh was one of the first to interact with the parents and then to alert many others on the site about them, enabling them to empathise and share their stories in turn. The passing of Ngoc was a death only some members could directly relate to, but others could envision it in their own personal ways from a variety of perspectives and experiences, and so there was a huge response of sympathy within NTO to her parents. Over time, Ngoc’s parents asked members of NTO to refer to them as Mother and Father. Linh now regularly phones them to check on their well-being, sometimes every night. Linh also meets up with the parents once a month as they travel to the pagoda for their daughter and pray. As well as this, death day anniversaries for Ngoc are attended by NTO members and every year the numbers have been increasing.

Along with personal experiences of meeting offline, there were also specific events and meet-ups hosted by *Nghĩa Trang Online* members, which brought Vietnamese from various parts of the country together. Informant Phuong talked about the joy of meeting others she had only known through NTO and *Facebook* for the first time in Da Nang, in central Vietnam. It was during this initial meeting for Phuong that, interestingly enough, the subject matter of death and those memorialised was absent from their discussions: “We meet offline because we want to connect, make strong between friends. We don’t talk sad all the time”. Another informant noted, “most every member of NTO have one person dead. We know, but we do not need to speak”. In fact, as one informant pointed out, the only person who seemed to talk about the dead offline “a lot” was me. This is not to suggest that all NTO meetings offline did not mention their experiences of death but to show that for many, it was primarily if not exclusively a social occasion that enhanced and strengthened relationships already formed online. Such shared experience and support was clearly of immense comfort and formed the bedrock of the NTO community.

## Conclusion

After the death of a loved one there is the business of looking after the dead, as well as the business of looking after the living. For those coming to *Nghĩa Trang Online*, their conception of community and the ties that linked them were formed through an assortment of social interactions and activity. For many members the expression of grief and the support offered were intrinsic to their time spent in NTO. The *chia buồn*, which becomes so powerful after the death of a loved one, brought them together, and it radiated through both the online and offline. Throughout this chapter the vicissitudes of interactions helped shine light on the different deaths memorialised—whether it was the death of a father, or fellow student, or of someone else very dear—and the community that arose out of this.

The following chapter now moves back to themes raised in Chapter 3. While this chapter has been concerned with interactions of members with the living and their expressions of emotion, Chapter 5 examines some of the tensions which exist between the three worlds of communication in this work. The chapter will expand on important strands already raised such as the support after the death of a loved one and the expression of emotion, while embedding them in conversations pertaining to the ‘realness’ and ‘genuineness’ of interacting with the dead in NTO. In reflecting ancestor worship, NTO members brought to the online memorial a

rich history of what it meant to remember those gone in Vietnam, while also raising questions for some Vietnamese about the legitimacy of the online cemetery.

## Chapter 5. *It is not that different!:* online, offline and the other world connections

Today I have come to Dung's home town, Thai Nguyen. It is an industrial town, three hours' bus drive from Hanoi. I am sitting upstairs in Dung's parents' house, with the sound of an English sports channel playing downstairs on a laptop, and a poster of Buddha showing several stages of transformation above me. I discussed my research subject with Dung's mother. She laughed and stated "ancestor worship online can never be the same, the ancestor wants the real thing, not a representation of it" pointing at the Hanoi beer sitting on the family ancestor altar. Later that evening Dung's brother observed that he felt that 'real' ancestor worship was more genuine and would pray up to four times a day because he had a business. (*Fieldnotes*)

Real thing can have effect through the ancestor. If you use technology it is not working. It is out of order. This is why few people do it at the moment. They think Internet offering is cheaper than serving something real. If it is not real it is not working... If you do not pray the ancestor will get nothing and sometimes they are angry that you do not serve. If the ancestor is poor they will not be happy with you... Most important thing is that the ancestor has power. They can control, they can make worse or make better your life. This is why many students make offerings, it is because they want to improve their life... Most offering are made from bamboo and paper because they will burn and burning the offering is so important. If it not burn it will not be received by ancestor. On the Internet there is nothing to burn! (*Interview with informant*)

### Introduction

The opening fieldnotes and interview quotation highlight a tension between online memorialisation and the cultural practice of ancestor worship for some Vietnamese. One is the words from a mother who feels that online memorialisation is too different from ancestor worship to be meaningfully applied to the other world. The other is by a Vietnamese student who questions such interactions as being cheap; not only do they not 'work', they will displease those who have moved from their physical existence. In this, the voices reflect a tension with personal and public grief and remembrance. This tension arising from the communication between the online, offline and the other world is key to this chapter.

This chapter initially examines scholarship from a North American context which demonstrates multiple criticisms of online memorialisation, including the argument by some that showing support online is not genuine compared to practical offline help for survivors, and that online the dead are abused and judged by the living. From here, I examine perceptions of Vietnamese who feel online memorials cannot be incorporated into relationships with the dead, as they are an unreal and untraditional practice. However as I will note, ethnographic accounts have pointed out the very specific ways online and offline interactions are simultaneous in the lives of people and their culture.

The chapter will then demonstrate the shifting nature of remembering in contemporary Vietnam, through the example of post-economic changes in 1986 known as the renovation (*đổi mới*), and newly created cemeteries in the country. It will also explore how religious resurgence in Vietnam has added a layer to the changing nature of remembering the dead, through offerings which directly correspond with socio-political and economic circumstances.

After this, I illuminate how those who visit NTO think about the hierarchy of ‘realness’ and ‘authenticity’ in regards to their online practices. The preceding critical stances will be discussed as important considerations for members, as explored through online offerings and the alteration of death portraits within NTO. I will demonstrate that online and offline forms of remembering contribute to NTO members’ relationships with the dead, who articulate that both are meaningful forms of communication. In the words of an informant regarding their interactions with the dead online: “It is not that different!”

### **Ambivalent and negative responses to online memorials**

While online memorials can be perceived as important sites of engaging with the dead and a wider community, literature also points to the sometimes ambivalent or outright negative reactions individuals have to them (Braman, Dudley and Vincenti 2011; Leonard and Toller 2012; Philips 2011; Urbina 2006). Just as physical cemeteries and memorials can be vandalised and turned to rubble, so too online memorials can be places of negative interactions; at times those memorialised online are targets of hostility and abuse<sup>35</sup> (see Gibbs, Carter, Arnold and Nansen 2013; Kohn, Nansen, Arnold and Gibbs 2012).

Leonard and Toller (2012:389) argue that anonymity in online memorials makes it easier to break social taboos relating to “speaking ill of the dead”, creating “darker forms of communication including flaming [the posting of offensive content], a disregard for the feelings of others, and increased conformity to negative group norms”. The authors note that their research within *MyDeathSpace*—a site for remembering victims of suicide—highlighted a much harsher reality for those memorialised online than previous research. In their study, individuals were judgmental of the dead and seemed to visit the site for information about them, rather than empathising with family members and friends who had lost a loved one;

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<sup>35</sup><http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2010/s2820638.htm>; <http://www.vancouversun.com/technology/Social+media+users+outraged+bullying+continues+memorial+page+Amanda+Todd/7387488/story.html>/ Viewed 6/8/13



kindness towards the dead was often only elicited after they were scolded for inappropriate behaviour (ibid:400). Leonard and Toller comment:

*MyDeathSpace* does not serve as a venue where survivors of suicide can reach out to others for social support and encouragement. If anything, many of the postings by members... only serve to further stigmatize and shame survivors of suicide by negatively evaluating and harshly judging their deceased loved ones or even the loved ones themselves. (Ibid:400-401)

Far from being environments of social interaction and support, for some, judgement continued online after death.

Research also reveals that online memorialisation can be uncomfortable for some who find it disturbing. Within the online world of *Second Life*, Braman, Dudley and Vincenti (2011:188) note one member's response to an online grave near her 'online house': "Could you please remove your graveyard. I find it very disturbing. When I look out of my bedroom I see a grave stone. NOT WHAT I WANT TO SEE WHEN I FIRST GET UP IN THE MORNING". It seems some people want to go about their online lives without having to deal with mortality. The online realm does not have the strict zoning regulations about when and where to build a cemetery, or physical walls demarcating different groups and behaviours. Perhaps more so than offline, it is harder to avoid the activities of others, be it in an unwanted graphic photo, adult content, extremely aggressive opinions, or the presence of the grave of someone's departed loved one.

Other earlier writers have commented on the insincerity of online memorials as places where individuals outdo each other with grief, replacing real and meaningful emotions with overdramatised portrayals (Harris 1998). According to Harris:

The Internet provided a completely uncensored forum for spontaneous eruptions of bewilderment and sorrow plagued by bad taste, inadvertent humor, and decimating bathos... Much of the typographic chaos of the tributes stems from the fact that many of the people lined up in this funeral cortege speeding down the information superhighway are teenagers or even prepubescent children... all of whom engage in what amounts to a crying contest, a sob fest, an act of mass hysteria with a distinct note of competitiveness. (Harris 1998:154-155)

While Harris's work is 17 years old, and much recent research challenges such an assumption (as seen in this work), there remains a feeling among some that displays of emotion for the dead online may not be wholly genuine. One anonymous individual insightfully writes about this with regard to the death of his sister:

It's sick nonsense. When my sister died this July her *Facebook* page was flooded with this kind of crap from Internet grief-junkies. People who were genuinely affected by her (sudden, unexpected) death did all sorts—phone calls, visits, charitable donations, offers to feed our cats when we were away, etc. I value all those individual expressions

of grief and offers of comfort. The people who scrawled their inanities over the Internet, however... they didn't give a fuck. They saw their chance to indulge themselves and get some attention and took it, that's all. Nothing to do with grief and certainly not a diffident, newfangled way of offering support to the bereaved<sup>36</sup>.

Such a comment is concerned with practical actions and support received during this time compared to easily accessible and perhaps inauthentic online expressions. Similarly, Marwick and Ellison (2012:386) note that the 'like' function on *Facebook*, which could be used to 'like' memorialised accounts, brought mixed reactions as many in their research "expressed dismay at the emphasis on quantifiable metrics over memories or more meaningful utterances". As one individual in their research remarked:

WE MUST REMEMBER ITS NOT HOW MANY LIKES SHE GOT, THIS IS A TRAGIC SITUATION, NOT A COMPETITION, PEOPLE WHO ACTUALLY KNEW AND LOVED CHRISSY ARE DEEPLY SADDENED BY THIS AWFUL THING AND ALL WANT TO PAY TRIBUTE TO HER MEMORY, NOT UP THE LIKES. (Ibid, uppercase text original)

Research also demonstrates that some online memorials may seem unmarked by negative comments simply because they are removed. Marwick and Ellison (ibid:383) write that traditional card and funeral books are rarely associated with negative comments, but that such sites as *Legacy.com* have to spend "one-third of its budget to managing such comments, deleting them before they are published".

In response to trolling and online bullying, some online memorials attempt to counter with measures by having the ability to censor comments before publication, as mentioned, or by requiring registration and a valid email address (Marwick and Ellison 2012). During fieldwork an administrator noted that NTO also had to overcome such issues:

When we see an inappropriate nick [profile name] for the member they get banned. They are banned forever... because you know there are many spammers advertising on NTO, every day, all the time. They advertise sex stories, bad things, drugs, many, many things not suitable to NTO. Sometimes they make bad comment on the page of the dead. Someone they talk terrible things to other people on NTO so we have to ban them. Sometimes they come to a member's tomb and say you should die. There are many things they speak about.

It seems we are now on the cusp of cementing public opinion that trolling is not merely unacceptable, but something that requires legislation and potential criminal action<sup>37</sup>. This, alongside global discussions on anonymity, state and corporate surveillance, and 'Internet freedom', has the potential to greatly impact all Internet activities, including online

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<sup>36</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/blog/2009/oct/07/memorial-websites-online-tributes/> accessed 9/2/14

<sup>37</sup> See for example <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/sep/13/Internet-troll-jailed-mocking-teenagers/> accessed 12/06/14

memorialisation. Such speculation on a changing online landscape is hardly surprising when considering its very recent materialisation in our daily lives, but is worth this brief mention as a reminder of its sometimes volatile and shifting nature due in part to its very nascency.

Scholarship discussed so far in this chapter has revealed a differing point of view towards online remembrance than elsewhere in this thesis. It is an understandable perspective. Dung's mother, laughing at online ancestor worship at the beginning of this chapter, has lived so many more years without such a technology than with it, so her refusing its validity is in no way unexpected. However, strong reactions to NTO also occur from Vietnamese familiar with online activities in their everyday life. It is the aim of the following section to provide a voice for those not enamoured by NTO interactions, such as Dung's mother, who find them a poor substitute to traditional forms of remembering and interacting with the dead.

### ***It makes our culture worse: critical attitudes to online memorialisation in Vietnam***

From my very first encounter with *Nghĩa Trang Online*, I began hearing a variety of responses from Vietnamese about it. When I showed or talked about it to Vietnamese who had never used NTO or even heard of online memorials, being neighbours, students and other Vietnamese I met outside of the research, responses were not always positive. "What is this thing?!" one participant exclaimed, "I would not want to go in there". This sometimes instant and strong response was echoed by many others: "Don't think I will enter! And it say 'enter forum', I don't have that desire"; "It uses colours that 'traditionally dead' like black, gray; it uses motif that looks exactly like an ugly cemetery"; "I will never bring any of my relatives to an ugly place like that"; "I did not like it very much! It brought me bleak and creepy feelings"; "Actually, I look around this site and I felt a little fear and sad"; "the site scares me. When I see pictures of the dead I feel haunted, like they follow me"; "not acceptable"; "cannot receive the food"; "no effort"; "they just want to show"<sup>38</sup>... I cannot enter, it is too sad"; "Scary!". Thao, a 27 year old male, who was well spoken in both English and Vietnamese, and whom lived not far from my own dwellings in District 12, felt that NTO was an attack on the values important to his conceptions of the deceased. Thao attended death days during the year for his own family members, and visited the local pagoda on important days for him. He even spoke of travelling at one stage to Hanoi in North Vietnam to visit the Temple of Literature (*Văn Miếu*) before starting his university studies. The offline and the other world were exceedingly integrated into his world though the online was peripheral. On seeing the website, he stated:

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<sup>38</sup> By 'to show', this informant meant that people wanted only to appear to others to be full of grief.

Not like it. I really don't like this website. How can we remember the dead people with this website? I don't believe it... This is a terrible thing to do. It must be real contact. You should come and pray in front of the ancestor with something real. Never on Internet! It is meaningless because it is not present for anything. We should do something real to express how we respect the ancestor. In my opinion this thing is so terrible. It makes our culture worse.

Online memorials were thus perceived by some as cheapening remembrance and breaking Vietnamese traditions; they became an 'electronic graveyard' (*ngĩa trang điện tử*), divorced from genuine ancestral relationships. Such a conclusion has also been observed in Chinese and Taiwan online memorials:

dissatisfaction with the emergent practice is rooted in the view that the Internet format does not lend sufficient solemnity and dignity for occasions which call for the expression of one's deepest feelings towards those who have passed on... As a form of computer-mediated communication with its largely free access and lack of central control, on-line mourning certainly encourages informality. (Kong 2012:429)

Several Vietnamese I spoke with became noticeably upset at the concept of an online cemetery, stating that they had never seen it before and would refuse to interact in such an environment. Such places were for them 'not real' and also disrespectful to those gone.

Other reasons Vietnamese described the site as improper included: the online offering of food and drink that ancestors would sometimes not be familiar with (such as sending a grandparent a KFC chicken meal); inappropriate profile images (for example, someone in a bathing suit); online interactions with people who did not know the deceased compared to meeting 'face-to-face' with family members and visiting the deceased's tomb and altar together; and the 'open diary' approach in which Vietnamese expressed their opinions online to the dead and thus worried them with their worldly concerns.

Thao, who was introduced above, remarked: "If you want to respect ancestor keep in the heart, in the mind, not on the Internet. If we miss them so much not share with the Internet... Why do they not write this in a diary? This is where no one can read it. How can they write of their relationship between their parents?" For him online interactions were much poorer in intention than meeting with family and friends, and feasting with the ancestor. The online cemetery was an imposter, an 'open diary' where Vietnamese shamelessly bemoaned their loss and chalked up their grief and bereavement to an already anxious ancestor. It defiled Vietnamese tradition and in some sense made a mockery of Vietnamese relationships with the dead. Again and again an emphasis was placed on the 'realness' of traditional relationships, by those who participated in the research:

The traditional beliefs of Eastern culture can hardly accept this new trend. We can use online cemetery but it will never replace the real tomb. I don't know about others, but I won't use this site for any dead family members because I think, why should I have to create an unreal tomb when I have a real tomb? Eastern people think that we can still keep in touch with dead people, we burn incense to call the dead and burn offerings and money made of paper for the dead. We believe that the dead can receive these items. Online tombs only help you to memorialise dead people and that's all. It cannot help living people communicate with the dead. Instead of an online tomb, I think to always keep the memory of the dead inside our minds is enough!

I disagree with the idea of using NTO to memorialise friends who have died. This does not relate to Vietnamese history at all and for me, this is not a good thing. Personally, when I am in a sad mood, I just want to be quiet. Also, this is a very sad thing, so why can you post it in public? Do you think this would prove that you care about this person? Love does not need to be shown in such activities like that. Losing our dear ones definitely breaks our heart and nothing can heal it. The time we had together, the memories will be forever in our mind and soul, but this site is not good for this. (Responses received via *Facebook*).

Here we have Vietnamese voicing some of the practical concerns and problematic connections between the online sphere and that of the other world, suggesting that ancestors will still require the 'real thing' through votive paper offerings and proper ritual attendance.

While back in Australia, writing up, I spoke to a Vietnamese student who argued for the greater efficacy of offline burning of votive paper offerings and votive money, compared to sending images of these online. She said: "It needs smoke, it needs a means to deliver. It's not like wifi in a sense. It sends the signal but it's visible, and you can see it fade away, you can smell it, you can feel its warmth, you can sense it much better than a wifi signal". She noted that smoke was better than the "invisible force" of the Internet. Others insist that offerings cannot be sent online, juxtaposing the real against the virtual; for them, the paper structure of a house or photocopied money when burnt, or actual food when placed on an altar, would transmute and become real to the ancestor. Chi's opinion on NTO echoed this:

It cannot replace real tomb. In my spiritual understanding the dead can't receive these objects if we send them online. I prefer paper offering... because when you burn paper objects, this will be sent to Hades bank then transferred to recipient. I think online object can't be sent to Hades bank because you lose nothing but a click<sup>39</sup>.

Chi was not alone in her sentiments, with numerous Vietnamese expressing similar concerns. It is significant to acknowledge that not all NTO participants felt that online offerings could 'get through' to the other world. Several users articulated that uploading images was *not central*

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<sup>39</sup> Votive money can either be photocopied tender, or specifically produced votive 'money' that is stamped with the Bank of Hades.

to remembering the dead, with some stating that it was insulting to send the ancestor food they would not have eaten while alive.

Here we have a distinct demarcation being made between the real and unreal, between traditional relationships with the deceased and the untraditional. One is full of filial piety and rich Vietnamese history, the other a meaningless ‘trend’, an act of those consumed by the falsity of the computer. One represents the physical act of remembering the ancestor, with genuine offerings, thoughtfully paid for and placed before the altar, the other simply a ‘click’ of the computer mouse, a twitch of the finger.

Concerns about the erasure of cultural and social interactions through new technologies are not new (see Wellman 2004) and stated like this, the differences may seem irreconcilable. However, as noted earlier in this work, ethnographic accounts point to the way individuals meaningfully take new technologies such as the Internet and appropriate them specifically within their culture (Boellstorff 2008; Garcia, Alecea, Bechkoff and Cui 2009; Miller 2011; Miller and Slater 2000; Pearce 2009). As Jones asserts:

In an electronic culture like that of today, the media of communication continue to play a role in how we understand death, how we hear about it, cope with it, and how we remember the dead, and it is no surprise that new media like the Internet and other digital means of communication become part of our culture’s rituals of death and dying. (Jones 2004:84)

Similarly in a recent collection concerning death, remembering and emotions the authors write:

As humans, we share death, loss, and grief in more visible and accessible manners than ever before, and furthermore, this sharing of death and mourning is a central example of how both offline and online practices can creatively constitute new communal spaces for designing, performing, and remediating rituals of grief and commemoration. (Christensen and Gotved 2014:5)

While the online is relatively new it is clearly integrated into many forms of remembrance.

A key tension arising for Vietnamese is the disconnect between what they see as the cultural significance of ancestor worship and mourning conventions, and the personal rituals of grief on the Internet. In this chapter and the previous, we see a tension between the private grief and forms of remembering the dead which is different from the public cultural practice of remembrance in Vietnam. One of the criticisms of NTO is “the spirits will never hear you there”, an issue about communication between worlds. Also, many believe it is inappropriate to put such internalising in the public sphere. In this tensions arise between online and offline interactions with the other world.

I will now examine some of the ways NTO members grapple with the tensions between the three worlds of the online, offline and other world. To do this, I will firstly demonstrate that the act of ancestor worship is not impervious to change; rather socio-political, economic and communication changes impact on how one is remembered, through religious resurgence and new forms of remembering in Vietnam. From here I will demonstrate how for members of NTO, the online is a component in how they interact with those now gone; it does not eclipse their offline sense of how to remember and communicate with the dead. Their interactions also mirror changing forms of ancestor worship in Vietnam. As will be argued, online memorialisation for NTO members is not identical to the cultural form of ancestor worship, but it does mirror and interact with it in meaningful ways.

### **The mutability of ancestor worship: Lac Hong Vien Cemetery and renovation**

Being physically removed from burial places can be a potential problem for some Vietnamese, and new approaches have been taken to assure that graves are taken care of when family cannot visit them during the year. A young tour guide Hui travelled from Hanoi to Ha Long Bay almost daily and rarely had time to visit the graves of his parents. He would pay staff of the cemetery to regularly clean the grave and leave offerings. It was a substantial amount of money, but one that he felt was appropriate and well spent; he could afford the money but he could not afford the time.

In a similar way, the Lac Hong Vien Cemetery on the outskirts of Hanoi offers personalised services for families who cannot visit tombs of the departed in person (see Image 9). As Ives (2011) notes, the Lac Hong Vien Cemetery is a place where “Vietnam’s rising middle class is dying to flaunt its bling in a new cemetery at the end of a golden-gated ‘Highway to Eternity’ where relatives can order graveside offerings of Hennessy [whisky] online” (ibid). Ives continues:

The graveyard’s online ancestor worship service is the first of its kind in Vietnam. Busy relatives can purchase afterlife gifts, from flowers to boiled chickens to expensive cognac, by the mouse click. Cemetery staff bring the items to the tombs and send videos or photos of the display by email... The trendy cemetery’s online service gives Vietnamese living elsewhere in the country or even overseas a way to participate in traditional rituals with a laptop and a MasterCard. (Ibid)

The website for the cemetery describes the fragility of other cemeteries in the country and on its information page has several stories where cemeteries in Vietnam are being closed down. In contrast, according to the site, it offers a final resting place that is clean and green, a tourist attraction and also a permanent home for the dead in a country where permanent cemeteries

cannot be taken for granted (see Chinh 2012; Johnson 2015; Nguyen 2010). This is reinforced in a section of the Lac Hong Vien Cemetery website where customers can provide feedback and comments on the service. One customer notes that the “scenery is charming, with open spaces, quiet and fresh air”<sup>40</sup>.



**Image 9: Lac Hong Vien Cemetery.** The man on the right takes a photo while the woman lights incense and leaves offerings on the tomb (neither of them are related to the deceased). The photo is subsequently emailed to the owners of the tomb. (Image <http://dichvudocung.com/dich-vu-cung-gio-online-tai-viet-nam-len-bao-nuoc-ngoai/> accessed 17/10/13)

Such memorialisation is not without its tensions. One news article<sup>41</sup> writes of the erosion of filial piety (*hiếu*) in Vietnamese culture, stating that the youth in Vietnam are changing their relationship with the dead by keeping their ancestors warm and clean by a “computer mouse click”. The article notes that while this may be more practical, many Vietnamese feel strongly that it encourages excess and commercialisation of the “cultural and spiritual values”<sup>42</sup> leading to the question of whether or not filial piety has been eroded. In the article several Vietnamese observe that while the service is convenient they still feel that traditional forms of ancestor worship cannot be replaced. In another article one respondent comments, “while the online worship services can be a convenient option for some, it is totally meaningless to those who

<sup>40</sup><http://lachongvien.vn/cam-nhan-khach-hang/cam-nhan-cua-khach-hang-ve-lac-hong-vien.html> accessed 16/11/2015

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.baomoi.com/Can-dong-dao-hieu-voi-dich-vu-cung-gio-online/c/7261801.epi> accessed 16/11/15

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.baomoi.com/Can-dong-dao-hieu-voi-dich-vu-cung-gio-online/c/7261801.epi> accessed 16/11/15



believe in the deeper meaning of ancestor worship. The beauty of ancestor worship and the power of faith have a greater influence than all modern gadgets like this” (all above translated)<sup>43</sup>.

In these examinations there are tensions arising between the traditional and untraditional, the real and unreal, and dichotomies are created with this ascension of newer mediums for commemoration and communication. For many Vietnamese in this research such concerns are real and deep-seated. They speak of the validity of the offline and its connection to the other world, while finding the new online realm disingenuous. However it is important to note that the very act of ancestor worship which seems so enshrined in the culture of Vietnam, is one that is mutable and vibrant. As argued earlier in this research, government policies are profoundly linked with how Vietnamese interact with the dead and the spirit realm more widely. Recent economic developments in Vietnam have impacted on religion and relationships between the living and those gone.

There has been a rich body of research on the proliferation and renewal of popular religion within Vietnam in connection to the economic reforms, known as the renovation (*đổi mới*), which swept through Vietnam in 1986 (Choi 2007; DiGregorio and Saleminck 2007; Endres 2011; Jellema 2005; 2007a; 2007b; Kwon 2006; Luong 2010; Malarney 2002; Pham 2009; Roszko 2012; Taylor 2004; see also edited volumes Nguyen and Kendell 2003; Taylor 2007). These market reforms ushered in renewed forms of remembering and interacting with the spirit realm, opening up the doors anew to religious activities previously banned or made difficult by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. With the relaxing of social and economic policies in the country, religious resurgence has made its way into Vietnamese society. As scholars note: “religion has been thriving in recent years” (Taylor 2007:1); it is “burgeoning in the Socialist Vietnam” (Choi 2005:10); “a blossoming of religion and ritual has occurred” (Malarney 2002:225); religion has “proliferated” (DiGregorio and Saleminck 2007:433), and to quote Endres (2011:167) in reference to her research on the Mother Goddess religion and the four palace mediums<sup>44</sup>, such a reform “allowed the doors of shrines and temples to swing open wide

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<sup>43</sup> <http://dichvudocung.com/dich-vu-cung-gio-online-tai-viet-nam-len-bao-nuoc-ngoai/> accessed 17/10/13

<sup>44</sup> The Mother Goddess religion (*Đạo Mẫu*) provides a kaleidoscopic view into the spiritual orientations within contemporary Vietnam. The religion involves mediums and spirit possession rituals known as *lên đồng*, wherein historical personas and patron saints are channelled through mediums to bring affluence and wellbeing to those involved. Among the various spirits and deities venerated in the Mother Goddess religion are Princess Lieu Hanh, the heroic general Tran Hung Dao, the lady of the realm Ba Chua Xu, who are incorporated into the four palaces which represent the natural elements of sky, land, water and the earth. There has been rich anthropological work concerned with the Mother Goddess religion recently including Endres’ (2011) ethnography based in Hanoi, and

and let a fresh breeze blow away the dust that has accumulated during decades of (forced) neglect”.

The economic circumstances after the renovation have followed through to the dead, with votive paper offerings enhanced and tombs improved following these changes (Jellema 2005; 2007a:60; 2007b; Kwon 2006:3; Luong 2010; Malarney 2003:185-195). Jellema (2007a:60) argues that it is impossible to consider contemporary ancestor worship outside of market reforms, situating the practices within “the rapid development of capitalism within the country... Although it has deep historical roots, ancestor worship in Vietnam continues to be shaped by changing socio-economic and political exigencies. The upswing in the economy is reflected on a most basic level in the increasingly lavish consumer needs of the dead”. This is reflected in the changes to votive paper offerings, which Malarney (2003:187) notes is “one of the most interesting manifestations of social change in Vietnam”. Malarney continues:

In the 1990s people were content to provide quite basic *hang ma* [votive paper offerings] items, such as bicycles and local currency; ten years later some families are offering motorcycles, refrigerators, and even cars, while others prefer to burn copies of the American dollar, which is regarded as a more stable currency than the *dong* [Vietnamese currency]. (Ibid; see also Kwon 2007)

And as Endres states:

The spirits have not ceased to exist in face of the Party’s persistent secularising campaigns, but instead are adapting themselves to the demands and desires of the modern times. Besides appreciating traditional food offerings... they have developed a taste for modern consumer goods packaged in colourful boxes or cans. (Endres 2011:80)

While ancestor worship has a rich heritage within the country, these examples, along with previous discussions on socio-political development demonstrate just how mutable ancestral relationships can be. Relationships between the living and the dead in Vietnam have perhaps always been changing, at times profoundly so. Along with the offline vibrancy, the online is now bringing a communication medium to the other world. The following section examines this through the introduction of online offerings in Vietnam.

### ***The most beautiful clothes: online offerings***

The act of ancestor worship, as noted earlier in this work, is the primary relationship Vietnamese have with the dead. It is a reciprocal relationship, where the living take care of the

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Fjelstad and Nguyen’s (2011) transnational research involved with the religion in both Vietnam and Silicon Valley. See also Fjelstad and Nguyen’s (2006) edited volume on medium and spirit practices in Vietnam.

deceased, and are in turn blessed and watched over by the departed. Providing for the ancestors in part consists of offerings placed on the ancestor altar, such as food, drink and certain type of fruits, and the burning of incense and votive paper offerings (*hàng mã*). Votive paper offerings range across the minutia of everyday life such as umbrellas and clothing, to more modern items including televisions, washing machines, iPhones, video game consoles, laptops, computers, and even in some cases, full-size motorbike replicas. Offerings for the ancestors are diverse and eclectic, and accommodating of modern needs. This is replicated within the online realm by members of NTO.

While several members felt that uploading online offerings was not central to remembering the dead, many others felt comfortable posting online offerings for the deceased and believed they would find a way to the other world for their use. Online offerings were, for the most part, copied and pasted from *Google*, making them near-infinite compared to the finite number of physical objects produced by those who create votive paper offerings. Looking for images of children's toys, members would type in 'teddy bear' for example, and work their way through the images trying to find the perfect fit. Others would take note of images while searching the Internet and place them later in the online cemetery. One participant searched for the latest technological products online so his father could keep in contact. After all, it was no use offering the dead old technology, "for even if they could use it, technology would change in the other world". Just as the younger generation incorporated new technological items, so too "the dead are influenced much like the living are"<sup>45</sup>. Kim said she found making offerings online strange at first but that it was not long before she embraced the practice, finding it "to be from the heart" and thus acceptable to her interactions with her father. It was also a possible way to reminisce and think about her father's favourite food, the clothes he used to wear, the motorbike he used to drive to work, and even the music he used to listen to, before sending them to him through the online portal. Kim noted that although she had heard other Vietnamese criticise online offering practices, that surely in all the prayers and offerings being uploaded, something would "get through".

Online offerings took on a dizzying array of forms; at one point in the research I started counting the different images I saw on NTO tombs before realising that it was as futile a task as going to Ben Thanh Market in the centre of Ho Chi Minh City, and counting every object to be found within. There were, among others: clothing and washing machines, iPhones and

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<sup>45</sup> For discussion in relation to changing votive money practices see Kwon (2007).

plasma televisions, camcorders, five hundred trillion đồng<sup>46</sup> notes, books of national poets, Heineken beer and Vinataba cigarettes, KFC chicken, soups, pizza and every other food or drink imaginable. For children and babies, there were dolls, jungle gyms and play-mats, bottled milk and pacifiers. For pets there was everything from fish food, dog biscuits and sleeping mats, to bird seeds and kitty litter.

For members of NTO, online offerings were shaped by their understandings of the dead in the other world. Kim for example, tells of an experience early on in her life which made her believe in the power concerning offerings to the dead:

My friend had an aunt who died young. Sometimes, she came back and her soul would go into her sister and complain about life in the Hades. Then, she would complain that in the Hades, she didn't have beautiful clothes and cry. Then everybody said that they would burn beautiful clothes [*votive paper offerings*] for her. She smiled and left the body of her alive sister. Strangely, the alive sister seemed very tired but she didn't remember anything and didn't know what happened with her! She said this had happened many times before, but she was too young so her father didn't let her know. That was the first time she witnessed and she was so shocked and scared. She went to visit a local market and bought paper clothes and money for her. Then she dreamt soon after of her aunt with the most beautiful clothes.

This experience of the soul entering the body (see Endres 2009; Kwon 2006; 2008), Kim noted, was challenging to describe to those who did not themselves know someone who had undergone the experience, or experienced it themselves. Similarly Phuong related the story of how, unbeknownst to her, her mother had burned a votive paper car for her deceased father. That night the participant had a dream that her father asked for a driving license, because while alive he did not drive a car. It was the next day that mother and daughter revealed to each the connection. This instilled in her early a need to burn votive paper offerings and now, several years later, she offers the best new technology to her father online, while noting humorously that “the traffic may not be as built up in the other world as in Ho Chi Minh City”. It is clear from examples like this that many members believe that online offerings reach the ancestors. The belief is literal and not metaphorical. This is a theme expanded on in Chapter 6 concerning online offerings created by Vietnamese women after an abortion.

Along with sending online offerings, some members digitally photoshop images of the dead, reflecting offline practices of ancestor worship. This will be the focus of the following section.

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<sup>46</sup> Đồng is the currency of Vietnam. To put this in perspective twenty thousand đồng is roughly equal to one Australian Dollar. Thus 5,000,000,000,000 đồng is roughly equivalent to 250,000,000 Australian Dollars.

## Photoshopping the dead



**Image 10: Photoshopped Grandparent.** The ancestor has been superimposed into a business suit and sits in an affluent Vietnamese setting. Colour has also been added, from a previously black and white image. (Photo taken by author)

When visiting the homes of informants and friends in Vietnam I was fascinated by the portraits of ancestors on the family altar. Some of the portraits were photoshopped to show the image of the ancestor in more respectable clothing and perched in an affluent setting (see Image 10). Black and white images were also given colour. Jellema (2007a:478) writes, based on her fieldwork in Dinh Bang on the Red River Delta in North Vietnam, that photoshopping death portraits allows Vietnamese to “grant the dead an upward economic trajectory impossible during their lifetimes”. For her participant Thuy, the photoshopping of death portraits aims to address “generational imbalances and correct for her parents’ hardships during their lives by elevating their lifestyle after death, making sure that their material standing keeps pace with her own, or even exceeds it” (ibid:477). Part of this remedying involves digitally altering the image of her parents, a practice which is becoming more popular in Vietnam, as “ragged peasants from hard-scrabble backgrounds are outfitted after death in the sumptuous costumes of the old feudal mandarinat. To achieve this retroactive class advancement, a photographic likeness of the deceased’s face and hands are digitally retrofitted into stock images evocative of imperial and colonial privilege” (ibid:478).

Informants noted that the portrait of the deceased was important in their relationship with the dead, as both a physical reminder and also as a portal for the dead between this world and the other world. In the words of Ha:

It is a very important thing in our beliefs. When the person dies, they do not absolutely disappear. They stay somewhere to watch and protect us. So when we keep the portrait we can always remember them as they are alone in a faraway realm so they won't feel lonely. We also pray to the portrait on certain occasions such as Tet Holiday or their death anniversary.

Likewise for Tuan, the death portrait was emotionally incorporated into his relationship:

When I look at my passed away grandmother, I feel secure and peaceful. I can also remember things she has done for me in the past and I feel thankful. I am inspired by the feeling that she is somewhere looking at me and protecting me so I can do my best and become a good person.

This understanding of what a death portrait constitutes is then faithfully carried over into the online realm, as the online tomb and picture of the deceased, whether it is photoshopped or not, creates a powerful connection between the living and the dead. It becomes a bridge between both worlds.

Thanh, mentioned previously in this work, felt that NTO was an online environment where she and others could create “another world” for a young student who had committed suicide. Thanh showed me the pictures of her friend which they had created through photoshop, in her words, “because it is creating another world for him, a symbol of a fairy tale and relatives of this person want him to be there”. These included images of her friend on magic carpets, in Disneyland, and riding a bike on the Great Wall of China. Another participant remarked it was “for him to have fun in another life”. Implicit in the online alteration of the young man was the continuation of a relationship with the dead, but more broadly, it was to share the memory of him between friends and family and potentially lessen their grief with their camaraderie and happy thoughts of him.

Digital manipulation of the dead occurs both online and offline and either way, one can imagine a loved one sitting at the computer, spending hours with the image of the deceased and thinking of things that made them happy in life; in this way it seems very intimate. Whether it be photoshopping the dead person's image into an activity, such as visiting Disneyland, or enhancing their social identity through clothing, this practice has become an activity on *Nghĩa Trang Online* and resonates with the practice of ancestor worship.

Remembering is served with the very act of manipulating images of the dead. Moving through the website a young Vietnamese woman is photoshopped into iconic images of her hometown Hue. Her superimposed image looks out over Hue's historic streets and the bridge that spans the Perfume River. The colour purple is utilised as it is the colour that represents the ancient capital. When travelling to Hue, members pass by these physical locations and recall the images, and hence remember her. The linking of the deceased with physical locations, and sometimes to nationalistic or grand emotions that a city may evoke, allows memory to spread even further and fastens the dead to the living once more. During the research I was also made aware of how members photoshopped the deceased to remove physical ailments and medical apparatus, through the narrative of a young baby girl.

### **Remembering Bé Nhân Ái**

It is night time when a one-month-old baby is abandoned in front of the Ho Chi Minh City's Children Hospital 2. The baby has lacerations and is severely malnourished; she is not only ill but close to death with serious diaphragm and heart conditions, as well as birth defects. On that night she is taken in and soon the baby is known throughout the hospital as Bé Nhân Ái (baby compassion).

The story of Bé Nhân Ái gained momentum among the Vietnamese press, and reverberated online with *YouTube* videos, blogs, newsfeeds, and social networking sites. The online sphere became one where Vietnamese could express their pain, and where they could talk of the wider issues about parenting in Vietnam. Online and offline, charities were set up to raise money for the young baby, for food and medical expenses. NTO raised awareness of the baby and a link was created that contained information relating to her circumstances. Despite the efforts of hospital staff and the money contributed through the wider public, Bé Nhân Ái died. She was 10 months old.



**Image 11: Bé Nhân Ái in life and death** (top to bottom). The first image shows the baby in hospital with medical apparatus. She is unwell with bruises, rashes and physical deformity<sup>47</sup>. The second is an image of the baby after death on NTO where signs of physical trauma for the most part have been photoshopped<sup>48</sup>.

In Vietnamese *nhân ái* is to be compassionate or humane, and the story of Bé Nhân Ái, evoked a feeling among many of the charity that could be given by others to save and nurture a life, but also of one to whom humaneness had not been given. For members of NTO I spoke with, it was important to create a tomb for the memory of the baby, but also for support for her continued journey in the other world. Members illuminated their emotional response to what had happened, while wishing there was a different time and a different family for the baby to

<sup>47</sup> <http://dantri.com.vn/tam-long-nhan-ai/cau-chuyen-tu-vi-su-than-10-thang-tuoi-610622.htm> accessed 12/9/13

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.nhomai.vn/forum/showthread.php?t=9409> accessed 10/10/14



be born into. They also prayed for the baby and sent online offerings of toys, food, and drink. Members spoke directly to the baby through the portal of NTO, wishing her peace, rest, love and salvation in the other world. One member reminded the baby to keep herself warm in the other world during the winter, and another wrote “we will always remember you” (translation). Images of her face were photoshopped to remove the physical trauma, as well as clinical apparatus, to show as much as possible a baby in peace (see Image 11).

There was an awareness among NTO members of the response of the wider community. As noted by one member, “There are articles about you, thousands of people have lit candles for you, and there is immense kindness here. Sleep and rest child” (translation). This statement reflects the contradictory conceptions of online activity. Instead of seeing this huge extent of online outpouring from strangers as *negative*, as *offensive* because it is so easy and instant as pressing ‘like’, that it is unreal and disingenuous as was explored earlier in this chapter, here there is the belief that the young baby will feel comforted that so many strangers have engaged online and elsewhere. Online memorialisation reflected the widespread community pain and anger that was written about in newspapers. Through expressions of love and care from ‘thousands’ of strangers, and the digital manipulation to remove her physical pain, we see an online community converging to create an existence for the baby which she was not afforded in life.

For me the online memorialisation of Bé Nhân Ái was an important point in the research. As members spoke of their emotional expression and concern for the baby who they had never met, I began to see the sharing of emotions, experiences, and the powerful need to remember in a much more focused sense. Though most may have come originally to *Nghĩa Trang Online* to remember a particular person, profound connections were formed through the narratives of others; the tapestry of these narratives together speak towards the potential of online remembering. That the online sphere can accommodate so much information and connect so many people, means it can accomplish a feeling of security, that of being part of something larger, an online community. Bé Nhân Ái, in the flurry of both online and offline activity and emotion, also reiterated for me the simultaneity of the online and offline, not as separate and distinct entities, but ones that overlap and feed into each other. Any aspects of memory, veneration or bereavement that either realm could better serve, in no way suggests that either would be ‘better off’ without the other. This simultaneity will be elaborated on in the following two sections, before the chapter’s conclusion.

### ***I try and do both: online and offline remembering in Vietnam***

Outside it felt like the hottest day of the year, though admittedly many days tended to feel as such. I was with Vinh and Oanh, who were in a relationship, and we made our way towards the back of a restaurant just outside Ben Thanh Market in Ho Chi Minh City. We had spent nearly an hour amongst the maze of Vietnamese trinkets, produce and treasures and we were all getting a little hungry and tired on our feet by the time we arrived. Over a *cà phê sữa đá* (Vietnamese iced coffee) and bún bò Huế (Vietnamese beef vermicelli soup originating from Hue in central Vietnam), we talked about some of the recent happenings concerning NTO.

Vinh and Oanh had met through the site at one of the regular offline meet-ups for members, and they knew many others who visited NTO. There was a moderator who, like them, had found love in the memorial and another who was thinking about leaving the site altogether. Vinh's father had died nearly a decade before from heart complications and a key reason for joining the memorial was support: "Everyone can visit and share their feelings with me". While he was very active on the site Vinh did have some ambivalence when I asked him about the negative reactions some Vietnamese had toward NTO.

They don't know about the site really, they only hear it from some news site. When members come to the site they know why we remember the ancestors on it... But I know this could make Vietnamese culture gradually be forgotten. In younger Vietnamese's house the altar rarely appears... I'm so proud of my culture, it makes us stronger and in solidarity.

For Vinh, both online and offline interactions fed into his remembering practices and neither could substitute for the other. We finished out flavourful soup, while also talking about childhood, the town of Nha Trang (Oanh's birthplace), and the upcoming wedding of fellow NTO members.

For Vinh and Oanh and many besides, NTO activities were an extension of their relations with the dead. Online interactions did not supersede or devalue the cultural practice of ancestor worship but rather online interactions complemented existing rituals and beliefs regarding the dead. For some users NTO was one of only a limited number of options in relating to the dead and sometimes only used when living overseas for example, or after an abortion (see Chapter 6). As stated by a member of NTO:

I had seldom noticed how people remember the dead until my beloved Aunt passed away. At that time Mai, her daughter (my close cousin) was living abroad and could not come back in time to see her Mom at the last minute. That made Mai very sad. A few years later, Mai happened to know about this memorial site, so she registered to be a member of the site and had her Mom's Internet grave there. Each time you click on the candle, it's like you just lit the incense for the dead. That means they are always

remembered. Now no matter where she is, Mai feels that Mom is always there for her, and she can bare her heart with Mom... We feel that it helps a lot in our spiritual life.

As part of the remembering process this member would also visit and pray at the local pagoda where her aunt's remains were kept, which Mai could only do when visiting Vietnam. Together, they negotiated and interlinked the online, offline and the other world, in a way which did not corrupt or do damage to relationships with the deceased.

## Leaving NTO

While online memorials could be theoretically permanent, the nature of digital storage needs to be contemplated. Bryson writes:

Historically digital systems of storage have been far more transient than paper. Traditional storage media such as magnetic tape corrode over time, but even where materials are relatively permanent, data formats and machine architectures are not. Many companies have literally found their past inaccessible in the last century when they returned to try to read old data from archived computer media. (Bryson 2012:71)

Technology can rapidly change and memories facilitated on the Internet can be closed down<sup>49</sup>, disappear or be rarely visited (see House and Churchill 2008). As Gibson observes (in Cooper 2011): "just as graveyards and roadside memorials embody the signs of forgetting, of now absent connection to living memory, so too do online memorials make visible the absence of visitors, of inactive and irrecoverable remembering". Sites such as *Myspace* have quickly become superseded, leaving behind memorials which often feel empty. Where once comments blossomed from those concerned with the dead, online memorials become vacant as members move on to new sites, with the former online memorials being a remnant of their once fertile afterlife (see Arntfield 2014; Roberts 2012:60).

Members left NTO for many reasons. A senior moderator for the site stated that a common reason for users not staying in touch was because they forgot their password; she received several messages a month from members wanting to reconnect after absences. They could visit their dead family and friends without a password but they could not contribute candles, incense, comments or online offerings. Another reason that people left the site was that it had been important for them at a particular time in their lives, but did not stay essential. Some informants would visit daily, even hourly early on, and then gradually decline to perhaps once a month,

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<sup>49</sup> Pearce (2009:88-93) for example examines the loss of online communities and how individuals create new online sites to socially interact in. Some of her participants characterised such a loss as traumatic, communicating poignantly about it, at times through poetry.

then less. Online graves in NTO became abandoned just as physical ones do, in the same way that you may see a clean headstone adorned with flowers, next to one that is crumbling, illegible.

“I don’t visit the online cemetery anymore” Truc stated, as we sat in a cafe in District 3 in Ho Chi Minh City just off Nguyễn Đình Chiểu Street. It was towards the end of my fieldwork and I was meeting up with informants, sometimes for the last time. Truc, a 25 year old female, was an early participant who had shown great interest in my research. She worked at a hotel near the tourist hotspot of Bùi Viện Street in the city centre, and was introduced through Tuan and Phuong who were noted earlier in this work. Truc’s family was Catholic though she also at times participated in death days with extended family and visited pagodas, especially on important dates. In the past these had more to do with studying though several years after finishing a retail diploma, she went to pray for the health of her grandmother in particular. It was when catching up for one of the final visits that Truc noted she was moving away from the site which had brought us together. At first she mentioned seemingly practical reasons. She did not have the time to go online now, her computer was broken, she was very busy at work. It took a while before she stated more keenly, “the dead, you go into NTO and there are just too many sad stories”. On one occasion Truc described her fear as relating to the presence of the dead within the memorial, and thought that perhaps the restless dead, the hungry ghosts mentioned earlier in this work, could somehow push through the boundaries of the Internet. I found this interesting and next time I met up with moderator Linh I asked her if she had heard of any similar occurrences for members. I quote the interview below:

*Anthony.* Do members of NTO feel the dead can respond to the interactions they have with them online?

*Linh.* The dead cannot write a comment back but they can send a feeling. I want to talk to you about a strange story on NTO. I want to talk about a woman who died by a car accident. Sometime at midnight we see the name of her light up on NTO, for two hours, three hours. After this the next morning I call her parents, and I ask them, “why last night did you come and visit NTO so late”? They say “oh no, we do not come last night, we were very tired, sleeping, we not come”. At this time I feel that young girl, that young student, her presence comes to NTO. You know she was learning information at university? So she is very good with information and the Internet. Let me tell you something else. A member of NTO, they live in Arizona State, in America. This member is working as an official, she is Vietnamese overseas. She has a strong belief and one time she learns about the death of the woman but she has not come back to Vietnam. She is still in US and one time when she comes to NTO at midnight, she saw the young student standing up next to the computer. Next to her computer, when on NTO she sees the woman, same as you and me. Very strange, very strange story, and next morning she comes to NTO and writes about the night, she says “last night I see”,

and her parents are very surprised because the dead girl, she was in Vietnam. So they wonder, why does she come to America?

*Anthony.* How did this make her parents feel?

*Linh.* It helped them. The woman in the US explained that she [the dead daughter] is very happy in heaven and now her parents do not need to worry. Very strange story.

This occurrence was for Linh, the girl's parents and several members a welcome occurrence. It cemented the 'real' connections forged through an Internet connection and memorial website. It was a sign that the dead could 'push through' the online ethereal. However to others such as Truc, it was disconcerting, and made them question whether hungry ghosts and the wandering dead could also get through. Such an occurrence was not Truc's only reason for leaving, as outlined above, and Truc was not "finished" with NTO. Perhaps she would continue interactions in the future, but at this time in her life she was not entering the online cemetery.

## **Conclusion**

In contemporary Vietnam, tensions arise when thinking about the communication channels NTO members use in their interactions with the dead. These speak to wider issues in the introduction of new mediums in the country, and the forms of communication between the online, offline and the other world. As espoused by many Vietnamese, there is a feeling that the online cannot 'get through'; that the ancestors cannot possibly be contacted through such a medium. In this we have a tension between the cultural practice of ancestor worship and the more personal rituals Vietnamese seek. As noted in this work, such a tension is not unique to online interactions in Vietnam, with many questioning the validity of online communities compared to offline communities: online rituals compared to offline rituals; personal emotion compared to communal emotion; and online memorialisation compared to offline memorialisation. In all of this we have research and inquiries which note the movements between the online and offline, and the fundamental links between them.

NTO members come to their online interactions aware of these tensions. While not denying the cultural forms of remembering in Vietnam, their interactions expand on ancestor worship and bring out interesting ways of thinking through remembrance in an online medium. Through online offerings and the photoshopping of the dead, we can see some of the ways Vietnamese are thinking about the connections between mediated worlds. In the mutability of online remembrance, members are also in sync with the cultural heritage of ancestor worship, which is one which continues to change. Ancestor worship in Vietnam is far from fixed as 'tradition' and 'culture'; rather it is dynamic and mutable. Whether or not online memorialisation

continues within Vietnam, the questions surrounding communication ecologies will continue to be asked and negotiated.

The tensions noted in this chapter between the three worlds of communication, will now be expanded on in Chapter 6 and 7. These chapters are concerned with social-political issues raised by online memorialisation and move between the micro level of experiencing grief and the disenfranchisement of it for members, while also weaving this expression into the macro levels of national discourse. Chapter 6 explores the online and offline memorialisation of fetuses by their mothers after undergoing an abortion. From a macro perspective it will examine the reasons for abortion in Vietnam and the cultural relationship women have with their fetus. It will then place this within the social-political context in which it takes place. I will then demonstrate the personal experiences of grief and remembering within NTO, and the various ways women seek appeasement from their fetus, and communicate with a wider audience.

Chapter 7 teases out the impact online memorialisation has on remembering war dead from the American/Vietnam War. The chapter has a particular focus on *Facebook*, and will explore the core themes of remembering and forgetting within Vietnam, examining how the medium of the Internet both allows for remembering which is publically and socially sanctioned, while also being a medium for new forms of remembering not so easily attained offline. This will be addressed through the example of revolutionary martyrs in Vietnam who are publically recognised and remembered, before turning its attention for those who fought for the opposing regime, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Together these two chapters aim to explore the powerful questions of who does or does not have the right to be remembered in society, and the wider issues pertaining to the intersection of the online, offline and other world in contemporary Vietnam.

## Chapter 6. *A grief that cannot be shared: continuing online relationships with fetuses*

Abortion IS BAD. In our culture people who kill their babies or abort are not treated in fair ways. But actually they don't care about what others think. And those people seem unsociable, I think. But they're not worth to be helped. They have to pay for what they did... I find it so messed up about those people who aborted or killed their own babies. In our culture, if you get pregnant without getting married, you'll be treated like a prostitute, and prostitutes are those whom others will treat LIKE A PIECE OF SHIT. (Vinh, an English student in the outer districts of Ho Chi Minh City)

Son, how are you? There are many thoughts which are piling on me and making me tired and in a terrible mood. I want to erase everything I am thinking about and start something new. I almost can't stand it anymore. I could not sleep well last night because of these thoughts. There is no one with whom I can share my feelings and it leaves me feeling uncomfortable and lonely. If I could cry I would, but these tears have run dry. I feel as I am at a standstill. Only one thing left, my little son. If only you and I could travel far away. (Communication between a mother and her deceased fetus on *Nghĩa Trang Online*. Translation)

### Introduction

While there is research concerned with Vietnamese women's suffering after an abortion and their ritual responses (Gammeltoft 2003, 2006, 2010; Nguyen and Liamputtong 2007; Whittaker 2010), how Vietnamese use online memorials to mitigate their grief has been less noted. This chapter argues that abortion brings about a profound disenfranchised grief for some Vietnamese women. Disenfranchised grief, as noted earlier, is "experienced by those who incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported" (Doka 1999:37). However, the grief of those who visit NTO can be powerfully enfranchised, through the remembering of their fetus and through connecting with other members. A durable biography (Walter 1996) can also be created between a mother and her fetus through direct communications, online offerings, and interactions with a wider community.

The chapter will firstly analyse attitudes towards abortion and youth sexual practices in Vietnam. It will then demonstrate significant reasons why it is challenging to continue a relationship with a deceased fetus. Many Vietnamese believe that the fetus will 'haunt' those responsible and lead to future fertility difficulties because of the abortion. In the face of such a powerful cosmology of the dead, the question becomes, how can Vietnamese women remember and appease their fetus?

One possible way is through a continued relationship online, as some Vietnamese women<sup>50</sup> who have undergone an abortion visit NTO to create a tomb for their fetus. The online memorial section that is the focus of this chapter, the tomb for fetuses or ‘little beings’, has approximately 700 tombs. With 22,000 online candles lit for fetuses aged between 2 weeks and 5 months, it is the largest online memorial for fetuses in Vietnam. Through the theory of durable biography and disenfranchised grief, it will be demonstrated that a continuing relationship is formed through communication and online offerings to express grief, ask for forgiveness, share past and present experiences, and through prayer and guidance for the fetus in the other world.

### **Pregnancy loss, online memorialisation and durable biography**

The experience of pregnancy loss<sup>51</sup> is for many individuals a deeply painful experience, extenuated by the disenfranchisement of grief (Lang et al. 2001; Layne 1997; Martel 2014; Weaver-Hightower 2012). Weaver-Hightower hauntingly illustrates this and the distancing of social relationships through the personal experience of the stillbirth of his daughter Matilda:

Being the parent of a stillborn child bestows a stigma. You become the living representation of the worst-case scenario. You are ‘those poor people,’ and consciously or not some people pull away. Perhaps they fear your bad luck rubbing off. Perhaps they just don’t know what to say. (Weaver-Hightower 2012:473)

Similarly Layne (1997:292) writes of the profound effect related to the “the cultural denial of pregnancy loss”, wherein “relatives, friends, and co-workers pretend that nothing happened”.

Doka supports this, stating:

Perinatal deaths lead to strong grief reactions, yet research indicates that many still perceive the loss to be relatively minor... An abortion, too, can constitute a serious loss... but the abortion can take place without the knowledge or sanction of others or even the recognition that a loss has occurred. (Doka 2002:11)

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<sup>50</sup> Vietnamese women were not alone in their interactions in the fetus tomb and visitors included fathers, friends, partners and sometimes other family. However, Vietnamese women formed the large majority of members who visited and participated in the fetus online memorials and consequently, it was Vietnamese women who participated in the research. While NTO has space for mothers who have lost an unborn child through other forms of perinatal loss (such as stillbirth), the Vietnamese perspectives in this chapter focus on abortion. It is also important to note that due to the social stigma and sensitive issues surrounding abortion in Vietnam, informants were introduced to the researcher through members who were already incorporated into the research. Messages were placed both on NTO and *Facebook*, notifying members and moderators of my research interests and asking for any interested participants to contact me. In these ways I was able to access a cross-section of members and moderators who both did and did not visit the online fetus cemetery.

<sup>51</sup> While I am aware that the experiences of abortion and other forms of pregnancy loss may be profoundly different, for the purposes of this chapter they constitute a broader context of loss around issues embedded in the memorialisation process. These include the disenfranchisement of grief, the lack of long-term support, and the ambiguity of the body and personhood of the fetus. I use these forms of perinatal loss to help complement the theory more thoroughly as there is limited research concerning abortion and online memorialisation in Vietnam.



Not yet a citizen of society, the loss of life during pregnancy is enmeshed in ambiguities, often a lack of body and social identity, which extenuates the loss dramatically for those involved (see Lang et al. 2001:184). How then can individuals express their grief and relate to others with similar experiences of loss?

Earlier in the thesis I introduced the theory of continuing relationships with the dead in scholarly literature and pointed out how the dead are embedded in the lives of the living, through the work of Klass et al. (1996). In the same year as their research, Walter (1996) proposed a way of connecting with the dead and other people through the theory of a 'durable biography'. Using personal experiences of loss through the deaths of his father and girlfriend, Walter noted we shape our understandings of those now gone through our own and others' recollections in a durable biography, as the dead are once again woven into the ongoing narrative of the living. Part of this process means that a biography needs "to be reasonably accurate and this requires testing it against the views of others" who knew the individual (ibid:13).

However, Walter (ibid:15) suggests "our *need* to talk about the dead, our need reflexively to monitor our relationships with them... may be increasing, and yet... the availability of others with whom to do this may be decreasing". Reasons for this include: the availability of medical staff who can explain the death; intergenerational differences in grieving; religious decline; family and work relationships and "longevity combined with geographical mobility. Those who knew the dead person are often physically separated from one another" (ibid:15-16). The question arises then as to how in modern societies, where there is a "disembedding from place, from tradition and from kin" (ibid:15) and a difficulty in finding people to talk to about the dead, do individuals still create such a durable biography?

Walter (1996:18) demonstrates the need to talk with others, through the example of self-help groups with members who "have had similar experiences and share one's own feelings. There is a sharing of experience. They do not share objective knowledge of the deceased, but, having suffered the same category of loss, they do have similar feelings". Thus while not knowing the departed personally, it is the sharing of experiences and feelings with those who can understand and empathise which becomes meaningful in the creation of a durable biography.

Online memorialisation is one way that individuals are creating a durable biography and engaging with pregnancy loss, through: expressing emotions relating to loss; remembering their child through written, audio and visual communication; accessing relevant information; and crucially, connecting with a wider online community (Christensen and Sandvik 2013;

Christensen and Sandvik 2014; Flohr Sørensen 2011; Godel 2007; Kean 2009; Yamada and Shupe 2013). Kean (2009:157-158) observes, “the technology of the Internet has clearly been central to the flourishing of pregnancy loss discourse and memorialization”, noting that the discourse of loss as examined through her research, primarily in a North American context, involves a narrative of “prehistory and history” of the child and an exploration of the future experiences they could have had in life. In these environments, individuals can “resist disintegration and alienation... (and be) publicly acknowledged through the appropriation of new communicative technologies” (ibid:267). Clearly for these types of loss, such expression is of vital importance and one not always accessible in the wider community.

### ***A lot of girls have to kill their babies*<sup>52</sup>: attitudes to abortion and haunting**

In Vietnam, abortion is a sensitive issue and one which has traditionally been understood as an act by an immoral person (Nguyen and Liamputtong 2007:80). However the moral order has been in transition within Vietnam in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, first with French colonisation which criminalised abortion, and then with the relaxing and legalising of abortion from the mid-1950s until the present (ibid). Reproductive control was implemented by the Vietnamese Communist Party in the 1960s, “inspired partly by the need to boost women’s participation in the workforce in order to offset men’s military service” (Wolf, Thuy, Hyman and Huber 2010:151). Wolf et al. (ibid) argue “the late 1980s saw the initiation of a stronger family planning programme through institution of the national committee for family planning and population... In 1988 the government introduced a policy limiting families to two children”. This drastically reduced fertility rates within Vietnam. Where six children was the norm in the 1950s, two is now the norm, and for those who produce more than two children, possible fines and moral judgement lay in wait (Belanger 2006:254; Wolf et al. 2010:151). This in turn has created an imbalance of sexes throughout the country (Belanger 2006; Guilmoto 2012:37; Wolf et al. 2010:161).

A recent news article remarks that within Vietnam the “northern Hung Yen Province still has the highest average sex-ratio at birth of 131 boys for every 100 girls”<sup>53</sup>. Guilmoto argues that the sex imbalance is new despite a historic desire for sons:

As recently as the beginning of the twenty-first century, the country had recorded no tangible rise in the sex ratio at birth (SRB)—the number of males per 100 females—in

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<sup>52</sup> Quote from informant.

<sup>53</sup><http://vietnamnews.vn/society/226004/preference-for-sons-leads-to-widening-of-birth-ratio.html>/accessed 2/3/13

spite of the many social and demographic features pointing to latent son preference. Since 2005, the increase in birth masculinity has been rapid and the proportion of male births is now higher in Vietnam than in India. (Guilmoto 2012:31)

The preference for sons within Vietnam is correlated with: fertility decline; two child family planning policies; patrilineal traditions; as well as familiarity and availability of prenatal sex selection technologies, previously difficult to obtain (Belanger and Oanh 2009; Guilmoto 2012:34-39). A strong son preference is also correlated to a “patrilineal tradition of Vietnam” (Belanger 2004:96), which:

prescribes the continuity of the male family line through the birth of sons. Marriage is followed by patrilocal residence and all daughters-in-law are expected to give a son so their husband’s family line may be continued. Women’s duty to provide sons for males’ descents is thus central to the definition of womanhood in Vietnam. (Ibid)

While sex selective abortion is illegal in Vietnam many doctors claim that women persist in having abortions because of the desire for a male child. Dr Nguyen Thi Hong Minh, a Hanoi obstetrician, contends that the majority of abortions were performed on female fetuses during the year of the dragon (2012-2013) which was an auspicious time for male children<sup>54</sup>. The doctor notes that “women who were aware of the regulation would ask for an abortion either claiming they were busy working or studying, or poor and so could not afford another child”<sup>55</sup>, circumventing an otherwise illegal abortion (see also Belanger 2006; Belanger and Oanh 2009; Guilmoto 2012).

In Vietnam premarital sexual activity also contributes to the rate of abortion, as it is understood as being morally wrong from a religious and social perspective (Gammeltoft 2006, 2010; Nguyen and Liamputtong 2007). Nguyen and Liamputtong (2007:92) remark, “when young, unmarried women engage in premarital sex, they are considered as ‘stained’ and ‘spoiled’, and are devalued morally”. Any resulting pregnancies and subsequent abortions become “an indication of illicit and immoral sexual activity; as evidence of a selfish pursuit of sexual pleasure or other personal gains” (Gammeltoft 2003:139).

Wider issues enmeshed with youth sexuality and abortion include: avoidance, embarrassment and lack of knowledge in relation to sex and contraception use (Binh 2012; Nguyen et al. 2006; Wolf et al. 2010); limited communication about sexual topics between parents and children (Nguyen 2009:8-10; Trinh et al. 2009); and socio-economic transformations implemented by

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<sup>54</sup><http://www.thanhniennews.com/2010/pages/20121212-hanoi-doctor-says-more-women-aborted-girls-in-dragon-year.aspx/> accessed 5/3/13

<sup>55</sup><http://www.thanhniennews.com/2010/pages/20121212-hanoi-doctor-says-more-women-aborted-girls-in-dragon-year.aspx/> accessed 5/3/13

the Vietnamese government through the renovation (Ngo, Ross, Michael and Ratliff 2008; Nguyen 2007:301-308; Nguyen and Liamputtong 2007). In research undertaken in Ho Chi Minh City, Nguyen, Liamputtong and Murphy (2006:406) note that although condoms and contraceptive pills can be relatively cheap or even free, there are fears relating to their use; many young Vietnamese displayed general ignorance and even disgust about contraception. Access to contraception can likewise be difficult for unmarried adolescents due to the condemnation of sexual activity before marriage (Wolf et al. 2010:60). With a lack of knowledge relating to sexual practices and contraceptive use, along with this changing sexual landscape, the odds of an unforeseen pregnancy rise.

Throughout the research numerous Vietnamese expressed the opinion that abortion was morally wrong from a religious, moral and social perspective. In Hanoi, a young student remarked: “I’m Buddhist so Buddha said it’s not good so I think it’s not good either. Because the baby in a woman is still a human and they need to live. I just hope that when they have babies they could have money for them and they won’t need to make a mistake”. She continued: “a lot of girls have to kill their baby because for them it is a mistake, the family won’t like that and the guy wants to leave, they have lots of bad comments made to them”. At times informants became noticeably upset when discussing abortion and likened Vietnamese who underwent abortion to sex-workers.

NTO became an environment for discussions relating to abortion. An information page was set up where members could discuss the subject matter, and also pray and send messages to the fetuses and their parents. One particular section within NTO has an image of a physical children’s cemetery (where many fetuses were buried) in Pleiku, a town of roughly 20,000 people in central Vietnam. As part of a get-together with fellow members, several NTO members visited the cemetery and uploaded the photos online. Along with the lighting of candles and incense for the cemetery, members note the pain of the fetus, and the wish that the fetus would be freed to the other world. Members ask for mercy for the innocent creature, and one member writes “may God take pity on the soul of the innocent child... I hope life gradually reduces this trauma and that people are more responsible” (translation). In this statement there is an underlying emphasis on the soul of the fetus. Comments were also made regarding the parents who underwent abortion, blamed by some members as being full of guilt/moral failings (*đầy tội lỗi*). In one graphic example a member speaks directly to parents who have or are thinking about having an abortion, asking them to contemplate the pain of the child, to have pity, and to understand. Such sentiments are followed with graphic pictures of fetuses on operating tables burnt from saline solution. At the same time forgiveness is asked for those

responsible and a willingness to give sympathy pervades the commentary. Online discussion through social networking pages, such as *Facebook*, also create the potential for heightened conversations among Vietnamese about this challenging subject matter, with many online chats discussing abortion and the wider implications in Vietnamese society.

Moral judgement and abortion in Vietnam are closely aligned. It is for many a deeply distressing, shameful and painful experience, and one which is exacerbated by the questionable social status of the fetus and lack of social recognition of the suffering endured by Vietnamese women. Such suffering simply does not fit into the “dream of a society in which birth, as everything else, takes place in a planned, controlled and rational manner” (Gammeltoft 2006:131). Gammeltoft powerfully highlights this often silent suffering in the face of a society which remembers more public forms of sacrifice:

Vietnamese public culture stresses heroism and self-sacrifice for the greater social good, while tending to ignore the more mundane suffering that circumstance and the contingencies of life may produce... In dominant moral opinion, there is nothing heroic about the suffering that young people’s experience of abortion may generate. (Ibid:139)

Abortion in Vietnam is far from a noble endeavour and the statues which are raised for revolutionary martyrs are not raised for the aborted dead or their parents. Along with this, an important aspect of the moral devaluation associated with abortion stems from how the act of ancestor worship impacts on conceptions of life after death.

As noted earlier in this research, in death, not all ancestors are equal. Foregoing proper funeral and burial rituals (such as where the deceased’s body is absent) constitutes a bad death which creates the potential for wandering ghosts (see Gustafsson 2007:62-65; Kwon 2006:12; Malarney 2002:179). These ancestors roam hungry, hellishly caught between the world of the living and that of the dead. Unless appeased by appropriate offerings and ritual attendance, the living cannot expect assistance from wandering ghosts, but rather ill-luck and misfortune. With this in mind, the aborted dead sit uneasily in Vietnamese conceptions of the dead. They are not yet born and yet, in the words of one informant, “a soul and spirit remain”.

After an abortion, ritually appeasing and remembering fetuses can be problematic for Vietnamese women and their families, who are often concerned with the well-being and future reproduction of their family members in the face of “powerful memories” (Gammeltoft 2010:71; see also Nguyen and Liamputtong 2007) and the potential haunting of the living by the departed fetus. Gammeltoft (ibid:66) notes that many of her informants in Hanoi articulated the desire for a proper burial of their fetus after an abortion. Despite this, up to half decided to leave burial rituals to hospital staff, in part encouraged by senior family members to enable the

process of separating the fetus from the larger extended family of ancestors in the home (ibid:67-69). How then can young Vietnamese women deal with their grief in regards to having an abortion? Are there ways to access a community of others to share their experiences? In what ways can they continue a relationship with the fetus? It is the argument of the following section that some Vietnamese women use NTO to express regret and grief, to continue a relationship with the deceased fetus through conversation and online offerings, and to join in a wider community of online kin.

### ***No appropriate words: sharing grief and accessing support***

The heart and my spirit are the most important thing and I could not feel them. It's hard to talk about this with friends and family in Vietnam. It is because of our Asian culture. There are no appropriate words to describe my loss and I kept the abortion secret except for one friend. In Vietnamese culture, women are not allowed to get pregnant with their boyfriend before marriage. If they want to keep their child they have to get married as soon as possible. Having an abortion is the worst thing. (Thuy, 23 year old female. Translation)

For Thuy, a young student from Da Nang in central Vietnam, her recollections of abortion brought a deep feeling of remorse, made difficult by silence. For a long time it was an experience that she knew was exceedingly challenging to share with others as it would bring judgement and scorn, the type illustrated in the quote at the beginning of this chapter. Her boyfriend did not want to continue their relationship and even her friend could not really understand.

She had learnt of the online memorial site in a newspaper story about a young student who had committed suicide, but it was not something which particularly interested her. “I knew about *Nghĩa Trang Online* a long time before I created a tomb but I didn’t really care. It was not relevant to me”. After the abortion however, Thuy’s difficulty in expressing her loss was profound, as were the feelings of wrongdoing. It was this feeling of remorse common to many Vietnamese after an abortion (see Gammeltoft 2010:58) which weighed heavily on Thuy, and it was a motivating factor for her entry into NTO. Thuy was not alone as immediacy was given to the online memorialisation of fetuses soon after NTO began, as if the floodgates had been opened on a silence long sustained. On learning of NTO through newspapers, family and friends, several members talked of feeling saddened in some cases that they did not know of NTO earlier. It is a sentiment shared between those who visited the section and expressed to the fetuses themselves. “I read of this website in the newspaper! So I, your mother, have come

to make a grave for you” (translation) states one member. “Your mother knows of this site through online media. I felt indescribable joy when I realised this would be the home for you, young child. It has somewhat lessened my remorse” (translation) writes another.



**Image 12: A tomb created in Nghiã Trang Online for two fetuses.** One tomb is for a fetus sixteen weeks in age, the other seven weeks. Online offerings which have been posted on the tomb include: teddy bears and other toys, cakes, milk bottles, candles, images of buses and trains, shoes, flowers, and cartoon characters. (Image [www.nhomai.vn](http://www.nhomai.vn))

The creation of an online tomb was the beginning of members’ communication with their fetus and other site users. As one participant observed, “there are many who can remember my child here”, which enfolded the dead and the living into a wider community. For Thuy, who created an online tomb for her fetus, the knowledge of others using the site was central to her time spent online:

Maybe what I have done is to share my sadness and my happiness with others. Though we have not met we understand each other. We can release inner feelings that cannot be shared with anybody else. After I made the mistake I really came to understand the feelings of those around me much more. I cared more about other people. On the tomb I can care and share the pain that other people suffered and I can understand more about them and make more friends. (Translation)

Thuy had discovered people with whom she could share her feelings and experiences. They did not know the deceased but they had “suffered the same category of loss... [and] have similar feelings” (Walter 1996:18).

*Nghĩa Trang Online* enabled a community for Thuy, which she felt she could not find otherwise. She had had no physical site at which to burn votive paper offerings, neither a family altar nor a cemetery. Her silence had effectively severed the possibility of advice and supporting words from family or friends, and the stigma of abortion meant that such succour may not have been afforded to her if she had spoken. She was, in a sense, “disembedd(ed) from place, from tradition and from kin” (ibid:15). NTO provides a home for her fetus; the digital candles and online offerings, every pixel she used to create the online tomb, form a new tradition of online remembrance. Through the sharing of stories, her voice joins with others, her online kin, and through interaction with other members, and communication with and offerings to the fetus (which will be discussed in the following sections) the departed is being purposefully worked back to have a durable biography among the living.

### **Continuing a relationship online**

Within NTO, communication with the fetus forms an integral part of the sustained relationship, as the fetus is told about everything from money concerns, work life, education, romantic relationships, friends and family, grocery shopping, arguments, and national holidays. One informant stated that she would tell the fetus if she and her partner (the fetus’s father) were having a difficult time and would pray to the fetus for help. Others felt that the fetus had good and bad days exactly like them.

One member demonstrates communication about the past and present, while weaving the fetus into everyday experiences. I quote several passages (which took place over a number of weeks) from NTO between a mother (Phuong) and her fetus, to illustrate the way she incorporates her fetus into a continuing relationship:

I love you child! After you died I cried every day. I cried because I missed you and I felt sorry for your father, who is also hurting. I cried because I felt it was my entire fault. I love you child. Child, I still love your father and I want to make him happy. But I am not confident to love again and I am afraid he will suffer. When we broke up it was very difficult for your mother and I am afraid to re-live that experience now. Please child, how will I survive this? What can I do now?

Hello, my dear. Are you scared of the rain from the storm today? I intended to go out and borrow some clothing for a work opportunity but how will it go in such bad weather? I met your father yesterday. We are still angry about many things. I thought things would change for the best between us but it never seems to change.

Hi, my dear. I had a memorable work interview today although there was heavy rain in the morning. It stopped raining, and then it was sunny again. This made me happy and glad. I wanted to share this happiness with you.



Hi, my dear. Are you healthy or not? Your grandfather is sick again. He has been health checked and treated at the hospital. Could you bless him to not be sick anymore and get healthy? Please bless your grandmother as well. I love you. (All above quotes translated)

Embedded in these seemingly routine messages, underlying themes emerge. The fetus becomes a silent listener but is also asked to look after the sick grandfather, and asked questions in relation to Phuong's changing attitudes to the father<sup>56</sup>. The fetus is brought into the everyday life and family through stories of work opportunities and observations of the weather, and there is a clear desire for the fetus to intervene and be present. Far from being a passive bystander, Phuong's fetus is profoundly incorporated into her life narrative and asked to be a continuing part of it.

Along with communication which embedded the fetus into their life, members also expressed loss and regret to the fetus, apologised and asked for forgiveness, while also explaining the reasons for the abortion. Fetuses were urged to understand the parent's situation and to empathise with how torturous the abortion was for them. One member states: "Can anyone understand the pain one feels when one is handed medication and kills their child? It was the most painful day of your mother's life" (translation). Another writes: "Now all I have is one grave on a network compared to a happy family" (translation). The expression of grief communicated to the fetus radiated among the postings of those who visited the online memorial:

Forgive your mother child! These past ten years I have not been able to forget. I cannot forgive myself that I made such a decision at a young age. This mistake cannot be accepted. Even though your mother and father now have a new life, your mother cannot abandon her past guilt. I will always love you! You are always in my heart and in my mind! (Truc, 29 year old female)

I am so sorry I have taken away the right of the child. I cannot justify my actions. I was not brave enough to give birth at the time. Please forgive your senseless and cruel mother. I apologise a thousand times because I did not keep you inside of me. The greatest happiness was your life, but now I have lost you child. I am so selfish and

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<sup>56</sup> At times the connection between parents and their fetus was continued after the parents ended their own relationship. As noted by a moderator of the site:

Many people they fall in love and then have a baby. But after this they do not want it anymore and so they go to the hospital [for the abortion]. After that they break up and they make a tomb for their baby where they still come to visit. They have new relationships and they don't visit the tomb together but every day they come to their baby's tomb, they talk to their baby, they say that Daddy and Mummy don't love again but you are result of Daddy and Mummy's love and so Daddy and Mummy will come to NTO to visit you every day. They come and light candles, and sometimes the new lover of either will come and visit the baby.

heartless. I love you more than everything I have in life. Peace child! (Kim, 21 year old female)

I love you child! I am sorry for not keeping you my child. I do not know what to say, so please just remember that I apologise a thousand times. Please do not blame me for this. It has been many years and I have had to repress this pain. I have had to bury this pain in my heart. Your father abandoned me but you should not blame your father! I love you! I believe that you still remember your mother and I am still tormented by what happened to me. Please do not be angry with your mother. (Mai, 26 year old female. All above quotes translated.)

There is intensity in these expressions and a sense of a voice finally opening up. For a number of informants it was the first time in a long time, if ever, they had been able to express such sentiments, which primarily related to guilt and forgiveness. It is possible, in some cases of the 700 tombs, that these expressions may actually *enhance* or *extend* grief (see Klass 2006:844-845; Stroebe and Schut 2005:482), that these continued relationships encouraged by the very existence of the website and its community, prolong what may have abated more swiftly in the silence. However, informants in this research have all reported overwhelmingly positive associations in their site participation and so I would argue that where grief is *engaged with* more comprehensively, and articulated more clearly—as resonates in the above passages—there would be a mitigation of grief.

As well as providing a forum for grief, there is another aspect of NTO that works towards lessening the severity of grief: the facilitation of online offerings, which are believed to have a real influence on the life of the fetus. For many Vietnamese who participated in this research, online offerings were an important component in the relationship with their fetus. Members primarily sent online offerings which expressed a concern for the soul (*linh hồn*) of the fetus and its subsequent journey in the other world. Informants often stated that the fetuses were too small, weak and confused to comprehend their after-death journey and NTO provided a direct connection where they could assist the fetus.



**Image 13: Online offerings for fetuses** (top left to bottom right). The online offerings include: towels and clothing; playschool toys; clothing for a young girl; clothing for a young baby which reads ‘I love Dad’; umbrellas; wooden children’s toys; a glass of milk; dessert including fruit and ice cream; Vietnamese spring rolls, and a milk bottle. (Images [www.nhomai.vn](http://www.nhomai.vn))

Online offerings then have practical applications for the deceased and everything from toys, milk, handbags, pancakes, toothpaste, cubby-houses and croissants were uploaded. Members desired to provide them real physical comfort: baby milk and a dazzling assortment of food were offered to assuage hunger; warm clothes to thwart the cold (and which should be changed on a regular basis); rattles and other toys for entertainment and play; beds, sheets and pillows for a comfortable sleep (see Image 12 and 13). As stated by Hanh, who created a tomb several years after her abortion:

When I'm on NTO I feel that the baby can hear my words, they understand, so I also think they receive what I give them. It is important to send to NTO to feed them so they are not hungry. When I think that they need to play and exercise well, I'll find toys for them. When it's cold I'll post offerings that will keep the baby warm. In the heat I also need to send the correct clothes. It is particularly important that you do not get sick in the cold. It is my desire to do this and make my baby forgive me.

These words were said as Hanh displayed online offerings on her computer: baby clothing (dresses, pants, skirts); milk (both fresh and formula); food (Vietnamese rice, noodle and chicken dishes, as well as ice cream and chocolate); and food and objects associated with important Vietnamese holidays, such as the Lunar New Year. As stated by a moderator of the online tomb for fetuses, online offerings were created because the members “always want the baby to be full like the current life”. Here we see, like previous chapters, an intersection

between the medium of the Internet and ancestor worship in Vietnam. Just as members noted that online offerings could be sent to their dead family members and friends, so too, several Vietnamese women felt these images could be sent to the unborn.

Recently, while idling away time on *Facebook*, Thuy asked where I had been as my online identity had seemed to disappear. Into a world of books, I told her, speaking about writing up my research. She said that she had thought of me and my research questions to her recently after she had clicked on a personalised *Facebook* video feature:

The music started and I did not even worry about what I was going to see. It did not occur to me. Then suddenly there are pictures of me as a child, and then as I am getting older. Then there is an image of tears which I created at the time [referring to the abortion]. I felt so empty after this and I really missed my child. I am not a good mother and I regret it very much but I am the mother of the child. (Translation)

Being the “mother of the child” was for Thuy something that would always remain, alongside her grief. The memorial site provides a place for her to perform her grief, and a home for her fetus. It enables a new tradition of online offerings where she and other Vietnamese women can continue to care for their fetuses in death, and a community of kin who listen and respond to each other’s voice, enfranchising their grief.

## Conclusion

In Vietnam, remembering a fetus after an abortion is a profoundly challenging act as it is tied into concerns about sexual activities of the unmarried and of youth, and the fetus does not fit comfortably into the pervasive cosmology of Vietnamese relationships with the dead. The mother’s grief becomes disenfranchised and the question of whether to remember the fetus or not, is a complex one. This chapter has argued that on NTO Vietnamese women can enfranchise their grief through interactions with a wider audience of members who have undergone a similar loss, and through continuing relationships with the departed. Communication with the fetus ranges from the minutiae, to the challenging matter of what led to the abortion, and these conversations join online offerings to guide the fetus in their other world existence. Through this, a durable biography is created both by mothers and other members and the deceased is meaningfully woven back into the survivor’s life. Together these experiences demonstrate that for some Vietnamese, online memorialisation helps to challenge the silence and stigmatisation of abortion, “the grief that cannot be shared”<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>57</sup> Quote from informant.

## Chapter 7. A country of (online) memory: remembering and forgetting in Vietnam

*Today I visited the Ho Chi Minh City Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery (Nghĩa trang Liệt sĩ Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh). It was a particularly important day of remembrance for Vietnamese as it marked the 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary for War Invalids and Martyr's Day. All down the street red and yellow Vietnamese flags hung from shops, businesses, and living quarters. The cemetery was blazing with sounds and life, it was joyful, not sombre, with partners and children walking together and whole families feasting with the dead; literally, families were sitting on the grass next to graves and eating lunch. They yelled out to me with big smiles as I walked past. There were groups of immaculately dressed men and women soldiers, lined up with incense in hand. The graves were cleaned, impeccable and flowers were in bloom everywhere. (Fieldnotes)*

All nations have a national memory enshrined in official history as “the past.” Yet collective memory of a nation is always selective in that it involves the public remembrance of certain events and experiences, and the active forgetfulness of others. (Schwenkel 2011:128)

### Introduction

This chapter examines the remembering of revolutionary martyrs (*liệt sĩ*) in Vietnam—those who fought against the Americans and other countries involved in the American/Vietnam War—and contrasts this with the forgetting of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in South Vietnam. The chapter brings many themes outlined throughout the thesis together, such as community and the expression of emotion online, and folds them into larger socio-political questions of who is, and who is not, remembered and commemorated in society. It then teases out some of the ways the medium of the Internet has created a new form of memorialisation previously unavailable to some Vietnamese.

The chapter will initially explore collective memory as espoused by Halbwachs (1992 [1952]). Halbwachs noted that far from being private and internal, our collective memories of the past are shaped by the societies we live in and the cultural scripts which we participate in. It will then be noted, that while collective memory is exceedingly useful, several scholars have argued that *collective remembrance* more adequately describes how individuals and groups think about the past and transmit it. Following on, the Internet will be examined as a medium where both

remembering and forgetting take place, with examples from recent work pertaining to the online memorialisation of children killed through ‘euthanasia’ during Nazi Germany’s Holocaust, and research which demonstrates the forms of nationalistic discourse and forgetting cemented online in regards to the Chilean War.

From here, the chapter examines how young Vietnamese in particular are using social networking sites to remember and commemorate revolutionary martyrs. In contemporary Vietnam, remembrance for revolutionary martyrs is highly visible, as they are employed as a symbol of national defiance, strength and unity. During fieldwork, there were two occasions in particular when I noted Vietnamese used *Facebook* to remember the war dead and fallen soldiers of Vietnam’s recent history. These consisted of National Day on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September and the Anniversary of War Invalids and Revolutionary Martyrs’ Day on the 27<sup>th</sup> of July<sup>58</sup>. I will also examine how some members of NTO use the online memorial to remember and give tribute to revolutionary martyrs.

Lastly the chapter will address public forgetting relating to Vietnamese who contributed to the Second Republic and the ARVN during the American/Vietnam War. In Vietnam there is exceedingly limited remembrance of the ARVN and this has been profoundly challenging for family members left behind. The public face of the ARVN in Vietnam has also been eradicated with war graves, statues and other forms of commemoration stripped from public view. Online however, new forms of memorialisation subvert and challenge the forgetting of the ARVN, and give a possible form of remembrance not easily attained offline in the country.

## **Remembering in society**

With the burgeoning of memory-related literature, known as the memory boom, history is being examined from the vantage point of memory—something not solid and constant but rather in flux and changing (Klein 2000; Nora 1989; Olick 2009; Recuber 2012; Roediger and Wertsch 2008; Winter 2000; Winter 2006; Winter and Sivan 1999; see for introduction Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy 2011:3-63). Halbwachs (1992 [1952]), a French sociologist from the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, observed that memory was fundamentally a *social process*. Terming it ‘collective memory’, such memory does not spring out ready-made; rather memories are sustained, created and transformed by our institutions and families, our place of birth and our

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<sup>58</sup> Reunification Day (*Ngày Thống nhất*) on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April was another such occasion, but for the purpose of this chapter I contain my analysis to the preceding two dates.

underlying cultural scripts. We are in essence *socialised* with collective memory and the acts we do in remembrance also in part solidify it. Halbwachs writes:

It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories... It is in this sense that there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection. (Ibid:38)

As seminal as Halbwach's concept is 'collective memory' has come under scrutiny by scholars who have noted such a term is under-theorised and little reflected upon (Berliner 2005; Kansteiner 2002; Olick and Robbins 1998; Winter 2006; Winter and Sivan 1999). Wertsch and Roediger (2008:318) remark: "Collective memory is a term that is widely used, yet poorly understood in contemporary academic discourse". Winter (2006:4) concurs: "The loose usage of the term 'collective memory'—framed to mean virtually anything at all—in every corner of the arts and humanities, has persuaded me to abandon the term whenever possible". It becomes a "nonparadigmatic, transdisciplinary, centerless enterprise" (Olick and Robbins 1998:106). Berliner (2005) observes in his exploration of anthropological discourses about memory, that the term used broadly by anthropologists has come to represent theories previously illuminated through identity and culture. In this sense, "the current usage of the notion by anthropologists can be a source of confusion as it tends to encompass many features of the notion of culture itself" (ibid:198). Through this burgeoning enterprise a proliferation of terms relating to memory arise. Olick and Robbins (1998:112) note that those uneasy with the concept of collective memory find in its stead a multitude of others, including "official memory, vernacular memory, public memory, popular memory, local memory, family memory, historical memory, cultural memory etc". Such terms are often about differentiating themselves from the blank statement of 'collective memory' which emphasises the collective over the individual.

In their introduction to a volume concerned with war and subsequent remembering and forgetting, Winter and Sivan (1999:9) argue that 'collective remembrance' is a more fertile way of exploring the concept traditionally assigned to 'collective memory'. They note that in doing so they circumvent simplifications of such terminology, while arguing that it is impossible for 'collective memories' to "come over an entire population when a set of past events is mentioned" (ibid). Similarly Winter (2006:184) in research surrounding remembering discourses and the First World War gives the example of film in culture, arguing that different members of an audience have varied reactions to it; they come from unique ages and histories, with diverse backgrounds. Conflating a narrative in a film or a monument on a street to

‘collective memories’ shared by all within a culture in this sense does not adequately describe how memory is produced and envisioned. Rather, “different cohorts have different memories and draw on different representations which are not identical. They are exposed to various narratives of the past” (ibid). One medium in which individuals are now being exposed to “various narratives to the past” is through the Internet.

### **Remembering and forgetting online**

In recent years there has been a proliferation of scholarship concerned with how remembrance is being shaped and contested through online archives, museums, visitor pages, social networking sites and online memorials (Barrier 2006; Bernal 2013; De Bruyn 2011; Devgan 2013; Drinot 2011; Foot, Warnick and Schneider 2006; Jarvis 2010; 2011; Kaelber 2010; Marschall 2013; Recuber 2012; Socolovsky 2004). Kaelber (2010:13), whose research is situated between online and offline sites of commemorations for children killed through ‘euthanasia’ in Germany, Austria, Poland and the Czech Republic before and during the Second World War, argues that the Internet has profoundly changed the way these events can be remembered. Children were among the 300,000 victims who were killed during this time in what was “the systematic mass murder of the disabled” (ibid). Among the multiple ‘special children’s wards’ which undertook the killing of children was the Dobrany Psychiatric Facility in the Czech Republic which does not mention or acknowledge the facility’s past involvement in the ‘euthanasia’ of children. This is despite historical evidence which implicates the facility: “The hospital administration denies the existence of these crimes and their victims, including those who died in the ‘special childrens’ ward’, to this day” (ibid:31).

Kaelber argues that the Internet can provide alternative sites of remembering, which raise issues and bring accountability to perpetrators of past acts. In this sense, the medium of the Internet allows for a diversity of voices, an undermining of hegemonic voices and a voice for those otherwise silenced. Kaelber comments:

In all these countries, before the emergence of virtual traumascapes, the commemoration of ‘children’s euthanasia’ crimes and their victims typically occurred only in the geographical vicinity of the crime, if it occurred at all. Outside academic circles it was sometimes difficult to find historical information about victims and events, and participation in acts of commemoration often remained a local affair. The arrival of new digital technologies allowed people from afar access to information about local events that were previously only reported in local newspapers, if they were reported at all... For some of these people, information provided online may be their first exposure to the topic of Nazi ‘euthanasia’. (Ibid:20)



While noting online and offline remembering overlap, Kaelber argues that online resources do create an alternative medium for remembering. In the case of an online museum with a separate online section for children killed through ‘euthanasia’, Kaelber writes that this uniqueness includes, when compared to offline museums: easier access, navigation, search and update functionality, language translations, as well as extra content including online links (ibid:29). Online remembering in this case aims to bring justice to the children killed and to hold the perpetrators accountable in a “memory war”; it is a memory war that is still unfolding (ibid:31). In the case of the Dobrany Psychiatric Facility, online sites have given voice to these historical events, refusing to allow the erasure of the past (ibid:31-33).

While the Internet allows for alternative sites for remembering, it can also be a place where national memories and racism are cemented, where hatred and abuse are all too prevalent, and where offline forms of remembrance carry over online (Drinot 2011; Uimonen 2003). Online interactions can become a form of “a virtual war that reflects real tensions; tensions that, ultimately, express broader aspirations and anxieties” (Drinot 2011:382). Drinot, in his research on memory discourses surrounding the TV show *Epopéya* based on the Chilean War, interrogates the way Bolivians, Chileans and Peruvians contribute to a discussion relating to the mini-series on *YouTube*. The site is crowded with commentary by hundreds of members from the countries mentioned. Several themes become clear including “the notion that the outcome of the war reflects the inherent superiority of the victors and the inherent inferiority of the defeated” and “the way in which contributors... racialize the war as a war between superior and inferior races” (ibid:375-378). The Internet in this case is not a vehicle for contesting historical remembering, rather it becomes an environment for sustaining memories and encouraging an “ultra-nationalism inflected by virulent racism” (ibid:381). Drinot writes:

Collective memories of the War of the Pacific reflected in the comments on *YouTube* express and reproduce in several interesting ways how the war has been historicized and how this historicization shapes collective memories of it: in particular, the comments reproduce, in varying degrees of alteration, some widely held ideas that are clearly shaped by how academic historians in Peru, Chile and elsewhere have written the history of the conflict. (Ibid:379)

In this sense, while individuals can use the medium of the Internet to raise questions and challenge remembering within societies, it can also be a communication medium for cementing nationalistic discourses and forgetting.

I now turn my attention to how revolutionary martyrs are publically commemorated in Vietnam. I look at the national narratives revolutionary martyrs fit into and some of the ways they are culturally and political appropriated. This will set up a necessary framework for

understanding the online commemoration of revolutionary martyrs in Vietnam and the consequent forgetting of the ARVN.

***Eternally remember (online) our debt to the heroic revolutionary martyrs***

There is a large body of research which has illuminated the way heroic revolutionary martyrs, spirits, ancestors, deities, and historic personas are authenticated, integrated and accepted by the state, and included into larger national narratives in contemporary Vietnam (Dror 2007; Endres 2011; Malarney 2002, 2007; McAllister 2013; Pelley 2002; Pham 2009; Roszko 2010; 2012; Schwenkel 2009; Tai 1995; 1998; see edited collection Tai 2001). In Vietnam a historical perspective and grand narrative is created, one which promotes a proud strong unified people, and juxtaposes Vietnam against a history of aggression from outside forces and the country's resistance<sup>59</sup>. For Vietnamese who remember revolutionary martyrs, their story is one woven into this grand narrative.

The memorialisation of the war dead began early with the Communist Party of Vietnam. As Malarney (2002:173) notes, "the word *liet sĩ* predated the revolution and generally indicated a person who performed a noble deed, but the Communists over time reworked its semantics to exclusively indicate those who died carrying out revolutionary duties". Language used to describe those who have died in warfare denotes their central role in Vietnam. Malarney (2001:50) states: "Communist revolutionaries and soldiers killed during the struggle against the enemy can indeed "suffer death," but officially and in everyday parlance, people say that they have been "sacrificed" (*hi sinh*)". The Communist Party's semantics were a part of the post-war treatment of revolutionary martyrs' families left behind, who became integrated into the narrative of sacred war (*chiến tranh thần thánh*). The difference between ordinary Vietnamese who died in war (the war dead) and those sacrificed as revolutionary martyrs was immense. It was the difference between special treatment at all levels of life including the opportunity for government and private sector work, schooling, medical care, the allotment and rationing of land and food, and pensions for the family. It was the difference between state and public recognition, statues, ceremonies, exclusive cemeteries and national holidays, between a family who had lost a member in warfare, to a martyr's family<sup>60</sup>. It was to a certain extent the

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<sup>59</sup> This is not to state there are not those who challenge such a narrative or use the national narrative for economic and personal gain (see Roszko 2012; Taylor 2002).

<sup>60</sup> There was however a tension in the state's remembrance of revolutionary martyrs among the families left behind. While the state approval and remembrance was beneficial to family members it did not concern the soul of the dead (Malarney 2002:179). Violent deaths during warfare, as previously mentioned, are just the sort to

difference between political and national remembering, and forgetting (ibid:172-177; see also Malarney 2002; 2007). With this background in mind, I now turn to how Vietnamese youth are remembering revolutionary martyrs online, while also embedding them into a larger national narrative.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the fact that Vietnamese youth are living substantially altered lives compared to their predecessors (Bradley 2009; Schwenkel 2006; 2011). Instead of war, suffering, revolution and death, young Vietnamese are enjoying the post economic reforms through consumerist lifestyles, weaving their latest motorbikes through the streets with iPhones and iPads in hand to the hottest gathering spots in town. Historical sites of the American/Vietnam War, including TrúC Bạch Lake where John McCain was shot down and captured by North Vietnamese soldiers in Hanoi, and the Củ Chi Tunnels outside of Ho Chi Minh City where Vietnamese families lived and fought in underground tunnels with the constant threat of death, have become for some younger Vietnamese a place of romance, relaxation, friendship and consumerism (Schwenkel 2006; 2011). These are modern sensibilities clashing with those of their parents' and grandparents' experiences. How then can Vietnamese youth possibly understand the hardship and suffering of those who went before? Bradley (2009:191) observes "for those born after 1975 the war and its meanings are increasingly remote from their consciousness". Instead education, the economy, travelling and latest trends may be more relevant than "their elders' stories about the war" (ibid:191-192). Without refuting this trend of modernity, during fieldwork many younger informants expressed the desire to remember those now gone in relation to warfare in Vietnamese history. One particular venue of remembrance was through the social networking site *Facebook*.

During fieldwork in Vietnam I created both a NTO and *Facebook* account and for the most part informants who used NTO had a *Facebook* account as well. I initially used *Facebook* for its chat function with NTO members, but over time I 'friended' many Vietnamese on the social networking site. This included members from NTO, neighbours and others who I met during the 12 months of which there were a great many (roughly 85 *Facebook* friends by the time I returned home). *Facebook* is the most visited social networking site in the country. According to a recent source: "94% of Vietnamese Internet users have a *Facebook* account and more than

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produce hungry ghosts, malignant ancestors caught between the world of the living and that of the dead. While the state primarily recognised revolutionary martyrs as those to whom remembrance and respect were due, "for the dead soldier's living relatives, their dead relations had a different ontology. Their bodies were dead, but their souls lived on, and similar to all other deaths, the living were obligated to perform the ritual acts needed to transform the person's soul into the other world" (ibid; see also Endres and Lauser 2012).

half use it actively (at least once per month). Although several other social networks have large user bases, none have achieved a comparably high level of active usage”<sup>61</sup>.

While I had initially wanted to stay within the confines of NTO for the research, as time went on I realised the specific ways both NTO and *Facebook* were incorporated into the remembering of revolutionary martyrs. On two public days in Vietnam I noticed many Vietnamese who had participated in the research creating, liking and sharing *Facebook* feeds in regards to revolutionary martyrs in Vietnam. The first was on National Day (*Ngày Quốc khánh*) on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, which marks the date in which the Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was orated by Ho Chi Minh in Ba Dinh Square, Hanoi, in 1945. The second occurred on the 27<sup>th</sup> of July on the 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of War Invalids and Revolutionary Martyrs Day (*Ngày Thương Binh Liệt Sĩ*). This is a day of remembrance for those who have been maimed or died during warfare for the country of Vietnam. Observing this powerful online presence of remembering was the catalyst for this chapter.

On National Day, many Vietnamese changed their *Facebook* profile image (also known as avatar) to the Vietnamese national flag. It was a demonstration of national unity (see Image 14). One *Facebook* group noted in regards to the transformation:

This is a testament to the unity of our people in general as well as of the Internet network of Vietnam and the Vietnam youth in particular. Let the whole world see once again, Vietnam's solidarity. Let us get together in common efforts for the best profile image! (Translation)

Along with a change in profile images, Vietnamese expressed their respect for the country and those killed in warfare. The comments displayed national pride and respect, accompanied with images of Vietnamese laying wreathes on the graves for revolutionary martyrs. Sentiments included “The Fatherland is grateful to all of you! (*Tổ quốc tri ân các anh!*)”, “Candles of gratitude” (*Ngọn nến tri ân*) and the well-established saying: “Eternally remember our debt to the heroic revolutionary martyrs” (*Đời đời nhớ ơn các Anh hùng Liệt sỹ*). Embedded in the conversation on *Facebook* and the images more widely were the concepts of sacrifice and suffering, with images of elderly Vietnamese women distraught before the graves of their children and husbands (see Image 15).

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61 <http://www.bdg-asia.com/vietnams-top-social-media-sites-2014> accessed 11/14/2014



Tôi ♥ Việt Nam.



National Day to all Vietnamese!!!



I love VIỆT NAM so much and I'm proud to be Vietnamese. Vietnam has the right to be a free and independent country—and in fact it is so already. And thus the entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their independence and liberty.



I love my country Vietnam, very emotional. ♥

**Image 14. Profile changes on National Day** (top to bottom; translated). Within this *Facebook* feed several profile images have been changed to the Vietnamese national flag. The third profile image is of former revolutionary and president of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh. In this image he is standing at the podium in Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi while reading the Declaration of Independence for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This particular *Facebook* user has quoted the iconic words of Ho Chi Minh at the end of the speech. The other comments speak of being emotional and of a love for the country.

Similarly, on the 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary for War Invalids and Revolutionary Martyrs Day, a member writes about the revolutionary martyrs who had fallen for their country:

Millions of people of the State fell to defend the independence, freedom and territorial integrity of this nation... Vietnamese, we've never surrendered to awesome powers... This day for war invalids and martyrs commemorates in entirety those who have fallen since the independence and freedom of the Vietnamese people. For the younger generation of Vietnam, live worthy of the homeland and the country! (Translation)

In this, social networking messages—engaged with by millions on a daily basis—are being tailored to the Vietnamese youth, often by the youth themselves, encouraging them to remember the fallen soldiers and to live up to their predecessors. One informant commented to me:

We thank the heroes of the country because they lived and fought bravely to protect the country which is very dear to us. They let us live in peace. We do this on the Internet because 02/9 is National Day of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This day President Ho Chi Minh read the Declaration of Independence... I will change my image and good thing to do when all vn [Vietnamese] peoples do that.

It was a sentiment established by numerous Vietnamese during fieldwork, and one encountered in NTO as well.



**Image 15: Remembering the fallen on Facebook.** On the left is a heroic mother lighting incense for her deceased family members. On the right Vietnamese youth create the country of Vietnam out of candles, the word in the middle being ‘I’ with a love heart followed by the country. (Images from Facebook)

NTO includes a specific section for the remembering of revolutionary martyrs. The Revolutionary Martyrs Cemetery (*Nghĩa trang liệt sỹ*) includes heroic martyrs (*anh hùng liệt sỹ*), revolutionary veterans (*lão thành cách mạng*) and state officials (*cán bộ nhà nước*). Key among those memorialised are revolutionary martyrs from the American/Vietnam War. It is by no means the largest online memorial in NTO, with 378 tombs created for those within compared to 1600 in the General Cemetery for example, but it is not insignificant in the wider discourse of remembering. The site also includes information concerning war martyr cemeteries throughout the country.

The comments by NTO members reflect values of respect and pride, of reverence for those sacrificed for the country. Within the memorial, revolutionary martyrs are noted to have been sacrificed with comments from members which speak of profound reverence, veneration and gratitude. It was these Vietnamese, as members pointed out, who were responsible for the independence, freedom and sovereignty of the country. Within the site members would also ‘light’ candles and incense, and send online offerings of flowers and wreathes.

The Revolutionary Martyrs Cemetery allowed an online environment for quite extraordinary interactions by family and those involved in the remembering and search for remains of revolutionary martyrs. On one particular revolutionary martyrs tomb in NTO for example, the creator of the tomb (the revolutionary martyr’s son) talks of the difficulties in locating the body of his father. It is a conversation which stretches for several years, as the member notes his visits to revolutionary martyr’s cemetery on the key dates noted in this chapter and also thanks NTO for being able to facilitate certain memorial practices. He states: “every year on this day,

Vietnam is a grateful country to the heroic revolutionary martyrs. I remember the sacrifices of the country for future generations” (translation). Pictures are included of commemoration parades and images are used through the memorial to express feelings of grief and remembrance, such as emoticons that represent a person crying. Images of flowers, incense and candles are posted through the memorial page and over one thousand candles have been lit for his father by other users. Throughout the message of veneration permeates the conversations and commemorations.

Throughout the tomb the member reminds others that it is an important place where remembrance can be carried out for the dead, but that the offline remains central to remembering and appeasing the deceased. The member also uses NTO to update members on the search of his father’s remains, and to commemorate the day of his death. Even though he speaks of some comfort, his comments also express the pain of his father’s remains being far away in a location not known. He is certainly not alone in these interactions, with many other members bringing up similar concerns. At times phone numbers are even left by members, so that those with any information concerning the deceased body, can directly contact the member.

Informants noted that the Internet was a productive space to disseminate respect for revolutionary martyrs. Kim, introduced earlier in this work, noted: “I think the Internet is a good way to show respect and connect people to each other... There has been many soldiers who have died on the battlefield. I’m really grateful that Vietnamese always remember their merit and we never forget things which heroes did for our country. They are worthy of the ultimate respect”. Kim expanded on this:

Vietnamese, they want to commemorate heroes and they want to educate everybody... If you are family of the soldiers lost in the war then you are lucky if you can find them on the Internet. We can use this site [NTO] to share them with the public. Vietnamese want to share all and we hope everybody can know VN culture, know about the heroes and their sacrifice. It is important to describe those who died in the war and their labour.

Part of Kim’s reason for remembering revolutionary martyrs was her family’s own connection with the Vietnamese Communist Party during the American/Vietnam War. Her uncles, both young men at the time, had been in the war. Kim on one occasion showed me several photos of war monuments she had taken when visiting parts of Vietnam, and noted:

We remember and learn about the French and American wars through books, newspapers, television and the Internet and through the words of previous generations that experienced, lived and fought for today's freedom... We also organize events at schools, universities, history museums to remind other youth to remember the sacrifice of previous generations.

For Kim, NTO was one more avenue for recall among a wider body of remembering acts concerning revolutionary martyrs in Vietnam.

While these responses in NTO and *Facebook* are in sync with larger national narratives and collective remembering, the voices online were by no means homogenous. Some Vietnamese were critical of remembering revolutionary martyrs through *Facebook*, finding it distasteful, superficial, and in the words of an informant Dung, “just showing off”. Dung noted:

I also have seen it on fb [changing *Facebook* images on National Day] for a long time but I didn’t care. I have thought that it’s really ridiculous, bullshit. Maybe they do it because of patriotism but they don’t show it truly, seriously. Most of them do it with the same reason as joining a new fashion trend... Heightening National pride is so good but they are overdoing it.

As stated by Thao, who was introduced earlier in this work as an English teacher in the outer districts of Ho Chi Min City:

In my opinion, *Facebook* is a social network for enjoying, chatting with friends, sharing your thinking, it is just for fun. Our countries martyrs are worth to be highly respected. Will you post your martyrs on *Facebook* to get comments or something fun? That is why I don’t think it is good to remember like this on *Facebook*.

For these individuals online remembering was distasteful to their own forms of remembering, while the remembering of revolutionary martyrs in itself was not.

Through *Facebook* and NTO, Vietnamese are remembering revolutionary martyrs, and in doing so, they are also disseminating a wider narrative: that of Vietnamese resisting foreign aggression. However, as this chapter hopes to evoke, where there is remembering forgetting is also present, through powerful forms of silence and destruction (Marschall 2006; Recuber 2010; Schwenkel 2009; 2011; Winter and Sivan 1999). While talking to informants in this research, there was extremely limited mention of “the other side”. For those soldiers who fought and died in the ARVN a regulated NTO cemetery section did not await.

The South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) was near invisible in the online remembering described above. In a similar way to Drinot’s (2011) research mentioned previously, the online was used to cement national remembering, where revolutionary martyrs were the ones who sacrificed their lives for the nation and thus they were worthy of remembrance. The forgetting of the ARVN in contemporary Vietnam effectively relegates them to a subsection of the enemy, invisible ‘puppets’ of the Americans, inconsequential in the long line of those trying to colonise, invade or take the independence and freedom of the country; just another China, another France, another Cambodia, another Japan and America. However, many hundreds of thousands of those who participated in the South Vietnamese Army, whose family members



had fought and died for the RVN (Republic of Vietnam), remained within Vietnam as the war came to a close. For these Vietnamese, remembering their loved one in public and private was an exceedingly challenging act, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, with little exception, allowed no room for their remembrance. The following section argues that online memorialisation is being used by some Vietnamese to contest forgetting and to remember the former ARVN.

Before I continue it is important to note the limitations on researching the remembrance of the ARVN online. When I returned from fieldwork I had a wealth of information relating to the remembrance of revolutionary martyrs in the country, online and offline. I had spoken to many Vietnamese and received an abundance of eager responses, both through online chat, interviews and offline meetings. It was a subject I wanted to write about firstly because there was a wealth of ethnographic insight (in particular Malarney 1996; 2001; 2002; 2007) and when visiting Vietnam I was struck by the towering obelisks in honour of those who had ‘sacrificed themselves for the fatherland’. My interests also stemmed from what I had grown up knowing about the country of Vietnam through my own education and representations of the country in media.

As I continued the research I became acutely aware of the forgetting of those who died for the Republic of Vietnam through academic work (Kwon 2009:69-82; Schwenkel 2006; 2008; 2009; 2011; 2013). Added to this was my predisposition to notice memories of the American/Vietnam War—coming from a country that was ‘the enemy’— and I was inspired to bring this lens to the research. In Tai’s (2001c) afterword to her edited volume, two particular statements resonated strongly with me:

If a community creates and sustains memory, the reverse is also true: memory creates and sustains the community. The creation of a common past is a means of defining what and who belong, and what and who deserve to be consigned to oblivion. Battles over memory are thus battles over how to draw the contours of community, who is to be included, and who is to be excluded from the community thus defined. (Ibid:227)

To be truly comprehensive... the study of commemoration would need to include the dead of the South. To do otherwise risks turning them into the scholarly equivalents of the wandering ghosts of those who, dying unmourned, constantly haunt the living in an attempt to force their way into the consciousness of the community, to be acknowledged as worthy of being remembered if only because they once walked the earth. (Ibid:228)

These issues, of remembering and forgetting, of inclusive and exclusive communities became central when thinking about the contribution of this chapter. To write solely on the online remembrance of revolutionary martyrs in Vietnam would “risk turning” members of the former

ARVN into “the equivalents of wandering ghosts”, and to push against a few powerful voices who had informed the research.

During fieldwork several individuals noted that online memorialisation was being incorporated into remembering the dead of the ARVN. However my selection for this was slim in part because of the delicate nature of the subject in contemporary Vietnam—without a doubt I learnt to be hesitant in raising the topic in interviews. Additionally, the instances of online remembrance in the sites I utilised were small. I managed to speak to three Vietnamese who remembered family from the ARVN online. Another informant helped greatly in pointing me in their direction. I had worried that perhaps there was not enough ethnographic data to be able to complete this final section when I first arrived back in Australia. Nonetheless, it is of high importance to those few Vietnamese who I was able to gain access to, and in this, necessary to this work. The last section hence pertains to how online memorialisation can work towards filling this remembrance void for some Vietnamese, and with humbleness and limitation, comes also much potential for future research.

### **Forgetting in Vietnam: The Army of the Republic of Vietnam**

I first met Tam, a daughter of one key informant, when I was invited to attend an art class she was giving to several students. Tam had lived in France whilst studying art, and living back home again, she seemed very observant of online trends. She spoke of the importance of remembrance for those gone before: “It’s good to be reminded of what they had done but that’s about it. We don’t go on our daily life talking about the dead in those wars anymore”. For her the past opened up wounds and made her feel that going over it too much could hinder future cooperation between countries:

I think if we continue talking about those people and what happened in the past, it’s easy to hate countries and parties involved in the war. There’re so many more issues, so many things that we want to talk about to move this country forward rather than talking about who died.

In this statement we see an ambivalence about remembering and a clear distancing because of it, but Tam also brought a perspective as one who did not have family members remembered as revolutionary martyrs within the country. Rather her family had opposed the Communist Party of Vietnam and fought with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

For ARVN soldiers within Vietnam after the war, economic hardships, re-education camps and discrimination within workforces were to be expected; any trace of their memories were

virtually erased from the public sphere and openness in remembering the fallen was not encouraged. Their monuments were removed, cemeteries uprooted, and large parts of their history erased (Bradley 2009:192; Kwon 2009; Logan and Witcomb 2013:270; Malarney 2001; Schwenkel 2006; 2009). For these Vietnamese there were no monuments, certificates, pageants, or state recognition. It was clearly a case of the fatherland *not* recording a sacrifice, to reverse the well-known proclamation. For these Vietnamese, both overseas and within Vietnam, Bradley writes:

The traces of their own war dead and the former South Vietnamese state have been effaced in Vietnam itself. ARVN soldiers who died in the American war are not buried or commemorated in the war cemeteries constructed by the Vietnamese state. The monuments built to celebrate them by the South Vietnamese government have long been dismantled, and the ARVN cemeteries, many of them razed after 1975, lie in ruins. (Bradley 2009:192; see also Malarney 2001:67)

The hungry ghosts described earlier in this work are a powerful metaphor of these war dead.

Households within Vietnam often display heroic war certificates which indicate to guests the history of their family and their participation in war efforts. However, as Kwon (2009:59) comments “it is also important to bear in mind that absence of certificates can speak as loud as their presence and abundance... The empty wall may equally be an installation for the unspoken, stigmatic history of the family’s wartime collaboration with the wrong side in the conflict”. The remembering of the war dead has ruptured families. Some family members have been remembered over others, some children have been given presence on the family ancestor altar, others hidden from public view (ibid:60). It is an empty wall where silence and the absence of the war dead becomes a narrative of its own. It is also, in a small number of cases, a changing landscape.

Kwon notes that within the interior of the home some Vietnamese are now wanting to bring out into the open images of family members previously hidden (ibid:57-60). This is powerfully expressed by a mother reuniting photos of both of her deceased children on the ancestor altar in central Da Nang. Each of her children fought and died for opposing sides during the war, one for North Vietnam and the other for the South Vietnamese Army. She speaks to her grandchildren about their uncles, her children:

Uncle Kan admired Uncle Tan. Uncle Tan adored the Little Kan. And the two were sick of the thought that they might meet in a battle. I prayed to the goddess of Marble Mountains that my two boys must not meet. The goddess listened. The boys never met. The goddess carried them away in different directions so that they could not meet. The gracious goddess carried them too far. She took my prayer and was worried. To be absolutely sure that the boys don’t meet in this world, the goddess took them to her world, both of them... Today, my two children have met, finally. I won’t be around

with you for much longer. My children, you should look after your uncles. They don't have children, but they have many nephews and nieces. Remember this, my children. Respect your uncles. (Ibid:60)

Respecting the uncles in this sense is to commemorate them and to invite other Vietnamese to remember them as well, in a way which has not previously been easily attainable.

This transformation has also been taking place in part through a willingness to include deceased ARVN members in certain photographic commemorations, albeit in a limited manner. In a particular salient example Schwenkel (2008) demonstrates the uniqueness of a requiem photographic exhibition in the War Remnants Museum, for photojournalists killed during the American/Vietnam War. The display portrayed Americans and Vietnamese fighting from both sides in what became “a transnational memorial that honoured war correspondents regardless of nationality, political orientation, or press affiliation, it presented a united front of journalists who died in pursuit of truth (ibid:40). This in turn produced a form of “public recognition and remembrance of non-revolutionary southern Vietnamese casualties who had been excluded from official historical narratives and state commemorative ceremonies in Vietnam” (ibid). In recent years former South Vietnamese soldiers have also been given the opportunity for remembrance, through work as tour guides in Vietnam (Schwenkel 2009; 2013). Within Vietnam these are rare exceptions to the public silence surrounding those who fought for the ARVN.

### ***Sad thing about Tuan's father: The Army of the Republic of Vietnam online***

We are sitting on low chairs in a small cafe, squashed close together. Phuong tells me about the young woman killed by the bus. From this topic we start to talk about bad deaths in the Vietnamese cosmology and she is hesitant. Phuong speaks of another member I have met, Tuan, and deliberately lowers her voice:

Sad thing about Tuan's father. His father die because of Viet Cong, the VC, they kill him, about 45 years ago, the government kill him. His father was very young... When his family find out the family bury him, so sad in nghĩa trang [cemetery]. And Tuan just 8 months, so young, and his father just 18 years old, so young. They brought the body back to Saigon and buried him in cemetery of army... His father is now in church, he moved body to church. He moved body because the Vietnamese they destroy grave.

Silence. Silence came to mind the first time I heard about Tuan's father. It was the epitome of deaths difficult to memorialise in Vietnam. I learnt very early on in my research in Vietnam that negligence of burial sites and bodies, let alone desecration of graves, was a unbearable

occurrence going against the core belief systems regarding the dead (Gustafsson 2007; Kwon 2006).

Strolling through the parklands of Ho Chi Minh City with Tuan (a middle aged man), a park where often on weekends people would dance, Tuan described how he used NTO to memorialise his father and in essence gave him a home in death that he otherwise did not have: “My mother looking for body, no body, my mother do not bury, no body”. He would light a candle for his father online every day and for him, being Catholic, the candle went “direct to heaven”. The online memorial site was also discovered by Minh, after he had been told about it by a cousin. As a young boy, Minh did not know his father who was an ARVN soldier killed towards the end of the war. Remembering his father online was not overtly political for Minh and he felt that Vietnam as a country was the place he wanted to be. While it made him sad that his father was not included in ceremonies or national remembering he understood why; he joined NTO because his father’s tomb was desecrated. Now he places photos of himself as a baby on his father’s online tomb to demonstrate a relationship with his father. He knows there are many others in a similar situation, without an offline tomb for their family members. There is no separate online section for their family killed during the war, no Revolutionary Martyrs Cemetery as there is in NTO. Rather their parents are remembered in other sections of the memorial: the Common Cemetery, the Buddhist Cemetery, the Catholic Cemetery. On a computer Minh shows me the state of disrepair of the offline cemeteries for ARVN soldiers and notes that “many many families” have since moved the burial remains to new locations.

Within NTO Vietnamese can create tombs for such family members in the knowledge that they are welcomed within the community. In that small café Phuong expanded on this and I quote her words, to demonstrate the openness of NTO in such commemoration:

*Anthony.* In Vietnamese culture the ARVN is a sensitive area. But on NTO does Tuan talk about his father who died?

*Phuong.* Yes, he can share that with other people.

*Anthony.* Does Tuan’s father have a cemetery offline?

*Phuong.* No, his bones are in the church.

*Anthony.* Does Tuan comes to NTO because it is difficult to remember offline? I know that revolutionary martyrs have many ceremonies in Vietnam.

*Phuong.* Yes yes, I see. NTO does not have ceremony for those people [ARVN] but their family can make a tomb for them no problem... When anyone they die they can make grave on NTO.

It was during this interview that Phuong showed me a *YouTube* video of the former Bien Hoa National Army Cemetery (*Nghĩa Trang Quân Đội Quốc Gia Biên Hòa*) on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City. In her words, the cemetery was in “disrepair”. Disrepair is certainly an apt

description with tree roots stretching out from beneath the graves, cracking the headstones. Pictures have been removed identifying the dead, statues have been toppled, destroyed. Some tombs are riddled with bullets. However, while the *YouTube* video itself displays the semi-abandoned and uprooted graves, the fact of the video's existence and that someone thought to walk through the cemetery with a recording device, demonstrates that such silencing is not absolute. The video also has hundreds of thousands of views, and many comments. On the one hand the cemetery is being nationally and physically neglected, and yet online remembering creates an afterlife which allows alternative historical remembering to be disseminated.

One *YouTube* commenter writes of the conflicting nature of their emotions, that they are saddened by the destruction and disrepair, while being aware of the pain and suffering in their recent history:

From childhood I know this is the cemetery, but I do not know anything about the time before the regime. Now I have grown up and have a little understanding about life I learned about where I live now. I also understand the pain of both governments. But I still feel sorry for this cemetery.

There is acceptance in this comment that history and the pain of opposing factions is not absolute, but multifaceted and changing. The comment points to the need for further research, that online videos such as this are causing him to reappraise his prior knowledge. There is an underlying notion in many of the comments that the war is not over, that it continues through the living standards of numerous Vietnamese today. On a train trip from Da Nang to Ho Chi Minh City, I was talking to a man as we watched the green countryside blur outside, and he observed: "Why do we fight all these wars? We fight and we fight but Vietnam is still a very poor country. What have we got from all this war?" It is a question that lingers in the mind of several Vietnamese I spoke with. In Bradley's history of the American/Vietnam War from the vantage point of Vietnamese, he writes:

In truth, there were many Vietnam wars, among them an anti-colonial war with France, a cold war turned hot with the United States, a civil war between North and South Vietnam and among southern Vietnamese, and a revolutionary war of ideas over the vision that should guide Vietnamese society into the post-colonial future. The contest of ideas began long before 1945 and persists to the present day in yet another war, this one of memory over the legacies of the Vietnam wars and the stakes of remembering and forgetting them. (Bradley 2009:2)

The online realm—through social networking sites, online memorials and other online resources—is incorporated into the war on remembering. Just how or if this will implicate offline remembrance within Vietnam in the years to come, is a pertinent question for consideration.

## Conclusion

In countries such as Australia, England, New Zealand and America, it is known as the ‘Vietnam War’. Our collective remembrance of the war, through monuments, commemoration events, documentaries and movies, text books and media, profoundly shapes the way the war is viewed. However even with such remembering what can be left blank is the story of the Vietnamese themselves: millions of families underwent unimaginable suffering which persists in various forms to this day. It is a pervasive omission of the Vietnamese experience which continues to the present; everything from Hollywood films, to Lonely Planet Guide information, continues to propagate American perspectives which at times omit the Vietnamese completely from the experience of war or continuously depicts Vietnamese as the ‘other’, as seen through the American experience (Hixon 2013; Hunt 2010; Kleinen 2003; Laderman 2002). Though it is impossible to ascertain the number of Vietnamese casualties during the war, estimates start at a million and at their highest suggest perhaps 4 million died as a direct consequence of the war (Bradley 2009:144; Gustafsson 2009:125). North, Central and South Vietnamese, parent and child, soldiers from all sides of the conflict: very few Vietnamese were untouched by the violent circumstances and outcome of the conflict.

Online, Vietnamese are now engaging with the remembrance of the war dead, with particular *Facebook* feeds set up to remember revolutionary martyrs and those wounded in the American/Vietnam War. Online memorials such as NTO are also incorporated into such remembering. These are powerful memories with many Vietnamese now incorporating online remembering into wider forms of commemoration and narratives.

Through all this, ghosts remain in Vietnam. Ghosts in the craters left behind through warfare, ghosts in the ancestor portraits which for a very long time have been hidden from public view, ghosts of those Vietnamese whose tombs have been desecrated. Online memorials fulfil a desperate need to create a home for the dead, and in the case of those remembering the ARVN, whilst they cannot read of their ancestors’ stories in a museum, or publically and possibly even privately celebrate their deaths as *worthwhile*, or sacrificial, they can, in front of others online, remember. In doing so they can invite others in similar situations to do the same for their ancestors. Whilst the ARVN cemetery is in disrepair, they can provide the dead an online home. In this way what may at first seem simply a *Facebook* post remembering war dead, instead feeds into larger social and political questions regarding what it means to be remembered or forgotten in contemporary Vietnam.

## Chapter 8. Three worlds: conclusions

### Finding community in NTO

*Outside in the still-warm night air, all is alive with laughter, chattering and the buzz of energy, movement and colour. Vietnamese gather, waiting for friends, family, partners and most importantly, those getting married. It was a thrill to be invited to the wedding, especially with a return home and end to fieldwork approaching. There was a small group of NTO members who I had spent a great deal of time with—on long bus drives to charity events in the Mekong Delta, to all corners of Ho Chi Minh City for dinners that went into the night—and quite a few of them would be there. The wedding was held at an event centre and when walking into the large dining room, I noticed how similar it seemed to the few weddings I had been to back home. Everything was bright white, with flowers and ribbons, and beautifully dressed guests. A main difference presented itself through the evening: speed! The food courses came quickly, beautiful fresh seafood, overflowing noodles, small canapés and the beer. The wedding couple, Hien and Ha moved around to each table to be congratulated and have photos taken. On this occasion instead of the chia buồn (sharing the sadness) which was routine to so many members of NTO, we instead shared happiness and excitement for the future of the newly wedded couple. The music started and various guests were invited up to sing.*

*That is when I saw the parents of Ngoc. They smiled brightly when they recognised me and we hugged. It had been several months since I had met them at their daughter's death day, as described in the vignette that begins this thesis. Seeing them at this joyous occasion filled me with a gentle sadness; they would not go to their daughter's wedding. Now, in writing this, the memory resonates even more, as I have a young baby daughter and the additional empathy of being a parent myself.*

*The wedding couple themselves had met through NTO. Hien had memorialised his mother on the site and Ha a long-time friend. Amongst 60,000 members of Nghĩa Trang Online, the memorialisation of Ngoc was central to their meeting. Separately they had become aware of the parents' loss of their daughter, lighting candles and sharing condolences online with the parents, and then getting to know them and each other. In getting married, they had joined their families together, including their children from previous marriages. There was a large number of people at that wedding whose lives would not have intersected had they not entered the NTO community. Before we dispersed towards the different areas of Ho Chi Minh City,*



*some onwards into the night for karaoke, others to head home, members of NTO joined in for a group photo. It was a joyous moment of reunion with the NTO community.*

As I look at the photo now, several years after leaving Vietnam, it represents not simply a wedding, a union, but also narratives. I see the narratives of Ngoc's parents, connecting with others after the death of their daughter. There is the story of Kim who had lost her father, and that of Phuong communicating with her fetus after an abortion. I feel the narratives of those who remembered friends from suicide and motorcycle accidents, and others who can remember both revolutionary martyrs and family from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. In the photo, community resonates, through fellow members who came together to remember those gone, to express grief, and support each other (and in this case fall in love); all of these vicissitudes are contained within. I also see myself among the faces in the photograph and think of my own research journey. I think of the mud of Sapa hills, of eating sea urchins on a boat off Phu Quoc Island at the opposite end of the country. I think of my first trip to Vietnam with my father and mother. I remember the first time I met up with NTO members, that long ago coffee, and my entry into the community. And laughter: for a year spent on Vietnam soil researching the dead, and being online and offline in Vietnamese lives and deaths for even longer, there was a surprising amount of laughter.

While the research has been challenging, I have received comfort in the relationships formed during the research process. It is significant to emphasise that though online memorials are places of death and grief, though they reveal sometimes very tragic stories and suffering after the death of a loved one, they can also be places of celebration and offer a renewal of social interaction, support and community.

Vietnamese online cemeteries are places where people come to discuss and remember those who have died, while weaving them into the fabric of their lives. Though it may seem superfluous to acknowledge, it is vital to realise that the dead are brought to life through the living. Computers are a means of helping with this but are not the reason for it. Inside NTO we hear the voices of a thousand different users, all forming and sustaining relationships between the offline, online and other world. As noted by scholars within an Australian context, but exceedingly relevant to the experiences of those in this work:

If we are fortunate we will find someone, or some group of people, who can let us grieve, and perhaps even encourage us to do so if we need encouragement. That person or that group will permit us to feel miserable when we feel miserable; to be angry when we are angry; to be in touch with our own despair... The person for whom we are

looking is likely to be one reasonably comfortable with the idea of death, reasonably comfortable with the realisation that one day he or she will also die, and reasonably comfortable with his or her own deep feelings. (Griffin and Tobin 1982:19)

Members of NTO had found those people, who had undergone similar experiences and who knew too well the emotions associated with losing someone close and dear. As reiterated by Linh, whose experiences have been threaded throughout this work:

NTO is a special community where many people can come together and think about the person who passed away. We can pray for them and then try our best to make the best for life, for the person who is dead and those alive. People at NTO can share feelings, happiness and sorrow, creating friendship... It is like a big family with love, sharing and caring. Its contents are happy and sorrow, smiles and tears... Love and sharing is equally important.

These were the core experiences. It goes without saying that the different magnitudes of loss affected members' subsequent experiences enormously—the feelings associated with losing a close loved one compared to a distant relative or colleague may be quite distinct—but ingrained in their experiences was that of loss. For these members, their experiences were far from non-consequential, as they brought with them an understanding of what it meant to love and cherish those now gone, to feel the pain of losing someone close, of what it meant to want to share those experiences and join in a wider community of online kin.

Though Vietnamese may have come originally to *Nghĩa Trang Online* to remember a particular person, profound connections were formed through the narratives of others; the tapestry of these narratives together speak towards the potential of online remembering. Among the many threads which joined members was the ability to confide (*tâm sự*) with others and share the sadness (*chia buồn*). As noted by an informant, “we come for the dead but it is the living we stay for”. That the online sphere can accommodate remembering and connect so many people, means it can accomplish a feeling of security, that of being part of something larger, an online community. Whatever positive, ambivalent or negative feelings internet memorials entail they are now deeply entrenched in the cyber sphere. Roberts (2012:55) writes, “as long as computers have been interconnected, the bereaved have made memorials to the dead in cyberspace” and Jones (2004:87) reiterates this on a future scale, “as we move into newer media... we will no doubt increase the quantity of the means of presence, but our desire to remember and be remembered, and our need to grieve, have not, and will not, change”. This is not to say that online memorials will not change, for they surely will, but rather to point out we have always incorporated new technology into our remembrance practices and that online memorials are just one of the many ways that the dead can be remembered.

As the Vietnamese proverb goes regarding the act of ancestor worship, ‘when drinking water, remember its source’ (*uống nước nhớ nguồn*). Online memorialisation spaces can be conceptualised as that water, constantly ebbing and flowing with the memories of the deceased: such memories exist within and far beyond the space. In the act of remembrance, Vietnamese come together, to share their emotions and experiences, forming wider groups and communities. Whether it be online tombs for common graves or revolutionary martyrs, for Buddhist or the non-religious, for mothers or fathers, for the unborn or the very newly born, for those who died well in good age with grandchildren and family surrounding them, for those who died too soon, in war, suicide or motorcycling accidents, or any other of the thousand ways death can suddenly or gradually enter a life—and in doing so, take it away—on *Nghĩa Trang Online* the stream of remembering and community continues.

### **Future directions**

On a site as large as NTO it was important to be selective; the sheer range of material available was both highly stimulating and daunting. In the ‘General Cemetery’ alone there were 1600 tombs, some of them spanning hundreds of web pages and it was simply not feasible to do anything near an exhaustive study. Early on in researching NTO I became overwhelmed; there were too many tombs, too many loved ones, and any indent I could make into its study would be limited. Selection then became paramount. Throughout this work I have followed the narratives of those members eager to participate. Some of these relationships were created through planned interviews, others through serendipity, but all form the core of the research, its heart. While not always the case, I felt more confident writing about those online memorials where I have been able to gain additional insight from family and friends, where I have been able to sit and talk about the meaning of the online in their life and its intersection with their own ways of remembering. That is, the Vietnamese who participated in this research helped shape the areas that concern it. The core themes which resonated with them included the sharing of emotions online, the support found in NTO, the continuation of a relationship with the deceased, and the community encountered. These in turn became my interests, and melded well with academic work pertaining to online memorialisation and Vietnamese studies concerning the dead in Vietnam.

The areas one could research within NTO are many. All bring with them a need to have a strong theoretical, as well as historical, cultural, religious and economic understanding of the country. There is little doubt that if I had encountered 25-30 different informants, the research could

have been distinctly different, perhaps unrecognisable from its current form. For example, I could have explored those who use NTO to create gravestones for failed or former relationships, of which there were many. This would have led to interesting discussions concerning the nature of relationships in Vietnam, and questions concerning sexuality and romance. Or perhaps I could have concentrated on those who use the website to ‘bury’ their *Facebook* accounts and video game characters in the Virtual Cemetery (*nghe trang ảo*). Another area for future research concerns those who may use online memorials while they themselves are dying (see Walter et al. 2011:277). This research focused on the memorialisation of Vietnamese after death. In some cases the memorials were created very shortly after death, at other times several years passed before online memorialisation. But what of Vietnamese using the site after learning of their own imminent or possible death, or preparing for it? Would they ask family members to create an account for them on NTO before their departure?

More widely within Vietnam it will be of interest to see how the online, offline and the other world continue to interact in the years to come. The act of ancestor worship is one that has changed within contemporary Vietnam, though I would be surprised to see online practices take precedent over offline forms of ancestor veneration. As this work argues, the online and the offline are constantly interacting, and I have difficulty envisioning one without the other. Online memorialisation in NTO is overwhelmingly anchored in Vietnamese conceptions of the offline and the other world; the smoke of offerings will continue to rise from the streets, and ancestor shrines will remain, though new mediums of remembering will continue to both mirror the practice and demonstrate its mutability.

### **A virtual candle?: summing up**

Earlier in this work I noted encounters with a neighbour who asked me what good the flickering of a virtual candle was. At the time it was a difficult question to answer, and the task it still complicated. The study of online memorialisation in contemporary Vietnam is a complex one, for it involves not just the world of the online, but that of the offline and the other world: the three worlds. In this sense, the metaphor of a quilt can fruitfully be applied to the findings in this work. The three worlds examined throughout are stitched together into a wider fabric, construed from a wide array of interrelated issues and relationships. Try as we might to disconnect one thread from another, they become merely strands, cut away and disconnected

from the complete picture. To see the focus of this work clearly, the entanglement of worlds is key. The offline and other world cosmologies of the dead reach deep into the online realm in Vietnam, and in turn, online activities resonate and mirror those woven into the fabric of cultural customs of ancestor worship and remembering. To step back and look at the larger picture then, this work has stitched these three worlds together through particular strands: remembrance, continuing relationships, community and emotion.

Online memorialisation in Vietnam is a mediated form of communication which involves relations and communications between both the living and the dead and the living and the living. In introducing this new world to the offline and other world, connections as well as tensions have been created between these communication channels. These intersections have played out in profound ways, and have been demonstrated throughout this work from both a micro and macro perspective. From a micro perspective, I have demonstrated the personal relationships Vietnamese form with one another within NTO and the emotion that was enabled and expressed online. I have also examined the connections between this world and the other for NTO members, and the movements between both communication ecologies. These interactions have been envisioned within a wider NTO community.

These personal experiences of using this new technology to interact with both the living and the dead have created tensions among Vietnamese. From a macro perspective, the culture of ancestor worship is well established and steeped in tradition. We see this in the creation of 'good deaths' and 'bad deaths', in the cosmology of ghosts, in the public discourses about what is and is not appropriate when interacting with the dead. Relationships with the dead in Vietnam are not set in stone, and continue to transform through economic, technological, religious, political and social changes, but they are also understood more widely as cultural conventions in Vietnam. In this, some of the sentiments of Vietnamese in this research revolved around the appropriateness of public sharing and the feeling that online interactions with the other world simply did not fit into the wider ecology of offline and other world communication. While offline, this distinction is clear, understood and managed, online there is a tension about how this should be manifested. In this we have a disconnect for some Vietnamese between the public and private, the cultural and personal, the medium of the internet and the offline and the other world. We see the disconnect for some between remembering a family member online with other Vietnamese not physically present, and visiting a tomb of a loved one in the physical company of family and friends. We see the tensions between remembering after abortion through personal rituals of remembrance and grief, but also the wider national discourses surrounding abortion and the reasons for it within the country.

NTO members come to their online interactions aware of these tensions. While not denying the cultural forms of remembering in Vietnam, their interactions expand on ancestor worship and bring out interesting ways of thinking through remembrance in an online medium. Through online offerings and the photoshopping of the dead, through emotional expression and support, through the creation of community, through continuing relationships with the dead, we can see some of the ways Vietnamese are thinking about the connections between mediated worlds.

By bringing these tensions out, and examining them through the core themes of remembrance, continuing relationships, community and emotion, we can see how the ramifications of bringing this new media into everyday interactions plays out for Vietnamese. Relationships between this world and the other in contemporary Vietnam have a rich heritage and this thesis has expounded just how vibrant and mutable such relationships can be. While many Vietnamese voices note the untraditional nature of NTO, relationships between the living and the dead in Vietnam have already been changing, at times in profound ways. Mediated forms of communication are continually transformed by the real-world: by the national discourses surrounding abortion or the public commemoration of revolutionary martyrs; by forms of bad death through war; by the movement of young Vietnamese away from the provinces to the larger cities; by the global diaspora. There has never been a fixed and pure ancestor worship in Vietnam and NTO is just one more branch to the growing tree of relationships between this world and the other world. The Internet and the online are transforming rapidly and technological abilities mean that the online in fifty years may be almost a different entity when compared to the Internet of 2015. With or without the continuation of *Nghĩa Trang Online*, mediated communications between the living and the dead will continue to raise interesting questions and to be rich and stimulating territory for future research in Vietnam.

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