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Spirit map and medium's message: Searching for war dead in Vietnam

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Abstract
Popular religious practices such as communicating with the deceased take place in many parts of the world. In cases of death through violence, as in warfare, the living worry about the dead bodies of their loved ones as the lack of bodily remains makes it impossible to perform a proper burial. Vietnam is a valuable case study because it has experienced terrible violence in the 20th century. This article explores the pilgrimage of a group of brothers who searched for the bodily remains of their father in the late 1990s. He operated as a secret agent and was killed in 1957 when he crossed the border into South Vietnam. In their quest, the brothers consulted a ritual expert, who guided them from a distance. Drawing on this case study, the paper argues that filial piety, spirit mediumship, technology, and political history are deeply intertwined in post-revolutionary and late socialist Vietnam.

Keywords
bodily remains, spirit mediumship, technology, pilgrimage, Vietnam

Death and the afterlife are crucial issues in many parts of the world. The corpses of hundreds of thousands of war dead have never been found, leading many families to suffer even today, as the lack of knowledge of the whereabouts of their relatives' bodily remains makes it impossible for the descendants to fulfil their duty of performing a proper burial. Wars in Iraq, Bosnia, Syria, and other places have transformed parts of these countries into mass graves, while the survivors struggle to find and identify the bodily remains of their fathers, brothers, sons, and also often those of female relatives, all of whom went to war and never returned.

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Mr Hiền, who served as a general in the People's Army of Vietnam for the past 40 years, started searching for the bodily remains of his father in 1997.[1] His father had worked as a secret agent for the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) and was killed in 1957 after he crossed the border to South Vietnam to execute a secret mission. In the late 1990s, together with his brothers and brother-in-law, Mr Hiền consulted a clairvoyant (*nhà ngoại cảm*) who was famous for finding the bodily remains of war dead. Literally, the term may be translated as specialist or personality (*nhà*), outside (*ngoại*), feeling, sentiment *(cảm)*, or 'a specialist in extrasensory perception', as translated in an article focussing on the role of state institutions in searching for war dead (Schlecker and Endres, 2011: 2). In contrast to other ritual practices in Vietnam (Taylor, 2007), such as spirit mediumship, whereby mediums are possessed by famous historical personages (Fjelstad and Nguyen, 2006; Endres, 2011), or practices of soul calling, whereby relatives communicate with their ancestors in the other world (Sorrentino, 2018), in the case of missing war dead, there is no body, no grave and no place for relatives to worship. Clairvoyants in Vietnam are considered to be able to sense a soul's presence and interact with the dead in a dialogical way, and by extension, to have extrasensory perception in 'seeing' and therefore discovering mortal remains.

In his work on war dead in Vietnam, Kwon (2006, 2008) described corpses out of place and wandering ghosts in need of returning home. He also focused on 'bones that receive reburial and ghosts transformed into spirits who find mediums, settle in new homes, and who lead the way forward in their communities' (Lambek, 2010: 28). To date, very little social science research has been conducted on *nhà ngoại cảm* (Malarney, 2013: 534), even though in 2007 an official ceremony took place in Vietnam to honour 10 people with extrasensory perception for having located the remains of more than 15,000 revolutionary martyrs and other people who died during the revolution. The father of Mr Hiền, whom I refer to as Mr Seven (*ông bảy*), his secret name in the late 1950s, might be considered one of the first war dead of the American-Vietnam War.

What interests me in this article is the relationship between a 'seer' and his or her clients, a map produced by the seer in a state of trance, the use of technological objects such as a tape recorder and telephone, and the bodily remains of war dead. Indeed, without an image of the landscape, created by the medium, the brothers would not have been successful in finding the mortal remains of their father. Inspired by ideas of agency and materiality (Latour, 2005) and referring to recent scholarship on iconic presence (Belting, 2016; Meyer, 2012) in religious practices as well as on the '*iconic* nature of letters' (Morgan, 2017: 482; emphasis from Morgan), this contribution addresses the nexus between material objects and a medium's message by exploring the visual, technological and traveling cultures of the Vietnamese in searching for the bodily remains of their loved ones who died in the war. This study thus connects to the investigation of the role of sacred objects in Vietnam, their power and divine presence, which has so far been analysed with regard to actors and agency (Kendall, 2008; Kendall et al., 2010; Hüwelmeier, 2016, 2018b, 2019). In tracing the interactions between a diverse set of actors, material objects and supernatural powers, this article also deals with linkages between pilgrimage and cartography (Geertz, 1988: 10), as the Hiền brothers undertook a journey with a spiritual aim, relying on what I call a *spirit map*, which consisted of a detailed description of the geographical surroundings that was transmitted by a medium.

Some mediums (clairvoyants) in Vietnam became famous due to their special abilities or extra-sensory perception that enabled them seemingly to receive information about circumstances and incidents despite their spatial or temporal distance. The aim of finding the bodily remains of war dead, namely performing a proper burial, is part of filial piety and ancestor veneration in Vietnam. Moreover, ancestor worship is also predicated on images of the nation-state itself. In the case discussed here, the narratives and directives of the seer/clairvoyant/medium, and the death of a revolutionary who died for the fatherland, are crucial to the project of creating a national imaginary of a united communist nation. Images materialised in maps, visions, drawings and recordings from the beyond depict a landscape of action where religious practices and searching for the war dead become intertwined.

Although Mr Minh, the medium, was never 'there' (Geertz, 1988), he listed all the details necessary for finding Mr Seven's bodily remains, resulting in what I call a *spirit map*, a material 'textual' object. Streets, hills, trees, rivers and cemeteries were plotted into a cartographic guide in a state of trance. How, then, could the medium draw the map without ever travelling there himself? As suggested by Louise Pratt in her book on colonial travel writing, the colonial explorer 'brings the discovery into being' through texts (Pratt, 1992: 204; Coleman, 2010) such as reports, names on maps, or a diary. In the case discussed here, however, there seems to be a travelling spirit at work (Hüwelmeier and Krause, 2010), moving between different spaces and times, while guiding the hand of the medium. Later, based on this map, the pilgrims would be guided by the medium via telephone. The *spirit map* was complemented by the transcription of an audio tape produced during the encounter between the brothers and the medium.

I met Mr Hiền in Ho Chi Minh City in early 2016, where a friend of mine, Mrs Thủy, introduced me to her friend whom she had known since the early 1960s. Both were born in Hanoi and raised in Kim Liên, the famous *khu tập thể*, a social housing project in Hanoi, constructed for the families of high-ranking political and military cadres, and they knew each other very well. Mr Hiền was only six years old when his father was killed in Quảng Trị province near the border between North and South Vietnam in 1957. His mother was 28 years old when her husband died, and moved to Kim Liên, together with her three children, after she had remarried some years following her husband's death. The "children of Kim Liên", as Mrs Thủy called the group of friends, meet to this day several times a year, no matter where they are living in Vietnam or abroad. To date, most children of Kim Liên are influential political and economic players.

For more than 40 years, Mr Hiền was a general in the Vietnamese army. He also participated in the invasion of Cambodia and in the border war against China in 1979. He narrowly escaped death on several occasions. Some years ago, he retired and, at the time of our encounter, was working as a manager for one of the many construction companies that have sprung up like mushrooms in fast growing Ho Chi Minh City, with increasing numbers of high-rise buildings and inhabitants living between 'luxury and rubble' (Harms, 2016). The two brothers of Mr Hiền who participated in the pilgrimage are also part of the elite and living in Ho Chi Minh City.

When we met, Mr Hiền brought along some documents which he thought might be of interest for my ethnographic work on popular religious practices: newspaper articles from the late 1990s; the spirit map indicating the place where his father was killed;

testimonies from people who had known his father; the transcription of tape recordings with a spirit medium; a photo album of the pilgrimage; family photos from the early 1950s, and a 'memory book' written by another agent who had come to know Mr Hiền's father shortly before he was killed. Before launching into my account of how the group of brothers finally located the bodily remains of their father, I will place the complex process of searching for bodily remains within the more general context of filial piety in Vietnam. First and foremost, however, I want to briefly outline the historical background and socio-cultural dynamics of revolutionary martyrs in socialist Vietnam.

Socio-cultural dynamics of war dead in Vietnam

In the years between 1946 and 1990 Vietnam experienced a number of wars which cost millions of lives. First, there was the anti-colonial war against the French (1946–1954), and after that the lengthy reunification war. Known as the American War in Vietnam, it was a conflict which involved Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia from 1955 to the fall of Saigon in 1975. Officially, the war was fought between communist North Vietnam and the government of South Vietnam. While the North Vietnamese army was supported by China, the Soviet Union and other communist allies, the South Vietnamese army was assisted by the United States, South Korea, Thailand, Australia and other anti-communist allies. The North Vietnamese government, together with the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong, who fought a guerilla war against anti-communist forces in South Vietnam, were fighting to reunify Vietnam, which had been divided into a communist North and a capitalist South at the Geneva Conference in 1954 after the defeat of the French colonial power in May 1954 at *Điện Biên Phủ.* The conference stipulated that a general election was to be held by July 1956 to create a unified Vietnam, but this election never took place.

1955 marked the start of the Diệm era in South Vietnam. Ngô Đình Diệm, the self-declared president of South Vietnam, was anti-communist, nationalist, and Roman Catholic, while the majority of Vietnamese were Buddhist. From summer 1955 onwards, Diệm launched a campaign to execute, arrest, imprison and torture any and all communists in South Vietnam. It was during this anti-communist campaign that North Vietnam started to send undercover agents to the South. One of them was the father of Mr Hiền, who left his family in 1957 to embark on a mission from Hanoi to cross the demarcation line in Quảng Trị province to South Vietnam and never returned.

Millions lost their lives in the American-Vietnam war. Soon after the reunification of the country in 1976, the border war between China and Vietnam (1979–1980) began and resulted in even more deaths. In addition, the war in Cambodia after the fall of the Khmer Rouge by the Vietnamese led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese soldiers and non-combatants. According to Malarney (2013: 513), Vietnamese communists had already implemented a new cultural category vis-à-vis the recognition of their dead, the 'revolutionary martyr' (*liệt sĩ*), in order to glorify the sacrificial action of the dead. Malarney referred to the work of De Tréglodé (2001: 267), who found an official document from 1957 which defined a revolutionary martyr as anyone who had died gloriously in the struggle against imperialism and feudalism since 1925. In contrast to the pre-colonial period, when governments recognised heroes who

had fought against foreign aggressors and lost their lives on the battlefield, the socialist government institutionalised the making of revolutionary martyrs by conducting official controls and confirmation, and thus emphasising the idea of the meaningful death of the soldiers. By doing so, the revolutionary regime connected official appeals for the success of the socialist revolution with deeper nationalist feelings in terms of safeguarding the independence of Vietnam (Malarney, 2013: 514).

While the past decades have witnessed official rituals of commemoration such as the establishment of war monuments and military cemeteries as well as the performance of ceremonies for the war dead in villages, towns and the capital Hanoi (Ho Tai, 2001; Schwenkel, 2009; Endres and Lauser, 2012), to this day hundreds of thousands of families have still not recovered the bodily remains of their loved ones. During the war, the death ceremony for a person who had died for the fatherland was carried out by state officials in the home of the respective family. This included praising the glory of the person who had given his life for the independence and freedom of the country, the donation of a monetary gift, and the presentation of a certificate stating that 'the fatherland will never forget your sacrifice' (Malarney, 2013: 519; 2001). These families, officially regarded by the government as families of a revolutionary martyr (*gia đình liệt sĩ*), received special benefits such as monthly monetary contributions, privileges with regard to health services, education and membership in the communist party. But – and this will be explored in more detail in the course of this article – as long as the bodily remains are missing, the family is unable to carry out the requisite burial and thus remains incapable of performing the necessary filial piety. As a result, the soul of the dead soldier will be restless and is considered one of what Kwon (2008) has called the 'ghosts of war'.

Filial piety, wandering souls and 'ghosts of war'

According to the beliefs of many Vietnamese, gods and spirits have a demonstrable influence on the living. The communist government regarded beliefs and popular religious practices performed to receive support from the otherworld as superstition (*mê tín dị đoan*). Nonetheless, people continued conducting these practices, often in secret. Moreover, notions of the soul (*linh hồn*) as an essential part of the human body continue to exist among many people in Vietnam. These beliefs conceptualise the soul as a feeling entity, with consciousness, sensations and emotions, both during a person's lifetime and after death (Malarney, 2013: 522). The soul is believed to leave the body after death and to travel to the other world (*thế giới khác*). As the other world is imagined to be a mirror version of the world of the living, the dead need to eat, to wear clothes, to use money, to have houses, to drive a car and to have TV, laptops and mobile phones (Hüwelmeier, 2016). Thus, the living are required to take care of the dead by sending prayers and material objects such as food, fruit and paper votive offerings (*hàng mã*) on the occasion of the funeral and during the 49 days after the funeral, as it is believed that the soul needs this time to travel.

Ancestor veneration is a filial duty in Vietnam (Jellema, 2007) and considered a moral obligation for the living. As part of the annual commemoration of ancestors, the extended family will gather once a year on the death day of the deceased. Together, they prepare a lavish meal, decorate the ancestor altar, pray, and ask the spirits for protection, good

health and family happiness. Ancestors are believed to guarantee protection and for this reason, it is thought that worshipping them is highly relevant for the well-being of the descendants.

In Vietnam, taking care of tombs is the duty of the descendants, but in recent years the maintenance of a number of graveyards in cities has been neglected by the authorities, and some graveyards have suffered as a result of urban renewal, as has been pointed out with regard to abandoned cemeteries in Ho Chi Minh City (Robert, 2014). A tragic death, particularly when there is no corpse and no grave, is regarded as a bad death *(chết nhục nhã)*, such as in the case of suicide, abortion (Gammeltoft, 2003; Heathcote, 2014) and war death (Gustafsson, 2009). It is believed that the soul cannot leave the body, as there is no one to take care of the remains, no one to pray or bring offerings. Thousands lost their lives in the hail of American bombs, making it impossible to identify many of the dead. In cases where a soldier died in the jungle and bodily remains were found, his comrades prepared a grave wherever they happened to be, wrapped the corpse into the soldier's hammock, performed a short ceremony and then left the body to the forest. Mr Thành, with whom I spoke about his war experiences, was a soldier in Laos during the American Vietnam war for six years. According to what he told me during our encounters in Hanoi, he saw many comrades die and, if possible, he and the other soldiers buried the corpse. Sometimes they asked Laotian villagers for incense sticks, as this was not part of the soldiers' equipment when they went off to fight in the war. Bảo Ninh, in his famous novel *The Sorrow of War* (1994), impressively described the 'ghosts of war', the wandering souls of dead soldiers during the American Vietnam war who were heard crying in the jungle as there was nobody to take care of them. By writing about destruction, grief and death, Bảo Ninh was challenging the revolutionary heroism promoted by the communist government.

During the war, soldiers from the communist north were not allowed to carry any private things such as a photo of their mother or wife. The soldiers never carried any sign of identity, and in the case of death, only a close comrade in the unit, with the agreement of the two fighters, would bring notice of the death to the family. Mr Thành recalled that in the case of a burial in the jungle, the name of the dead and his home address, the location, and, very importantly, the date of death would be written down on a little piece of paper and put into an ampoule previously used for penicillin. Then the ampoule would be carefully sealed with candle wax and placed in the mouth of the corpse. This was done in the hope that somebody might find the bodily remains one day, and only then could a proper burial take place and the soul truly rest in peace. In cases where the remains are not found and reburied, Vietnamese believe that the soul will be restless and become a wandering ghost (*con ma*), afflicting the living. Having no descendants to pray and take care of them makes the soldier's death even worse. As a result, this dead person can never become an ancestor, but remains a hungry ghost.

To appease the needs of the souls of dead soldiers, family members buy votive paper offerings such as canteens (*bi đông nước*) and military rucksacks (*ba lô con cóc*), and burn them during ceremonies for the dead. Members of craft maker families who produce these kinds of material objects in a village near Hanoi told me during my fieldwork in March 2016 that the souls of dead soldiers continue to live in the otherworld and that these items are exactly what they need. Some days later, I participated in a thanksgiving

ceremony for gods and deities on the occasion of a ritual to prevent damage (*lễ giải hạn*) in the Quỳnh Lôi pagoda (*chùa Quỳnh Lôi*) in Hanoi. In the yard of the pagoda I noticed hundreds of votive paper offerings in the shape of canteens and military rucksacks, which were being offered in front of a war monument on which the names of dead soldiers (*bảng ghi công các liệt sĩ*) from that particular urban neighbourhood were listed. This instance of commemorating war dead in an urban sacred place points to the relevance of performing religious practices in cities. As has been described for various metropolises in Asia (Van der Veer, 2015), conducting religious rituals in public spaces challenges ideas about the secular-religious divide which is often claimed for Western countries.

The bodily remains of more than 300,000 war dead are still missing (Malarney, 2013: 531), and therefore thousands of families suffer to this day. Kwon's (2008) poignant analysis is that the belief in the physical and spiritual presence of 'ghosts of war' is part of the collective memory in Vietnam. To this day, families still worry about the mortal remains of their fathers, brothers, cousins, uncles and daughters, and therefore many of them visit clairvoyants who are believed to have special skills in finding the bodily remains of war dead.

Materialising the otherworld - spirit map and spirit protocol

Searching for the bodily remains of war dead with the help of mediums became a booming business starting in the late 1990s and should therefore be considered an important part of the resurgence of popular religious practices in Vietnam more generally. Similar to mediums in soul calling and spirit possession rituals, *nhà ngoại cảm* are imagined to be able to communicate with the otherworld, in this case with souls of the war dead. While much has been written about popular religious practices in contemporary Vietnam, including outstanding ethnographies on the war dead by Kwon (2006, 2008), to date, however, little work has been done on the relationship between material objects and technologies in regard to searching for the bodily remains of war dead in Vietnam.

Otherworldly visual and oral messages point to the striking correlation between popular religion, media and technology, as has been discussed in anthropology and in religious and media studies over the past few years (Eisenlohr, 2011; Morgan, 2017). Considering religion as media opens up opportunities to analyse the entanglement of media and mediation in new ways (Stolow, 2005; Meyer, 2006; Morgan, 2008), thereby shedding new light on the relationships between spirit mediumship, technical media and issues of circulation and movement (Hüwelmeier and Krause, 2010). As I have discussed elsewhere, the use of technology and new media in performing religious practices among Vietnamese Pentecostals (Hüwelmeier, 2015) as well as in *lên đồng* spirit mediumship in Vietnam (Hüwelmeier 2018a) is crucial not only in documenting the repeated 'coming into presence' (Lambek 2010) of spirits, but also in proving its efficacy. Pictures in particular play a pivotal role in spreading religious imageries (Pinney and Peterson, 2003; Spyer and Steedly, 2013; Kendall et al., 2015). Relationships between popular religion and materiality in contemporary Vietnam have been analysed by a number of scholars

(Kendall, 2008; Kendall et al., 2010), emphasising that the circulation of material objects between the living and the dead is crucial in the context of the religious gift economy (Endres, 2011; Soucy, 2012). Paintings and photographs (Hiền, 2012) as well as mass-produced sacred pictures (Meyer, 2010) mediate between immanence and transcendence, as did the spirit map in the case discussed here. Unlike most of these images, however, the map's production was based on messages from the beyond, materialised by the medium's drawings.

At the end of the 1990s, when Mr Hiền's mother was getting older, she and her younger sons insisted on searching for the bodily remains of her husband and their father. They wanted to know about the place where he died and intended to perform a proper burial. Mr Hiền, who was always sceptical about this endeavour, hesitated to make a decision as he considered himself a 'Marxist, not an idealist believing in spirits'. But as he was the first-born son and, as a result of Confucian values, responsible for the well-being of all family members, he finally agreed to meet the needs of his family and to consult a medium.

During the brothers' visit to the house of the medium, Mr Minh drew a geographical map. This cartographic rendering, however, was not merely an image on a sheet of paper, but a material object charged with otherworldly energy – a spirit map, as I have called it here. According to the narrative of Mr Hiền, the map was produced in a state of trance, and, as he emphasised, it could be read from two sides: the front side could be decoded by people living in this world, while the back side could only be read by holding the map against the light. Producing a material object drawn by a medium is not only a pictorial representation of a landscape, but is, according to the beholders – in this case the group of brothers – considered a 'double image': one side depicts the locality where the person was killed, visible and readable for the living, while the other side of the map can only be read by the spirits during the search process, as Mr Hiền confirmed during our conversation. Hence, the power of this picture lies in its potential to help visualise the invisible. The spirit map in this case not only helped in finding an unknown place, but also indicated the location of the bodily remains of a person buried somewhere in a hilly landscape, where he was killed in 1957. As the remains had later been transferred to another place, the spirit map also pointed to a cemetery for unknown soldiers. By referring to the Indochina War and to the American-Vietnam War and its afterlife, trance mediumship in this case pointed to the past, as it does in other parts of the world (Lambek, 2016).

The map, drawn by hand, depicted a landscape with hills, roads, pathways, streets, rivers and streams. Some villages, whose names had also been part of the map, no longer existed in late 1997, as they had been given new names, according to Mr Hiền. As a result, the only way for the brothers to find this region of the country was to perform a spiritual journey based on the instructions in the map. Being unaware of the disappearance of localities or the renaming of some villages, the medium could only draw the old names onto the map. At this point of the narrative it became obvious that the medium could visualise the past, but not the present: the information provided was based on what had happened in the late 1950s. Being in trance, the medium envisioned another time, visualising the past in the image, thereby simultaneously bringing to the present events from decades ago.

While producing the map, Mr Minh also explained his drawings. These explanations and the whole session in the medium's house were recorded by the brothers using a tape recorder and transcribed by Mr Hiền. The transcript of the conversation with the medium, a written document from 1997 which I refer to here as the *spirit protocol*, begins with information about the ritual expert Mr Minh, his family and his abode. According to this information, and here I refer to the pages which Mr Hiền brought along when we met, the medium was about 40 years old, had attained only a low level of education, was married and had 2 children. He had never travelled in his life, except a few times from his village to Hanoi. Second, the spirit protocol provided information about the medium's special skills, which had led to the discovery of bodily remains upon the request of other families, as had been published in the communist press. It was also noted in the protocol that in 1997, on the occasion of the 50th commemoration day of those who died for the fatherland, there was a meeting in Ho Chi Minh City with people who had special skills to find the bodily remains of war dead. On this occasion, the vice minister for transport and traffic gave a talk about the successful search for the bones of his own father, who had died in 1943, during the anti-colonial war. The search was carried out by Mr Minh, the same medium whom Mr Hiền and his family consulted. It was also documented in the protocol that the medium agreed to help find the bodily remains of Mr Hiền's father, who died in 1957 in Quảng Trị province. The last sentences of the general information in the document emphasised that Mr Minh did not take money for his information and did not perform prayers (*cúng*) at any point; the session consisted of Mr Minh just talking to the group of brothers while drawing on a piece of paper.

Dated 1997, the pages of the typed protocol contained detailed information transmitted by the medium about the locality where Mr Hiền's father died. It also indicated the route the brothers should take in order to find the site of their father's bodily remains. The state of the medium's trance is documented and materialised in the transcription of the protocol, comprising staccato phrases, akin to a telegraphic style. The medium, in his conversation with the younger brother of Mr Hiền, had been talking about the Indochina War and the Vietnam War, the latter having replaced the former. Furthermore, he gave information about the village, where to go, and whom to meet. He also reported about two reburials of the bodily remains of the father, and two cemeteries, one "wild" cemetery at a nearby hill, and a second one in the village, the cemetery for the unknown soldiers.

While drawing and simultaneously commenting on the spirit map, the medium suddenly changed his delivery and cited a poem or a verse or lines as if he were the son of the secret agent.

> 'My father stands alone
>
> He died while standing in the house
>
> In 57, 58
>
> Here only three died.
>
> Guerilla fighters in my village
>
> Because Diệm troops attacked the house.'

The medium continued talking, as documented in the transcription from the voice recorder:

> 'My father, my father was killed by the forces of the Diệm regime, not by the soldiers of Ngô Đình Cẩn [the brother of Ngô Đình Diệm], not by the French. Here are the soldiers of Diệm, which attacked our guerilla fighters.'

While reading the spirit message aloud during our encounter, Mr Hiền commented that at this point it became clear to him that his father was killed by the Diệm regime.

As the map was produced by a medium/clairvoyant, a spirit provided the medium with the required information. The identity of the spirit, however, was ambiguous. In some of the lines of the spirit protocol it seems as if one of the sons was conversing ('my father stands alone'), in other parts of the message it seems as if the spirit of Mr. Hiền's father was communicating through the medium.

In addition, the spirit protocol included instructions about whom the brothers should contact in the village, the names and ages of the people who had buried their father, and a detailed description of the places of reburial. According to the transcribed notification, the village was located near the demarcation line between North and South Vietnam. Mr Minh instructed the group to start immediately on their journey, and asked the brothers to call him every day at a particular time in order to receive further information. Thus, the telephone was an important technical media in supporting communication between the brothers and the medium during their journey in the late 1990s. Again, this indicates the close relationship between spirit mediumship and technical media, as discussed by scholars in various parts of the world (Behrend and Zillinger, 2015). Media practices have thus challenged ideas and experiences about spatial distance, presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, thus influencing and transforming knowledge.

The pilgrimage

In September 1997, Mr Hiền started the journey along with his two brothers and his brother-in-law. As it had been raining for days, the group had to ride on slippery roads and muddy pathways and had to cross torrential streams in order to not waste time in finding the grave of their father. Travel may be considered a pilgrimage, a spiritual and physical journey which involves various forms of motion (Coleman and Eade, 2004). A pilgrimage may be related to a ritual transformation of the pilgrim's status or to a quest for a transcendent goal; in other cases, it may involve physical or spiritual healing. In the case discussed here, the pilgrimage was connected to filial piety and family obligations and thus had a spiritual impact. Therefore, the journey may also be considered a type of sacred travel (Turner and Turner, 1978), as the group was ready to look for bodily remains in an unknown region in order to perform a proper burial.

In scholarship on pilgrimages persons, texts, places and the act of guiding have all been considered 'processes and practices of mediation' (Mesaritou et al., 2016: 17). However, while guiding has previously been linked either to people who accompany groups or to guidebooks helping people find their destination, in the case discussed here the 'guide' was a spirit medium who remained at home while a group of people was

travelling. The 'guiding' text in this situation was materialised as a spirit map and spirit protocol. Finally, the destination was a cemetery of the unknown soldier in central Vietnam. Textual and visual representations were based on the authority of a medium. Moreover, the production of persuasive accounts of the journey and its experiences were carefully documented, simultaneously generating affects of filial piety and reconciliation.

After their arrival in the village which had a different name in 1997 compared to the information on the spirit map, which described the village as if it were 1957, the brothers first met an old man wearing traditional dress, as some elders still do today when celebrating village festivals. He advised the pilgrims to visit the village festival that was being celebrated that same day, where they would find a number of old men probably able to help them. As it happened, at the festival the travellers met Mr Thường, the man who had buried their father when he was killed in 1957. While asking Mr Thường for further details, they presented a photograph taken of their father before he left for the South. This photograph, which Mr Hiền had brought along when we met in Ho Chi Minh City, showed a young man dressed in a trendy western style suit and hat, reclining against a wall near a river, his gaze on the river, not at the camera. Staring at the photograph, the old man told them that he could recall the face of their father. As Mr Thường was 75 years old when he met the group of brothers, he must have been 35 when he buried the secret agent from the north.

Several other elder villagers confirmed that they knew about the burial of the brothers' father, including the party secretary, who was also participating in the village festival. This man recollected the story of the secret agent, as his own father, who had supported the northern communists, experienced the events in 1957 and later told his son what had happened in the village. The secretary told the brothers that his own father had received a message in 1957 about a revolutionary from the north being killed. He was informed that soldiers from the Diệm regime found a Chinese pistol close to the corpse of the secret agent, which was, in their eyes, an indication of his northern origin. Further, the secret agent carried things, such as a raincoat, that were only available in the north. Moreover, he had small balls of sticky rice in his pockets, and the rice was still warm. For this reason, the whole village was punished, as the authorities from the south suspected that villagers had provided food to the man from the north. Soon after the South Vietnamese authorities had found the sticky rice, a massacre took place and some villagers had been killed, according to what the father of the party secretary had reported to his son.

After the death of the secret agent, South Vietnamese authorities did not allow the body to be buried. But then, only three days later, they gave permission to inter the corpse. Mr Thường specified that he had buried the corpse of Mr Hiền's father near to the place where he had been killed, in the forest on a small hill near the village, under a tree near a group of other trees. After the war, he stated, bodily remains from several people had been excavated, including the remains of Mr Hiền's father, in order to entomb them in a single location, a group cemetery not far from the village. This was a place for the unknown soldiers who died for the fatherland.

Supported by the party secretary, who asked two villagers to help with the excavation, the group of brothers first started digging in the place where their father had been killed

and buried in 1957, in the forest on the hill near the village, the 'wild' cemetery. They began their digging here in case some of their father's remains had been forgotten during the first excavation. With the assistance of Mr Thường, who remembered the exact place where he buried the corpse in 1957, the brothers were successful in finding a few remains. Fortunately, as Mr Hiền recollected, the corpse was buried near the top of the hill, so it was possible to find at least some of the remains after so many years. If the corpse had been entombed further down, the bodily remains would probably have floated away due to heavy rainfall over the years. Mr Hiền also mentioned that they found remnants of plastic at the gravesite, which they identified as pieces from a raincoat which, in the late 1950s, had only been available in the northern part of Vietnam.

Located near the village, the hill was designated *ông bảy* (Mr Seven) by the villagers, who named the place according to the name of the secret agent. After they had found a few bodily remains on ông bảy hill, the brothers visited the large cemetery for unknown soldiers near the village, where they met the caretaker. He informed the brothers that the number of the hill where Mr Hiền's father had first been buried was 302, and that the place was also called ông bảy hill. Number 302, the caretaker assured them, was renamed 113 on the grave at the group cemetery. Mr Hiền and his relatives were therefore able to identify the site. They started digging immediately and after a while found bodily remains. The bones, as Mr Hiền recalled, were well preserved. This was a very touching moment for all the family members. Right away they started performing a ritual, bringing offerings such as food, flowers and incense and they prayed with the assistance of a ritual expert. After this, they continued digging and finally found more bodily remains, cleaned them, wrapped them in red cloth, and then carefully put them into a box.

The brothers documented all the steps of the exhumation of the remains and the preparation for the reburial by taking photographs. During our encounter in Ho Chi Minh City, Mr Hiền showed me his private photo album while commenting on the details of the reburial. The introduction of the technology of photography (Pinney and Peterson, 2003) contributed to novel forms of recounting and provided insights into the ways 'in which new technologies mediate the pilgrimage experience and affect memory and identity formation' (Coleman and Eade, 2004: 14). While presenting the photographs, Mr Hiền was visibly still touched by his travel experience, which had taken place 20 years previously.

Once they had localised the bodily remains of their father, the brothers intended to take them to a cemetery in Ho Chi Minh City, where they and their families lived. However, the authorities did not give permission for the transfer, arguing that the fatherland is everywhere, no matter where somebody is buried (see also Malarney, 2001). The authorities also presented an argument related to costs, noting that they had already paid more than one hundred US dollars for the reburial from the ông bảy hill to the cemetery of the unknown soldiers. The authorities later agreed to rebury the bodily remains in Ho Chi Minh City, but did not give permission for an official ceremony. Beyond that, they required that a new sign be affixed at the gravesite in the cemetery for unknown soldiers, as Mr Hiền's father had been identified and for this reason was not an unknown soldier any more. Much later, an official ceremony honouring ông bảy took place. Actually, as Mr Hiền told me at the end of our encounter, the family made a request to award his

father the title ‘hero of the country’ (*anh hùng quốc gia*), as he was one of the first who died for the Fatherland in the war against the Americans.

After having completed his story, Mr Hiền emphasised that all of his family members, except himself believed in what the medium had predicted. Again, he stressed that he was a follower of Karl Marx, and thus was a materialist, not an idealist. Because Mr Hiền was not convinced about the validity of the medium’s information and argued that all the events were pure coincidence, his brothers suggested that a DNA test be conducted to verify the identity of the remains they had found. As Vietnam has only been able to identify a few hundred war dead so far using old technologies, the Vietnamese government promised to invest $25 million in upgrading three existing DNA testing centres. Recently, the government signed a training contract with a medical diagnostics firm based in Germany to get Vietnamese DNA experts up to speed with the new technology.[2] However, Mr Hiền decided against the DNA test, and as he was the first-born son (*đích tôn*), he had the power to make such a decision on his own, while his younger brothers, according to the Confucian hierarchical model of the family, had to accept this decision. In our conversation, Mr Hiền explained that if the bodily remains had turned out not to be those of his father, then he would not have had a problem with it – as he considered himself to be a non-believer – but his mother and his brothers would have questioned all the activities they had undertaken in order to find the bodily remains. As Mr Hiền saw it, all of his family members had reconciled with the past, and reconciliation was the main reason why he had accepted the search for the war dead, so he saw no good reason to conduct a DNA test on the remains. Why put his family through another search? And, he finally remarked, if the bodily remains they had found were truly those of someone else, he personally did not care. For him, the remains were in any case those of a revolutionary martyr, and this was the only issue of importance. So many died for the fatherland, he said, and it is of no consequence whose mortal remains are venerated.

Conclusion

By tracing the interactions of a diverse set of actors, material objects and supernatural powers in the process of searching for war dead in Vietnam, this article contributes to recent anthropological scholarship on mediumship, materiality and religion. Popular imaginings about the wandering souls of war dead are widespread in contemporary Vietnam as are also imaginings about the effects of the war on both this and the other world. Clairvoyants, mediating between immanence and transcendence, are believed to have special abilities in finding the mortal remains of war dead. While there are many kinds of war dead, secret agents have been neglected in anthropological research on Vietnam so far. Documents collected in the course of searching for the bodily remains of this kind of war dead might become evidence in the process of carefully examining a request to have a former secret agent officially recognised as a revolutionary martyr by the authorities. For the Vietnamese state, the glorification of ‘death on the battlefield’ and the secular idea of war death in general is remembered in its monumentality, and hence is part of socialist and nationalist imaginaries.

In this vein, anthropological research on searching for war dead in Vietnam and in particular on the relationship between materiality and religion results in new considerations about the role of the state in ‘governing dead bodies’ (Stepputat 2014). This

becomes evident in (post)socialist Vietnam, when some clairvoyants who had achieved fame in previous decades for locating the gravesites of unknown soldiers have been unmasked as fraudsters and put into prison. As searching for war dead is a national project and not just a private issue, the Vietnamese government established a range of laws, institutions and practices to take control of identifying the whereabouts of dead bodies. This control includes the involvement of the military forensic institute and a biotechnology institute specialising in new technologies such as DNA testing to avoid 'worshipping animal bones'. [3] Although the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs banned its agencies from asking mediums to search for the bodily remains of war dead some years ago, and despite the fact that only the military is authorised to search for and excavate the remains of war dead, many Vietnamese continue to rely on mediums/clairvoyants in searching for their loved ones. As the bodily remains of more than 300,000 war dead are still missing, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese share feelings of grief, pain and sorrow with millions of mourners who have lost their relatives due to violent conflicts all over the world.

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Notes

1. All personal names are pseudonyms.
2. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-3399184/The-search-Vietnam-s-war-dead-Largest-DNA-identification-project-underway-perished-40-years-ago.html. accessed 7.2.2019

   https://www.extremetech.com/extreme/221211-40-years-later-genomics-could-let-vietnam-identify-war-dead. accessed 7.2.2019
3. http://www.thanhniennews.com/society/fake-mediums-abound-in-vietnam-target-war-martyrs-families-765.html. accessed 7.2.2019

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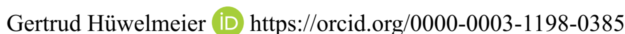

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