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War Tourism: Shaping Memory and Perception in Post-War Vietnam

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## **Abstract**

Dark tourism, which is the travel of places associated with death and suffering, can play an important part in a country's economy and construction of historical narratives. Visiting sites associated with the Vietnam War has emerged as a vibrant part of Vietnam's tourist industry, and crowds of foreign tourists can be found at several sites that are dedicated to commemorating the war. Several questions emerge from these sites, concerning the nature of their representation of the war, the reasons tourists visit, the impact on perceptions of visiting tourists, and the ethical implications on local Vietnamese that war tourism creates. This study is an attempt to explore these questions, as well dark tourism's broader relationship to society, and war tourism's relevance to the study of dark tourism and the nature of its existence in a focused case study of Vietnam.

## **Introduction**

When a country emerges from warfare, the way its people decide to confront its legacy of death and suffering plays an integral part in the construction of its national image. Tourism is one of many factors that contribute to representation, but in many cases plays an important role in shaping perception and memory. The existence of what has recently been identified as ‘dark tourism,’ that is, “travel to places associated with death, disaster and destruction” (Sharpley & Stone, 2009, pg 9) has potential to play a large part in constructing a national image, and should be accounted for when studying memory and perception in any country that is in its post-war stage. This is especially relevant for Vietnam, a country that emerged from a brutal and destructive war less than forty years ago, and is still in the process of reconciling this devastating recent past with a burgeoning tourist industry in a modern and globalized world. The exact narrative of the war is still being constructed, and the way that tourism establishments portray the war can contribute to the narrative that tourists ultimately learn.

The Vietnam War is an especially significant war for the current generation for several reasons. It is the first war that the United States fought in and lost, which led to a dramatic change in perception of America by both Americans and the rest of the world. The U.S. went from being an indomitable world superpower to one that was fighting an impossible, futile, and depending on how one views it, a pointless war, exposing the weakness of the U.S.’s governing institutions. It is also a war that is very recent in history, with many of its veterans still surviving. It was devastating both mentally and physically for its participants, and since it occurred so recently, remains a very sensitive subject. This means that tourism establishments concerning the Vietnam War are especially important, particularly those in Vietnam, as they represent the side

of the victor and allow the telling of history to be influenced by a less powerful world player, but one that still has legitimacy and clout in the formation of the war's narrative.

Since the war ended, tourism establishments have been erected in many different areas of Vietnam, including monuments around battle sites, cemeteries honoring war dead, and museums in urban areas. Regardless of whether or not this has been an intentional move on the part of either tourism business-people or the government (or both), war tourism (tourism that focuses on and profits from past wars) has become a vibrant part of Vietnam's tourism industry. These places describe aspects and outcomes of the war and its key events and players, and if these descriptions have legitimacy and are taken seriously, then they become part of understood history by those who consume them. That is not to say that the descriptions and narratives being produced by Vietnam's war tourist establishments are necessarily inaccurate, merely that they have significant power and influence in creating history. However, the question does naturally arise of whether or not the descriptions and narratives match those that might be depicted by a more Western or American perspective, and if not, then how seriously they actually are being taken.

The purpose of this paper is to explore several of the many questions emerging from the development of war tourism in Vietnam and the inevitable cultural narratives being produced as a result of war tourism establishments. Is there a particular uniform image of the Vietnam War being constructed and propagated by these sites? Is this image being influenced by governmental or other interested forces? Who visits these establishments, and how do the establishments affect the memories of the war and perceptions of modern day Vietnam of the visitors? How does the development of war tourism in Vietnam fit into the broader ethical discussion that arises from the increasing popularity of dark tourism in general? Is it okay for certain people to capitalize

and profit from so much death and suffering? Does war tourism have any negative societal consequences for Vietnamese living in Vietnam whom the war may still be very relevant to? By understanding war tourism in Vietnam and the effects it has (intentional or not) on Vietnam's society as well as international visitors, it will be easier to understand how war tourism fits into modern cultures.

## **Literature Review**

First it is necessary to define dark tourism and its various forms and implications in order to understand how war tourism may fit into the study. Though scholars have only recently identified dark tourism as a phenomenon, people have been drawn to places associated with death, suffering, violence, or disaster for as long as they have been able to travel (Stone, 2005). However, since tourism has become dramatically more widespread since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the demand and supply for dark tourism has increased significantly in both size and scope (Sharpley & Stone, 2009). Because of the broad nature of this definition, dark tourism can include travel to a large variety of places, such as collections or museums themed around death and suffering, attractions associated with death, murder and mayhem, and areas commemorating death, fear, fame, or infamy (Dann, 1998). Since it is a relatively recent topic in scholarly research, a number of fundamental questions regarding dark tourism remain unanswered. Most relevant to this study is the question of whether or not dark tourism is tourist-demand or attraction-supply driven, or if it is both (which is most likely), the nature of the relationship between the two (Sharpley & Stone, 2009). There are also moral questions to be considered, such as whether it is ethical to develop, promote, or offer dark sites and attractions for touristic consumption. As Sharpley and Stone (2009) point out, "the rights of those whose death is commoditised or commercialized through dark tourism represent an important ethical dimension

deserving consideration” (pg 8). By considering these questions in the context of a focused case study, it is possible to develop a more thorough understanding of the relationship between dark tourism and its wider sociocultural context. It is still unclear how aware of it governments and tourist companies are when constructing these sites and the cultural narrative that goes along with them, and the degree to which dark tourism plays a role in tourists’ decisions to frequent these sites.

Dark tourism clearly plays a role in both a country’s economy and its image, which some may or may not choose to exploit. Since it has been identified as a phenomenon, several countries have tried to integrate it into their tourism industry. For example, the Cambodian government is in the process of developing the “sun-baked, mine-riddled frontier town” of Anlong Veng into a theme park devoted to the Khmer Rouge, the brutal regime that murdered around 15 percent of Cambodia’s population from 1975-1979 (Burman, 2010, pg 34). According to Burman, the theme park is part of a larger effort of the Cambodian government to capitalize on the atrocities of its past. Other countries, however, choose to directly resist the opportunities dark tourism offers. Although tourism is Croatia’s top industry, in its postwar tourism promotion campaign, the Croatian government chose not to acknowledge its brutal war to foreign audiences, leaving out all opportunities to capitalize on dark tourism, which could potentially be very economically appealing (Rivera, 2008). According to Rivera (2008), this is an effort on the Croatian government’s part to “regain a positive international reputation following the war” (pg 624). This contrasts with neighboring Bosnia, which suffered extensive and visible damage during the war, and where dark tourism has emerged in cities such as Sarajevo and Mostar (Rivera, 2008). Depending on the degree to which a government chooses to integrate war

tourism into the greater tourism industry, war tourism can play a crucial role in constructing a post-war image.

As becomes immediately clear when studying the literature written on the Vietnam War, the acts committed by both sides were atrocious. The My Lai massacre is perhaps the most well-known of the atrocities. In writing on the event, Myra MacPherson describes how “in a morning’s rampage at My Lai, 347 civilians were ruthlessly murdered [by American soldiers]. Rounded up and shot, flung into a drainage ditch and shot. Mowed down by ‘Machine Gun’ Calley in clusters. Women and girls were raped, then murdered. Smoke over My Lai could be seen for miles” (pg 494). Now, according to some reports, My Lai is becoming an appealing area for tourists, whether they are there for the luxurious hotels and golf courses that are being established or the historical attraction that the massacre attached to it (Pringle, 2005). The My Lai site is just one of many war sites in Vietnam today, and there clearly exists an attraction to these sites. However, whether tourists are visiting for the dark attraction or if it is a natural result of a greater opening up of Vietnam’s market economy is unclear.

As Ho Tai (2001) explains, when examining efforts to construct cultural memories of the past, one must take into consideration ‘politics of memory.’ In socialist systems such as Vietnam this is even more relevant, as there is a definite tension between official history and popular memory. In Vietnam these work together to create a cultural memory, as “public activities are ordinarily conducted with close reference to official cultural policies” (pg 7). He goes on to describe how the growth of the tourism industry in Vietnam is allowing “international actors as well as domestic ones play a role in this work of re-vision” (pg 6). This creates another tension between “the uses of the past as a legitimating device and as a means of constructing community and its repackaging as a marketable commodity” (pg 6). The way in which tourism portrays

Vietnam and its history plays a vital part in shaping popular memory and perception, and these tensions must be taken into consideration.

Most of the literature focusing on Vietnam's tourism industry describes only the international actors that help to develop tourism in Vietnam. Kennedy and Williams (2001), in their study of the role of tourism in reshaping the past, describe how the international tourist industry has chosen to construct Vietnam as a nation of colonial pleasures, which "offers to travelers [an] Asian exoticism and mystique, as well as a muted and angerless history" (pg 136). This luxury tourism attracts more elite tourists, who are unconcerned with Vietnam's past and history of war. When they do mention domestic efforts to commercialize the war, they focus on the role of the government in retelling the story of Vietnam's victory for profit, which means that "aspects of the story must be muted and key roles recast to make the story more palatable" (pg 145). Several sites have been identified by Kennedy and Williams (2001) as establishments that have benefited off the telling and commemoration of the war, such as the My Lai massacre site, the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, the Cu Chi tunnels (a network of around 125 miles of underground passageways), and the De-Militarized Zone, which separated North and South Vietnam during the war. However, attention is not given to the tourists themselves and the effects of this retelling on their perceptions of Vietnam.

## **Methods**

I spent a month in Vietnam in an attempt to fill in some of the gaps in the literature. My efforts were mainly focused on the ways in which tourist establishments associated with and focusing on the Vietnam War affect the perceptions of the war of visiting tourists. The literature written on post-war tourism in Vietnam is surprisingly silent on this matter, but it is an important issue to understand when considering the wider development of post-war cultural narratives. I

took an ethnographic approach, travelling through the country as a typical tourist would (using the transportation typical of tourists and stopping in the most obvious tourist destinations), stopping at places that have been identified as tourist sites concerning the war. I relied heavily on popular guidebooks, such as the Lonely Planet and Rough Guides, as well as talks with locals and other tourists, to determine which cities to stop in and what tourist destinations to seek out. By doing this, I was able to effectively visit all the most frequented war tourism establishments, as well as some that are not as popular.

I began my journey in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, and worked my way south to end in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam). Along the way I stopped in the cities of Dong Ha, Hue, Hoi An, and Vung Tau to visit nearby sites. The establishments I visited that were solely dedicated to the war include the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the Son My Memorial (My Lai), some ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) sites nearby Vung Tau, the War Remnants Museum, and the Cu Chi Tunnels. There were also many museums and tourist sites I visited that were either loosely related to the war or had exhibits dedicated to the war, such as the Hao Loa Prison Museum and two separate military history museums.

My plan was to interview international, English-speaking tourists at each of these sites to determine their reactions and understanding of the war after visiting the sites. However, as I soon found out, it was the off-season for foreign tourists and English-speaking visitors were sparse outside of a select few sites, so I found myself relying more on field observation (I took detailed field notes, observing things such as the rhetoric used at the sites, the types of information that was displayed, and my own personal reactions) as well as talks with my tour guides when I was not able to speak with other tourists. I also relied on my own critical understanding of the

emotional impact these sites create to determine the effect they have on visitors, keeping in mind that I am a young American who grew up in a generation removed from the Vietnam War. After I returned from Vietnam, I found that visiting tourism websites such as trip advisor and the lonely planet and reading the user comments was a helpful tool in determining the reactions and thoughts of tourists, and I was able to find much of the information that I would have otherwise asked tourists on the spot. Through the combination of focused research, detailed observation, and informal interviews, I was able to come to a closer understanding of how war tourism sites in Vietnam affect memories and perceptions of the war today.

## **Findings**

### *Who visits what*

The biggest obstacle to my research that became immediately apparent was the fact that I visited Vietnam during the tourist off-season, meaning that apart from the major tourist destinations, foreign tourists were relatively sparse. However, while it may have given me a different perspective on tourism than if I had visited at a different time, it actually showed a pretty revealing pattern of the popular sites to visit, and why they might be so popular. The general conclusion I reached concerning the war establishments that tourists visit in Vietnam is that war tourism is not particularly popular for places that are out of the way of the standard tourist trail and major cities. By far the most popular war tourism establishments with foreign tourists were the Cu Chi tunnels and the War Remnants Museum, both of which are located either very near to or in Ho Chi Minh City. Other sites which one may expect to be more popular, such as the Demilitarized Zone and the Son My Memorial, were relatively far from major cities, and thus the amount of tourists visiting were dramatically less.

The first major war tourism destination I visited, where I was expecting to find a significant number of tourists, was the Demilitarized Zone. After skimming the DMZ section of my guidebook, I determined that the city of Dong Ha would be the best starting point for a tour of the area due to its proximity, but I was the only foreign tourist I saw the entire time I stayed in the city and hardly anybody spoke any English (which indicates that foreign tourists do not stop in the city often). After further investigation, I found out that most tours actually leave from Hue, a much bigger city that is further away but more popular with tourists, but even within the DMZ itself there are very few tourists, and the majority of them are domestic (I saw quite a few Vietnamese soldiers, as the government apparently subsidizes the army to visit war tourism establishments as way to thank them for their service).

The Son My Memorial, which commemorates the most infamous and shocking atrocity of the war, was equally devoid of foreign tourists. Before I came to Vietnam I was expecting this to be one of the most popular war tourism sites in the country, since most people are familiar with the My Lai massacre and recognize the importance it carried in the war. However, after I visited the DMZ I had my doubts, since it is pretty far away from any major city, and indeed I saw no other foreign tourists during the time I spent there (though there were more Asian tourists visiting). Prior to my visit, I had read of the development of luxury hotels on the beach of My Khe, approximately 3 kilometers away from the memorial, and when I went to investigate there were indeed many people on the beach, but they all seemed to be domestic tourists and the beach was littered with trash (which was much different than the immaculately kept beaches of the popular tourist areas, indicating that not many foreign tourists actually visit My Khe). I was surprised by the lack of foreign tourists at both of these sites; in my opinion they are the most interesting and educational of the war tourism establishments in Vietnam, and offer much more

freedom to explore and ask questions than other more-visited sites like the Cu Chi tunnels (though this is probably precisely because they are not as often visited). I asked my guides for both the Son My Memorial and the DMZ if they took many foreign tourists out on tours of the respective areas, and they both said that a lot of foreign tourists that take private tours (which is what I was doing) are Veterans of the war who are returning to visit various war sites. As was mentioned, I did see a group of foreign tourists arriving at the DMZ from Hue, but these tours are often criticized for being more driving than seeing due to the distance (Atkinson, et. al., 2012), and I got the impression that they are not actually very popular. It seems that if somebody really wants an in-depth and educational tour of the DMZ they should take a private tour from Dong Ha like I did, but since I was the only foreign tourist I saw in the entire city and it pretty obviously was not a town catered to tourists (no English speaking restaurants, only one guesthouse, etc.), private tours from Dong Ha are clearly not very popular.

The War Remnants Museum and the Cu Chi Tunnels, located in and near Ho Chi Minh City, were by far the most popular and heavily advertised war tourism establishments – it was actually a bit of a shock spending so much time at empty war tourism establishments and then visiting such crowded sites. In these cases, the way that the sites were advertised did not seem to try to differentiate them from other mainstream tourist attractions. Both of these sites were portrayed as part of the standard tourist trail – somewhere that one should visit to receive the overall cultural experience of Vietnam. In tour offices all over HCMC the Cu Chi Tunnels are listed near the top of the attractions, accompanied by pictures of smiling tourists crawling through caves. On the way to the tunnels (about an hour ride out of the city), tour busses stop at a handicraft workshop where workers show how traditional crafts are made and allow tourists to purchase them if desired. Also on the way our guide taught us some basic Vietnamese, told us

facts about Vietnam, and sang us a “traditional” song from the Mekong Delta (though it was all in English, so it clearly was not that traditional). The site itself was lined with gift shops selling wares that had absolutely no relevance to the war or the tunnels, allowing others in the tourism industry to profit off of war tourism. On the way back from the tunnels, the first stop the bus made was to the War Remnants Museum, before stopping next at the market, which was described as “great for tourists.” Throughout the entire tour, I felt more as if I was on a cruise that distances tourists from the local population, effectively ‘othering’ them, rather than immersing myself into the world of the people who lived in the tunnels and understanding what it was like to be them.

These sites became part of a wider tourist experience rather than an exclusive and sought after niche in Vietnam’s tourism industry, as opposed to the other two aforementioned sites, which require time and commitment to get there. From my observations and conversations with tourists, it seems as if the typical tourist will go to only the War Remnants Museum and Cu Chi Tunnels, whereas one would only visit the other sites (including the smaller ones like the Anzac sites around Vung Tau) if they have some kind of personal connection with the war, or are a domestic Asian tourist. Several of the tourists I spoke with at both the Museum and Tunnels, when asked if they were planning on visiting any other tourist establishments associated with the war, said that they would visit the other HCMC site (or other tourist establishments loosely connected to the war in HCMC, like the old capital building of Saigon that housed the government of South Vietnam and currently has an exhibit on the fall of Saigon) but were not planning on visiting other sites like the DMZ either on their current trip or a future one (unless they happened to be near the area). All of them mentioned that they do have at least a little interest in the war, though, and believe it is important to visit these sites. Hanoi, the next biggest

city in Vietnam, is a similar story, but there are not really any strictly war associated establishments in the city. However, there were several establishments loosely affiliated with the war, such as the Hoa Lo Prison Museum, which housed American prisoners during the war, as well as the Women's Museum, which had an exhibit on the role of women during the war. Both of these had numerous visitors, all of whom were foreign, but because they are not strictly war tourism establishments, it is difficult to draw conclusions on the extent to which these tourists concern themselves with the war or are merely just visiting the main tourist attractions in Hanoi. My general conclusion about the places foreign tourists visit, though, is that the average tourist will only visit the sites that are easy to access and that are on the standard tourist trail, as part of a wider Vietnamese cultural experience. As a result, they usually receive a streamlined and packaged war tourism experience, whereas if they were to visit other sites as well they could develop a well-rounded and less mainstream understanding of how the various war tourism sites depict the war.

### *Worldwide opposition*

Overall, a certain amount of communist nationalism was evident in most all the war tourism establishments I visited. The way that the war is portrayed does not necessarily contradict what one would learn from a more Western or American perspective, but it certainly supports a view that is sympathetic to the Vietnamese. At some sites the strong nationalist rhetoric used and image of the war portrayed is more evident than at others, but there does seem to be an overall trend that accompanies all the sites.

For example, basically all the museums I visited (even those that weren't strictly dedicated to the war, like the Hoa Lo Prison Museum) contained an exhibit on international protests and opposition to the war. These leaned fairly heavily on the side of propaganda, as in the case of the

Prison Museum it was pretty irrelevant to the overall museum, and I got the impression that just because there was a section on Vietnam's war the museum used that as an excuse of sorts to include a section on resistance. The rhetoric used against America in the resistance sections of the museum was very strong, and made it seem as if every person in every country that was listed was strongly against the war. It is safe to assume that some people around the world were in favor of the war, but none of the representations included this. Even though I was coming from the perspective of an American who believes the war was misguided and unnecessary, I still felt a little uncomfortable at times. For example, in multiple museums there was a display of an American man praised as a hero because during the war he burned himself to death in protest. The museums treat him as a martyr, but I found it difficult to revere the death of a person even if it is for an important cause. However, for the museums that venerate him, he is portrayed as a man fighting with his life (the biggest sacrifice one can make) to end a morally unjust war and his death is celebrated.

The representation of America clearly being opposed to the rest of world, without any complicated domestic political issues or variation within other countries, helps to show the unique and in some ways simplified portrayal of the war these places depict. It is not as if the displays were misleading anybody about the war – it was certainly tremendously unpopular around the world and many people went to drastic lengths to express their contempt for it. It is merely the fact that the exhibit is so blatantly included in so many museums, whether or not it is completely relevant, and ignores those who did support the war. These displays give the war a sense of moral significance, where there is a clear bad side and good side, and those who protested were clearly on the side of the good.

*The U.S. war against humanity*

The overwhelming impression I received after visiting Vietnam's various war tourism establishments supports the idea that America was on the morally unjust side of the war, and North Vietnam was fighting to protect humanity. The rhetoric used in this regard was very strong against the Americans, focusing almost exclusively on American cruelties while praising the Vietnamese and ignoring any atrocities that may have occurred on the side of the Vietnamese. Of course, not every site was exactly the same, but after visiting most of the tourism establishments associated with the war in Vietnam, it becomes easy to notice this general trend.

Even in establishments that were not strictly devoted to the war, like the Hoa Lo Prison Museum, an image of America being the cruel aggressor against a defenseless and humane Vietnam was noticeable. The museum focused on all the cruel and horrible treatment the Vietnamese received under the French colonialists and then heralded the way the Vietnamese treated American prisoners during the war. The walls of most of the prison were lined with photos of Vietnamese prisoners being tortured by the hands of the French, allowing visitors to sympathize with Vietnamese suffering. The American section, though, contained only photos of smiling Americans, accompanied by descriptions of how well they were treated, all the activities they were allowed to do, the religious freedom they enjoyed, and the souvenirs and ceremonies they received upon their release. Also displayed was the suit American senator John McCain was wearing when he was captured and became a POW detained in Hoa Lo. Next to his gear were pictures of him seemingly happy, as well as his wounds being cared for by Vietnamese doctors, leading one to think that he was perfectly safe and content in Hoa Lo. However, Senator McCain himself has spoken of his time at the prison, describing how he was brutally tortured and beaten (Schwenkel, 2009). It is probably very true that the Vietnamese were ill-treated by the French,

but the fact that they completely ignore American suffering illustrates how tourism establishments tend to create an image of victimization on the side of the Vietnamese.

This portrayal of prison life during the war contrasts pretty heavily with the exhibit on prisons in the War Remnants Museum, which contains shocking displays of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong suffering at the hands of the Americans and the South Vietnamese government. Visitors are allowed to see mock plastic prisoners despairing over their solitary confinement adjacent to setups of tiger cage cells which allow hardly any room for movement without being punctured by piercing barbed wire. Lining the walls of the model prison are pictures of mutilated bodies and descriptions of torture methods used on Communist prisoners during the war, some of which are so shocking that I felt myself getting sick (most of them included nails or electric shocks forcibly inserted into bodily orifices or various types of burying alive). I noticed other tourists having the same type of reaction I did, and some people had tears in their eyes as well. There is no reason to believe that any of the information given on prison life is untrue, and the way Vietnamese Communist prisoners were handled is certainly despicable, but the museum neglects the infamously cruel way American prisoners were treated at the hands of the Communists. As a report by the Center for POW Studies (Hain, et. al.) describes, “The North Vietnamese tortured their prisoners severely and over a long period of time. They starved them, exposed them to the extremes of heat and cold, denied them medical care, and abused their wounds.” It is clear that brutal torture and terrible prison conditions can be accused of both sides, but the Remnants Museum and other establishments in Vietnam portraying prison conditions would lead one to believe that the Vietnamese were the sole victims of prison aggression.

The rest of the War Remnants Museum continues to lament American aggression, and fully supports the image of North Vietnamese victimization and American war crimes that other war

tourism establishments in the country contribute to. The museum uses dramatic rhetoric and intense imagery to make obvious the fact that America devastated the country during the war (with the consequences of actions such as chemical bombing still ongoing today). In fact, the history of the museum's name itself highlights the probable agenda that it has tried to propagate. When first established in 1975, it was called "The House for Displaying War Crimes of American Imperialism and the Puppet Government [of South Vietnam]," in an attempt to denounce American Aggression. It was later called the "Museum of American War Crimes," then the "War Crimes Museum," until 1993 when it received its current name after liberalization and strengthening relations with the United States (Murta).

It can be assumed that a decrease of the nationalist propaganda inside the museum followed the de-intensification of the name, but there is still a clear one-sidedness in most all of the exhibits. Several of the exhibits in the museum were named in a way that already helps to incline the visitor to agree with the Vietnamese side. For example, there is the room on "Agent Orange Aftermath in the U.S. Aggressive War in Vietnam," which displays the terrible and long-lasting effects chemical bombing had on both Vietnam's environment and population, as well as "Historic Truths," which describes the lead-up to the war as being orchestrated entirely by the U.S. because it wanted to keep its cheap supply of tin and tungsten. In the first room, visitors see the United States as a thoughtless, destructive, and sadistic invader, which is supported in the other room, where a few regrettable phrases by politicians are presented as "truths." The rest of the museum is presented in a similar manner: all the civilians who were killed as a result of the war are depicted as completely innocent villagers tragically murdered, tortured, and interrogated at the hands of American aggressors. There are detailed and gruesome descriptions of massacres led by U.S. soldiers, and the U.S. was repeatedly accused of committing "war crimes" and even

“genocide.” The exhibit on Agent Orange was the most difficult to confront for me, as it is filled with pictures of mutilated victims (many of whom are children born from those affected) and devastated terrain. Next to the photos is displayed a letter from an Agent Orange victim and activist to President Obama requesting compensation and demanding he take legal action against the chemical companies who developed and sold Agent Orange to the U.S. army. After perusing the museum (which I did several times on different days), it is almost impossible not to be overcome with some sort of strong emotion – mine was usually disgust at the United States government and soldiers in the war who allowed so many atrocities to occur.

While there is no reason to think anything described in the museum is untrue, it still may be misleading<sup>1</sup> to those who visit having little or no prior knowledge of the Vietnam War. There is no doubt that the Vietnamese suffered immensely as a result of the U.S. invasion, but that does not mean that they did not commit any atrocities either. For example, in what has become known as the Dak Son Massacre, the Viet Cong carried out an attack on the hamlet of Dak Son for allegedly giving aid to refugees fleeing the Viet Cong, resulting in the death of 252 civilians (Time). The death tally in this massacre is certainly not as high as the My Lai Massacre, but it would seem that a museum that claims to report the “historical truths” would be interested in including such a seemingly relevant occurrence. The fact that the Dak Son Massacre is not included in the museum suggests that there is some sort of nationalist agenda being supported by the museum.

Most of all the other war tourism establishments I visited had some degree of suggestive nationalism in their telling of the Vietnam War narrative. Both the Military History museums in

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word “misleading” assuming that the reader comes from a Western background and is educated similarly. Surely, the historical education that Westerners receive may be completely inaccurate, or perhaps just different than a Vietnamese understanding, and there is no way to know the absolute truth of history. In this sense, “misleading” is used to suggest that the representation of the war at these sites could potentially lead the visitor away from a Western understanding of the occurrences of the Vietnam War.

Vietnam (one in Hanoi and the other in HCMC) are essentially the same – they are littered with old war paraphernalia like tanks and helicopters on the outside grounds, and inside are pictures and descriptions of many of the military successes the Vietnamese military has had in recent history (as can be expected, depictions of military failures are not included). The DMZ is spread out over many miles, but within the zone are several monuments of nationalist pride, such as one that was built on top of a former U.S. military outpost but was overthrown when, as the statue depicts, the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong worked together. There is also a small museum right on the old border between North and South Vietnam dedicated to the events occurring in and around the DMZ during the war. Even this small museum which was devoid of tourists used exaggerated rhetoric in its descriptions of occurrences; an example being the relocation of civilians to temporary camps by Americans being described as the forcible movement of “innocent” villagers to “concentration camps.” Even during the tour of the Vinh Moc tunnels in the DMZ (a network of underground tunnels that housed an entire village of around four hundred people for five years) my guide focused only on the remarkable cunning of the tunnel builders and the small museum on the site was dedicated to the strength of the villagers to endure such troubles, while any weaknesses of the tunnels were left out. After visiting all these different sites, I was struck by the lengths the descriptions went to portray the Communists as an unbeatable force on a mission of moral and almost holy significance to remove the imperialist American invaders from their country.

The tour of the Cu Chi Tunnels was the only occasion that stood out as a different type of tourist experience. While the Viet Cong were certainly marveled at by visitors when being shown their ingenious secret entrances and cunning traps, there was a certain distance being created from the war for the visitor. The war became an experience to enjoy, as tourists are

allowed to shoot AK-47s and M16s at targets for prizes and compete to see who can make it furthest down the tunnels before getting claustrophobic. It is a much different experience than being confronted with the atrocities of the war, as you are forced to do at the War Remnants Museum, and I felt instead as if the war became part of a fantastical story from another lifetime that can be treated lightly and enjoyed (the guide incessantly made jokes about the things we experienced – for example, “Okay, see you in Cambodia!” when a tourist used a trap door to pretend to hide from enemies). This experience was in a sense the opposite of confronting the atrocities of the war, as the tour was an effective tool of ‘other-ing’ those involved in the war and the intense conditions they faced. Even though this site treats war tourism as an experience rather than a confrontation, everything that we saw and were told supports the image of Vietnamese ingenuity against a malevolent foreign force.

There definitely is a distinct image being presented in the telling of the narrative of the Vietnam War by these various war tourism establishments, which supports a potential Communist nationalist agenda. To be fair, it could merely be the way the Vietnamese have learned history and are sharing it with visitors, and not in fact an intentional political move on the part of the creators of the narratives to create calculated representations. Despite the reasons though, there are certainly important perspectives of the Vietnam War that are not included, and because of this the telling of the War allow tourists to sympathize with a slightly exaggerated account of Vietnamese suffering and to loathe a seemingly victimless and destructively imperialist United States. There is no doubt that Vietnam suffered terribly and still suffers today because of cruelties from the U.S. – on both the bureaucratic level in the government and chemical companies as well as the personal level on the ground. However, the potentially very

relevant and helpful perspectives of victims of Vietnamese aggression are not included, which may incline a tourist to feel differently about the war.

### *How tourists respond*

I found that most the people I spoke with and observed at the various war tourism establishments I visited seemed fairly well-educated and knowledgeable about the war. It is true that places like the Cu Chi Tunnels and War Remnants Museum are an essential part of the standard tourist trail, and are described by tourist pamphlets and offices as the most popular and fascinating places to visit. However, that does not mean that tourists are completely complacent in their choices of where to visit, and will likely only visit war tourism establishments if they have at least a passing interest in the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War is, after all, one of the defining occurrences in Vietnam's history, and it is only logical that tourists visiting historical museums in Vietnam are interested in Vietnam and its history, so it is not a surprise that this was my finding.

The general consensus I received after speaking with tourists and perusing travel websites is that visitors do seem to recognize to a certain degree the trend described above. As one man said about the War Remnants Museum, "it is biased yes, but to a degree you'll find that in any memorial or museum," and he would expect an American telling of the war narrative to be biased toward the American perspective. Everybody I talked to after spending time in the museum, while they did believe the exhibits to be slightly one-sided, seemed to think that the one-sidedness was not too strong or exclusionary, as many atrocities were actually committed by the Americans and it would be wrong not to face them. One Australian woman told me after recognizing the prejudiced view of the exhibits that she thinks "everybody should come [to the museum] and face the atrocities that happened, particularly Australians and Americans because

they were so involved.” If this is to be taken as the prevailing view of visitors to the museum, then it seems many foreign tourists are willing to forgive the supposed one-sidedness of the war’s portrayal due to the significance of the events being depicted.

Indeed, many people seemed very moved (as I similarly was) by the museum. In my observations I occasionally saw tears in the eyes of tourists, and there was a kind of oppressive seriousness weighing down on all the visitors, which made at least me (and it seemed others) feel solemn and grim. The emotional impact that the museum was able to create is profound, and seemed to move tourists in deep ways. One couple described the museum as “compelling and sobering” and said that it reinforced their notion that the Vietnam War was unfounded and wrong, while another man called the pictures “horrible” but was glad to have visited (indicating that he received some sort of personal benefit from the visit). When asked over email what she was expecting from the museum and whether or not it met her expectations, one woman said that she was “expecting [it] to be emotionally challenging...that experience was beyond my expectations and inspired me to do further research on the topic of Agent Orange and its presence in Vietnam and in Vietnamese/US relations and politics.” She also expressed strong feelings of anti-war and US policy sentiment, which she says she did not possess prior to her visit. It is clear that the War Remnants Museum, and presumably other war tourism sites which similarly portray the war, has a strong and significant emotional impact on tourists. Though nobody I talked to was pro-war before their visit, everybody was adamantly anti-war immediately after and the museum clearly played a significant role in influencing these feelings. From scanning travel websites, it seems that most other people who comment feel very similarly.

From these findings, one can potentially conclude that war tourism establishments do indeed affect popular memories and perceptions of the war of visiting tourists. It seems that after

visiting, most tourists feel moved to have strong feelings against the war and US involvement in it. The war tourism establishments in Vietnam have the effect of giving visitors a reason to loathe the United States and no reason to have negative feelings toward the Communists.

## **Conclusion**

War tourism establishments in Vietnam create a very confronting experience for visiting tourists, and the representations of the war, which illustrate an especially negative image of the U.S., urge tourists to take a strong political stance that is sympathetic with the Vietnamese Communist government. As was discussed previously, ethical issues have been raised by the promotion and development of dark tourism, which Vietnam's war tourism may help to discuss. One could say that, if Vietnam's portrayal of the war is indeed "one-sided," then visiting tourists may be moved to feel a certain way politically (anti-war) based on contradictory information. Additionally, certain people are making money from the war (some places, like the Cu Chi Tunnels, charged relatively steep prices, when considering the relative cost of everything else in Vietnam), which caused so much death and suffering and continues to affect many lives. It was pretty obvious in my visit to these war tourism establishments that the vast majority of tourists to visit were foreign. This means that one could also say that those who profit from the war are in a sense exploiting a base that, for the most part, has no grounded connection to the war and does not actually know firsthand what it was like to be living in Vietnam during a time of war, whereas the war was recent enough that many of the Vietnamese do (and even those who were born after the war still have to deal with the consequences, like genetic mutations from Agent Orange and environmental devastation). For foreigners, the war is an interesting tourist distraction, but for the people of the country they are visiting it is still very present and relevant.

These considerations can be weighed against the other, potentially positive societal effects war tourism establishments may have.

In the War Remnants Museum on the very top floor is an exhibit titled “Requiem” which is an extraordinary photo journalistic collection compiled by several international actors and donated to the museum, so it thus for the most part escapes the themes of representation evident in the rest of the museum. The exhibit is indeed allegedly intended not to take sides and is meant only to show the effects war has on the people involved in it. Within the exhibit is a spotlight on one of the most innovative and well-respected Vietnam War photographers, Larry Burrows, an Englishman who was shot down in Laos. In regards to the purpose of war documentation, he is quoted saying “and so often I wonder whether it is my right to capitalize, as I feel so often, on the grief of others. But then I justify in my own particular thoughts, by feeling that I can contribute a little to the understanding of what others are going through; then there is a reason for doing it.” This is quote is admittedly from an American who had a Western understanding of the war, but the fact that it is included in the collection suggests that it is a general sentiment that education can outweigh the potential ethical dilemmas of profiting from war occurrences. In this sense, if the purpose of these establishments is to educate visitors in the most honest way possible of the causes, circumstances, and effects of war then it makes sense and should perhaps even be encouraged to develop places concerning the war for tourists to visit.

As has been discussed, the presentation of the Vietnam War in many of Vietnam’s war tourism establishments is subtly unique from typical Western depictions, so, intentionally or not, it does not fully represent the war to the Western standard that Burrows would probably have understood. However, I found that the sites handle what could be considered the most important and dramatic events of the war fairly pragmatically. The most infamous and probably horrible

massacre of the war was the My Lai Massacre, and I found that the Son My Memorial commemorated it relatively soberly. In the museum there is the usual dramatic telling of historical occurrences (a U.S. “aggressive war against Vietnam”) but when it comes to the telling of the massacre, it seems actually comparatively impartial. It definitely makes clear who the ‘bad guys’ were (the Americans who perpetrated the massacre) and understandably has absolutely no sympathy for them, but there is also a section describing heroic Americans who saved many lives and tried to stop the massacre. There is also a very touching monument behind the museum that seems to be depicting the strength of the villagers in the face of such aggression and terror, but does not explicitly insinuate the U.S. as an entity in direct “genocidal” actions, as is casually done in other, less sensitive places. Some dramatic rhetoric and exaggerated depiction of the war as a whole is still present here, but the fact that they tell the narrative of the massacre with a regard for both sides shows that the most important (arguably) and contentious events are given much more careful consideration.

I found that my guide for the DMZ is an interesting figure to examine when considering the various ethical issues surrounding war tourism in Vietnam. In regard to the issue of representation, he seemed to recognize the fact that many tourists may feel off-put by what could be considered the one-sidedness evident in the sites. For example, he tried to dispel some of the propaganda in the DMZ museum: when he showed me the sign calling temporary relocation centers “concentration camps” he made clear that they were not in fact concentration camps, but were merely established to keep civilians safe from war zones. The fact that he clarified this suggests that he is used to tourists reacting perhaps fairly strongly toward this description, and was hoping to appeal to a more positive reaction – regardless of the reason though, if some of those in charge of personally representing the war are trying to be ‘honest’ in their depiction and

clarifications then perhaps this can serve to counteract the potential ethical grievances involved in Vietnam's representations. This man is also an interesting case regarding the personal connection of Vietnamese to the war. He was a student during the war, and while he moved south to study in Saigon, he still had many friends and family in Dong Ha at the time. When I asked him if he knew anybody who actually lived in the Vinh Moc tunnels he curtly answered yes and did not elaborate – he similarly evaded other personal questions concerning the war. It is hard to know whether this reluctance to talk is merely a cultural inclination or if I was actually asking questions that were very personal to him. Either way though, at times during our tour I felt almost intrusive, as if I was invading a profoundly personal and emotional experience to satisfy my own tourist whims. However, the tour my guide gave me is part of how he makes his living, and he seemed to rather enjoy it (he was full of smiles and conversation throughout the tour) – plus, compared to many other Vietnamese I saw on the streets, he appeared to be relatively successful. War tourism seems to provide many Vietnamese with decent jobs, and while the money brought to local populations certainly is not enough to counteract the damage done during the war, many people do depend on it for money now and it seems to have become an important part of the economy.

My guide can be seen as an exemplification of the rest of Vietnamese society's relation to the war and its modern manifestations in tourism. It does seem that the majority of Vietnamese have either moved on from the war, or the new generation coming of age is unconcerned; I often saw Vietnamese wearing American flag t-shirts, and locals would often approach me to either engage in conversation, or if I was in, say, a bar, would buy me drinks – clearly there is very little animosity left among Vietnamese toward Americans. However, if one looks closely signs of the war are still very evident: bomb craters litter the countryside and crippled Agent Orange

victims in cheap makeshift wheelchairs dot the cities. There is still a generation in Vietnam that is very personally connected to the war, and depending on how they feel about tourism exploiting the suffering that occurred, war tourism could be a very intrusive and psychologically damaging phenomenon. Of course, the feelings of and impacts on Vietnamese regarding the existence of war tourism establishments is beyond the scope of this research, but it is important to keep them in mind when considering how exactly Vietnam portrays the war through these sites. The overall sentiment of Anti-Americanism that the war fostered in Vietnam could possibly play a large role in the decision to portray the war as it is, both in the immediate aftermath of the war as well as in the present day. However, the most streamlined and mainstream sites do not seem to live up to Larry Burrows' ethical standard, which it seems many believe to be the only logical justification of war tourism (besides the economic benefits), and if the Western view is to be taken as a standard, they should look more to places such as the Son My Memorial, which gives a more pragmatic discussion of the war occurrences.

The above ethical discussion is grounded solely on surface observation, and it would require an entirely new study to fully examine the implications war tourism has for local Vietnamese. However, I find it to be a fitting conclusion to my research because it helps to understand how war tourism fits into the broader discussion of dark tourism and the way it affects society. After the war, the world had to come to terms with a destructive and horrible period of death and suffering, and in doing so created unique narratives of the war, which include separate pieces of history in their telling. War tourism emerged as an effective tool of conveying Vietnam's representation, and tourists found themselves confronting the atrocities of the war in a very specific way. As this study has shown, Vietnam's war tourism allows tourists to both easily access a streamlined version of the war as well as side with what may be a simplified

understanding. As the ethical conversation illustrates, this has far-reaching consequences for both visiting tourists and Vietnamese society as a whole.

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