Ghosts of War in Vietnam

This is a fascinating and truly groundbreaking study of the Vietnamese experience and memory of the Vietnam War through the lens of popular imaginings about the wandering souls of the war dead. These ghosts of war play an important part in postwar Vietnamese historical narrative and imagination, and Heonik Kwon explores the intimate ritual ties with these unsettled identities which still survive in Vietnam today as well as the actions of those who hope to liberate these hidden but vital historical presences from their uprooted social existence. Taking a unique approach to the cultural history of war, he introduces gripping stories about spirits claiming social justice and about his own efforts to wrestle with the physical and spiritual presence of ghosts. Although these actions are fantastical, this book shows how examining their stories can illuminate critical issues of war and collective memory in Vietnam and the modern world more generally.

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In recent years the field of modern history has been enriched by the exploration of two parallel histories. These are the social and cultural history of armed conflict, and the impact of military events on social and cultural history.

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Ghosts of War in Vietnam

Heonik Kwon
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My own way of thinking about the history of war through the plight of war ghosts comes from the fact that such a mode of thought is rooted in Vietnamese cultural tradition and embedded in their everyday life. However, it is also influenced by some innovative historical literature, notably Jay Winter’s powerful work on the European experience of the First World War that approaches the then popular beliefs and artworks about ghosts as a distinctive social form meaningful for the painful process of mass bereavement. In writing this book I am also indebted to ideas from Keith Hart, Caroline Humphrey, and Tim Ingold. I share with Tim the commitment to understand the human practice of animism philosophically, and learned from Caroline the merit of studying religious norms and practices in the context of political history. Keith taught me...
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