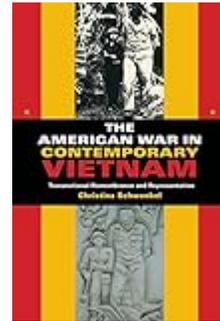




**Christina Schwenkel.** *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. x + 264 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35306-1; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22076-9.



**Reviewed by** David Kieran (American Culture Studies - Washington University in St. Louis)

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## Transnational Tensions: Remembering War in Vietnam

Although cultural studies made what has often been described as the “transnational turn” nearly a decade ago, and though Andreas Huyssen has identified what he terms the “transnational movement of memory discourses,” attention to the legacy of the United States’ lengthy involvement in Vietnam has remained nearly entirely focused on the war’s significance within U.S. domestic culture.[1] The transnational legacy of the United States’ war with Vietnam—the ways in which the war has been remembered in Vietnam, and the implications of those memorial discourses in contemporary transnational cultural politics—has remained understudied. Christina Schwenkel’s *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* is thus a much-needed and long-overdue book. This thoughtfully argued, well-researched book may well become the definitive treatment of the complex ways in which the Second Indochina War has been produced and contested in recent Vietnamese history and the ways in which those memorial debates intersect with the most salient political and cultural questions regarding Viet-

nam’s evolving geopolitical significance and participation in the global economy.[2]

*The American War in Contemporary Vietnam* opens with an account of Bill Clinton’s 2000 visit to Vietnam. This vignette serves well to frame Schwenkel’s central argument. Each of Schwenkel’s three two-chapter sections demonstrates how a range of actors, including government officials; journalists, artists, and public historians; and tourists from within and without Vietnam have used memorial spaces and crafted discourses of remembrance in ways that inform contemporary debates over not only the war’s meaning but also contemporary Vietnamese politics and the nation’s evolving participation in the global economy. Her term “recombinant history,” which she explains “suggests the interweaving of diverse and frequently discrepant transnational memories, knowledge formations, and logics of representation,” provides a useful model for conceptualizing what she explains are the competing narratives and memorial practices mobilized by a range of stakeholders within and without contemporary Vietnam (p.12).

Schwenkel's first section illuminates the tension between American desires to validate past interventions and current policies and Vietnamese efforts to craft alternative discourses. It reveals that efforts by U.S. visitors and exhibit curators to maintain dominant U.S. memorial discourses threaten to silence alternative memories and attention to the war's continuing impact on Vietnamese culture. Turning first to the travels of American veterans to Vietnam and the range of projects that they undertake there, Schwenkel argues that this commemorative and charitable work buttresses anticommunist discourse, valorizes the veteran, and legitimates both past U.S. interventions and contemporary neoliberal economic policies. In contrast, she illuminates the degree to which the quest for healing and reconciliation that was so central to U.S. journeys was largely absent from Vietnamese perspectives, which are instead dominated by a discourse of forgiveness (p. 42). Likewise, in "Requiem," an exhibit of photographs taken by Vietnamese and American journalists killed during the war, images produced by Vietnamese photographers and in which the emphasis on people as active, rational, and creative agents ... served to underscore the humanity, ingenuity, and fortitude of the populace were presented in Vietnam with captions ... in which U.S. ideological modes of historical interpretation tended to dominate, a discourse that government officials in turn sought to edit before the exhibit premiered in the War Remnants Museum (p. 64). Schwenkel's careful unpacking of the multifaceted politics of each of these encounters illuminates the complicated ways in which different national discourses, as well as the competing discourses within individual national contexts, have shaped the war's remembrance and contemporary ideas about Vietnamese cultural politics. Nonetheless, these chapters would benefit from a bit more historicization and context; one wonders, for example, in what ways American veterans' visits to Vietnam, and the meanings they ascribe to them, have evolved since the end of the American war, and how the reception of "Requiem" in Vietnam compared to its initial installation in the United States.

Schwenkel next explores the ways in which state-produced memorial spaces intersect with competing discourses of both transnational and Vietnamese memory, politics, and culture. Here, she offers some of the book's most interesting and subtle analysis, arguing that the war's legacy, increasingly commodified for (primarily American) tourists, officially endeavors to communicate revolutionary values but nonetheless simultaneously creates opportunities for the emergence of mem-

ories that contest official discourse about both the war and contemporary Vietnam (p. 83). At the Cu Chi Tunnels, Schwenkel makes good use of the concept of "recombinant history," revealing that the war functions as both legacy and commodity as she identifies a tourism discourse marked by a politics of reenactment that simultaneously constructs sanitized narratives of heroic resistance and recalls images of a Vietnamese insurgency familiar from U.S. war films. Perhaps most interesting, though, is her account of how some Vietnamese, including former ARVN soldiers who have otherwise been largely marginalized in contemporary Vietnamese culture, have seized upon the space to contest official narratives of the war and critique the socialist government's economic policies. Here, the complicated commodification of the war emerges as a contested terrain informed by a range of national and transnational discourses of remembrance and economics.

Similar ambivalence marks the contested discourses regarding memorial building in contemporary Vietnam. Identifying tension surrounding the funding, design, and construction of memorials, Schwenkel weaves together a range of concerns regarding Vietnamese tourism practices, gender in Vietnamese memorial discourses, and the relationship between economic development and a "memory boom" that follows an economic boom, that are familiar from her earlier chapters as she reads sites ranging from Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum to martyr cemeteries to statues.<sup>[3]</sup> Yet the chapter's true contribution lies in Schwenkel's analysis of memorials' emergence as critical within debates over Vietnamese identity and history. Noting that "artists and intellectuals repeatedly referred to war memorials and monumental sculpture as 'non-Vietnamese' practices of memory," she traces the historical influence and intersections of French colonialist and socialist memorial practices and identifies the uneasiness among some younger memorial designers who advocate a more distinctly Vietnamese national memorial tradition (p. 109). She likewise reveals the way in which recent Vietnamese memorials have adapted and revised earlier traditions and have "engendered a more hybridized style of monumentalization in which 'foreign' structures ... were 'Vietnamized' with the addition of cultural motifs and objects considered 'traditional'" (pp. 129-30). In so doing, the chapter illuminates the intersections of historical transnational memorial practice and the contemporary historical and cultural tensions central to a globalizing Vietnam, tensions that are particularly apparent as the first post-revolutionary generation matures.

As compelling as her reading of these issues and sites is, however, the chapter does not foreground the relationship between shifts in Vietnam's economy and the evolving remembrance of the war to the degree that other chapters do and also quickly passes memorial sites and issues that seem worthy of lengthier discussion. This is particularly the case in her noting, but not exploring, an official's comparison of a memorial to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (p. 140). Given the degree to which the Maya Lin's design has been significant within U.S. culture, this respondent's evident familiarity with it, and her observation elsewhere that many Vietnamese are quite familiar with U.S. culture, some attention to the ways in which U.S. memorial designs have informed or been contested within Vietnamese public memory would augment her argument.

Schwenkel's final section more directly deals with tensions between dominant Vietnamese remembrances of the war and alternative narratives produced elsewhere, particularly within the U.S. government and by international tourists. As she is throughout the book, Schwenkel is attuned to the degree to which Vietnamese museums craft memorial discourses that unite the Vietnamese nation into an imagined moral community of shared historical memories of resistance while eliding stories of suffering and defeat as well as references to troubling elements of postwar Vietnamese politics and culture (p. 152). Yet she also shows that curatorial decisions have been made with an eye towards Vietnam's relationship with its significant trading partners, as when exhibit scripts were revised days prior to the normalization of U.S.-Vietnamese relations. Simultaneously, international visitors—often American tourists—have likewise seized upon the museum to not only challenge the content and but also debate both the meaning of the American war and contemporary U.S. foreign policy. She is particularly insightful in her critique of the extent to which American visitors' focus on propaganda in Vietnamese museums displaced attention away from the violence of U.S. empire conveyed in exhibit photographs to museum officials accused of producing historical untruths (p. 175). Here again, Schwenkel sometimes moves too quickly through her analyses of exhibits, as when she describes an exhibit at the Museum of the Vietnamese Revolution in Hanoi in a single paragraph. Given many of her readers' likely unfamiliarity with these exhibits, the close reading of salient elements of exhibits would lend further context and complexity to her analysis. Nonetheless, in tracing these historical constructions and their circulation, Schwenkel perhaps most clearly demonstrates that

public memory has become a fraught space within the complicated larger discourses of postwar national identity and economic development.

The book's final chapter is devoted to analysis of transnational debates regarding prisoner treatment during the American war and their relevance within discourses of transnational neoliberal economics. A critique of Voice of America's response to the Abu Ghraib scandal is followed with a story recalling American POWs in Vietnam as historical victims that is interesting but which seems somewhat disconnected from the larger argument Schwenkel forwards. Reading government documents and political rhetoric as well as exhibits at Hoa Lo Prison, and recalling the discourses of gender and exclusion that have been central throughout her argument, Schwenkel then convincingly shows that amid U.S. efforts to continually cast Vietnam as having victimized U.S. soldiers, and thus contemporary Vietnamese culture as not fully modern and thus not warranting full participation in global markets, many Vietnamese embrace a narrative in which Vietnam's moral response (good treatment of POWs) to an immoral transgression (U.S. invasion) signified a just and humane history that confirmed Vietnam's membership in a global humanity and the community of civilized nations from which the U.S. has long attempted to exclude it (p. 189). Demonstrating that each nation has sought to legitimize a contemporary economic policy through the production of a discourse of cultural memory, this chapter reveals that the normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations has hardly resolved the war's complex legacies; rather, they have been made to signify in new ways and on behalf of new political issues, and the chapter portends the war's continuing significance in each country's relations.

If there are critiques to be made of Schwenkel's book, they are minor. Although her language occasionally comes across as somewhat stilted—as when she writes “In the previous chapter, it was argued that ...”—and the independent nature of each chapter leads to some repetition of the central theoretical concepts, the book is still well written and accessible, though most appropriate for advanced students and scholars (p. 154). As noted above, there are moments when one wishes for more thorough close readings that would push her claims regarding transnationalism a bit further. As well, the book's passing references to, but examination only in a footnote of, the politics of unrecovered Vietnamese bodies seems something of an omission. It would be interesting to know, and is certainly relevant to Schwenkel's larger argument, how the politics surrounding efforts to

account for those soldiers listed as Missing in Action have figured into contemporary Vietnamese culture, both with regard to efforts to recover Vietnamese remains and to negotiate the demands of the United States.

Nonetheless, these critiques are slight. *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam* makes a compelling, significant, and long-overdue contribution to a growing body of recent scholarship that is interrogating the Vietnam War—or the American War—in increasingly innovative and complicated ways. This well-researched and provocative book is a fine example of transnational, interdisciplinary scholarship that adds an essential dimension to consideration of the war’s legacy. It is essential reading, and it is difficult to imagine teaching a course

on the legacy of U.S. involvement in Indochina without including it.

#### Notes

[1]. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), 14.

[2]. The term is William Turley’s. See *The Second Indochina War: A Concise Political and Military History* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 1.

[3]. On the concept of “Memory Booms,” see Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 1.

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