

Remembering the Cold War

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Abstract

An Asian Cold War modernity does not exist; the various communities in Asia did not experience the Cold War in an identical way. Nonetheless, it is important to find ways to reconcile these radically different historical experiences and related divergent historical memories of the global conflict in Asia. This is because reconciliation remains a vital, unresolved issue of public policy in the international sphere, relevant to efforts to build up transnational solidarity in the face of common threats to human security. One means for effecting reconciliation may be discovered on a much smaller scale, in the intimate spheres of human life. In this paper, I examine two such spheres: the first is a village in the southeastern region of the Korean peninsula, a village once known as the region's *moskba* (Moscow)—the wartime reference for a communist stronghold; the second is a humble shrine in Danang, Vietnam for a Vietnamese grandmother who lost her life amidst the crisis of the First Indochina War.

Keywords: Cold War, communism, ethnography, reconciliation, shrine, South Korea, Vietnam

Introduction

The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 was a momentous event in recent history, not only for Berliners and Europeans but also for the world. It signalled the end of a divided Europe and an opening of artificial borders. The consequences of this opening are now bitterly contested, and sadly so; I am thinking in particular of the recent EU referendum in the United Kingdom and its disturbing result. Despite these contestations, there is no question that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing end of the Cold War in 1989–1991 were celebratory events long hoped for. It was supposed to end the generalized enmity of the long twentieth century and open up a new era of broader amity among peoples and nations. The Charter of Paris agreed upon by a broad group of European state leaders in November 1990 states: “The era of confrontation and division of Europe has ended. We declare that henceforth our relations will be founded on respect and co-operation.”

The question I raise today is not about what has happened to the spirit of 1989 or why it has become increasingly difficult to see the living legacy of that time in Europe’s public discourse and sentiment today. There is a profound irony in the Brexit move and other related developments in Europe now; these are taking place right in the middle of the important 2014–2018 centennial commemoration of World War I—a war whose destructive repercussions gave birth to the modern political idea of Europe. What I want to think about today instead concerns the very meaning of the end of the Cold War and how to place Asia in relation to this great rupture in modern history. We know that the Cold War divided the world into East and West, and we believe that the end of the Cold War removed this division. My question today is whether there are other divisions in the history of the Cold War and in our collective memory of the global conflict. If such divisions exist, what can be done about them?

Different Memories of the Cold War

My answer to the first question is that there are indeed formidable divisions in our memories of the Cold War. This was made evident

by some recent experience of mine. In March 2015, I had the pleasure of attending the inaugural meeting of the Berlin Center for Cold War Studies in Humboldt University and, then, in February 2015, a meeting in preparation for the Korean Association for Cold War Studies at the Asia Center in Seoul National University. While equally exciting, these two events displayed rather different atmospheres. The Berlin meeting was decisively one of historical reflection, consisting primarily of historians of modern Germany and those specializing in the international history of the Cold War (I was the only non-historian to attend this meeting). It clearly represented the change in Cold War studies since the 1990s from a field of social science to that of historical research. In the Seoul meeting, however, it was not clear to me whether the conference was approaching the Cold War as a subject of historical research or rather as one of contemporary history. My impression was that this meeting had two foci. In one respect, it sought to discuss the Cold War as a historical question in relation to global horizons; however, when the conversation covered conditions in the Korean peninsula and in broader northeast Asia, issues of the Cold War appeared to be much more ethnographical than historical as they concerned phenomena and developments here and now rather than from a bygone era. There was another notable difference between the two events and their invoked ideas of the Cold War. Unlike in the Berlin meeting, during the Korean one, the very idea of the Cold War seemed somewhat controversial and even contradictory, having to include as it did the human experience of a radical socio-political crisis at odds with what the term “Cold War” usually stands for.

Let me illustrate this contradiction of the Cold War using some of my recent ethnographic work in rural Korea: In the southeastern region of the Korean peninsula, there is a village once known as the region’s *moskba* (Moscow)—the wartime reference for a communist stronghold. Each year, people originally from this village return to their homeland in order to join a ceremony held on behalf of their family and village ancestors, mainly to visit their ancestral graves. On most occasions, relatives from distant places are pleased to meet each other and exchange news—but not always.

After the visit to the gravesites, a man cautiously suggested to

his lineage elders recently that the family might consider repairing a neglected ancestral tomb, and the harmony of the family meal was broken. One elder left the room in fury, while others remained silent throughout the ceremonial meal. The man who proposed the idea was the adopted son of the person buried in the neglected tomb, having been selected as such by the family elders for a ritual purpose. The elder whom he had offended happened to be a close relative of the deceased. The ancestor had been a prominent anti-colonial communist youth activist before he died at a young age in a colonial prison without leaving a descendent. The elder's siblings were among the several dozen village youths who left the village together with the retreating communist army during the chaos of the Korean War (1950–1953). The elder believes that this catastrophe in village history and family continuity could have been avoided if the ancestor buried in the neglected tomb had not brought the seeds of “red ideology” to the village in the first place. To him, beautifying the ancestral tomb was unacceptable, since he believed that some of his close kinsmen had lost, because of the ancestor, the social basis on which they could be properly remembered as family ancestors.

The morality of ancestor remembrance is as strong in Vietnamese cultural tradition as it is in Korean. These two countries also share the common historical experience of being important sites and symbols in Asia for American leadership in the global struggle against international communism. Since the end of the 1980s, when the Vietnamese political leadership initiated a general economic reform and regulated political liberalization in the country, there has been a strong revival of ancestral rituals in Vietnamese villages. Such rituals were previously discouraged by the state hierarchy who regarded them as being incompatible with a modern secular, revolutionary society. In the communities of the southern and central regions (or what was South Vietnam during the Vietnam War, 1961–1975), a notable aspect of this social development has been the introduction to the ancestral ritual realm of identities previously excluded from public memory. The memorabilia of the hitherto socially stigmatized historical identities, such as those of former South Vietnamese soldiers, have become increasingly visible in the domestic and communal ritual space.¹

In the home of a stonemason south of Danang, the family's ancestral altar displayed two framed pictures of young men. One man wore a military uniform, and his name was inscribed on the state-issued death certificate hanging above the family's ancestral altar. The other man, dressed in his high school uniform, had also fought and died in the war. His death certificate, issued by the former South Vietnamese authority, had been carefully hidden in the closet. Recently, the matron of this family decided to put the two soldiers together. She took down the Hero Death Certificate from the wall and placed it on the newly refurbished ancestral altar. She laid him on the right-hand side of the altar usually reserved for elders. She had enlarged a small picture of her younger son that she had kept in her bedroom. She invited some friends, her surviving children, and their children for a meal. Before the meal, she held a modest ceremony during which she said she had dreamed many times about moving the schoolboy from her room and placing him next to his elder brother.

Another family living near Danang has a similar, yet deeper and broader, history of displacement and reconciliation. The family's grandfather is a former labourer soldier of the French colonial army. In 1937–1938, the French colonial authority in Indochina conscripted a large number of labourers from the central region of Vietnam and shipped them to the great Mediterranean city of Marseilles. There, two thousand Vietnamese were brought to the notorious powdery of Marseilles. The conscripts manufactured gunpowder for the French army and, under the Vichy regime, for the German army under French management. Some of these Vietnamese labourer soldiers objected to their situation and joined the French resistance, whereas others continued to endure the powdery's appalling working conditions. After sharing in the humiliating experience of German occupation with the French citizens, these foreign conscripts found themselves in a highly precarious situation following their return home in 1948: the leaders in the Vietnamese revolutionary movement distrusted them, indeed looked upon them as collaborators with the colonial regime; and the French took no interest in either their past service to their national economy or their contribution to the resistance movement against the German occupiers. Many of these

returnees perished in the ensuing chaos of war—the First Indochina War (or what the Vietnamese call the war against France)—and many of their children joined the revolutionary resistance movement in the following era during the Second Indochina War (which the Vietnamese call the war against America).

The grandfather of this family is one of the few returnees who survived the carnage and has an extraordinary story of survival to tell: how he rescued his family in 1953 from the imminent threat of summary execution by pleading to French soldiers in their language. He accomplished this again in 1967 thanks to the presence of an American officer in the pacification team who understood a few words of French as a result of having fought in Europe during World War II. The man's youngest brother died unmarried and without a descendant, so the man's eldest son now performs periodic death-remembrance rites on behalf of the fallen. His brother was killed in action during the Vietnam War as a soldier of the South Vietnamese army, and his eldest son is a decorated former partisan fighter belonging to the National Liberation Front. The eldest son, together with his father, also performs a periodic rite of commemoration for his great-grandmother who died in a tragic incident in 1948 shortly before her only surviving grandchild returned from France.

At that time, the woman was living alone in her bamboo hut. She had lost her husband in 1936 and her children shortly after, and her orphaned grandchildren had left the village for the urban ghettos. She survived on a small plot of land where she grew vegetables. The neighbours regularly helped the lonely woman with rice and fish sauce. On the fifth day of the eleventh lunar month of 1948, she spotted a group of French soldiers conducting a house-to-house search. Ill at the time, she waved at the soldiers for help. The soldiers came, pushed her back into the house, closed the shutters, and set fire to the bamboo house. In the following era, the spirit of this woman came to assert her vitality through various apparitions, which eventually led the villagers to erect a small shrine in her memory on the site of her destroyed home. The locals then started calling her Ba Ba Linh, meaning "powerful grandmother." Throughout the chaos of the Vietnam War, her humble shrine attracted steady visits

by local women who came to pray to the old woman for the safety of their families. During the day, some Saigon soldiers saw the village women kowtowing to the shrine, heard the story, and began to offer their own prayers at the site. At night, the peasant militiamen who came to survey the area heard the same story. The village women saw that some of these partisan fighters were praying to the shrine before they hurriedly joined their group to move to the next hamlet. When people returned to the village after an evacuation during the critical period of the Vietnam War in 1967–1969, they recalled that there was nothing standing in the hamlet except the humble wooden shrine dedicated to the powerful grandmother. Today, the old woman's shrine continues to attract prayers for other aspirations and desires.

The precarious condition of life that confronted this family and many other people in this region for many years is often referred to as *xoi dau* by the locals. *Xoi dau* refers to a ceremonial Vietnamese delicacy made of white rice flour and black beans. Used also as a metaphor, the term conveys how people of these regions experienced the Vietnam War. As a metaphor, *xoi dau* refers to the turbulent conditions of communal life during the war, when the rural inhabitants were confronted with successive occupations by conflicting political and military forces. At night, the village was under the control of the revolutionary forces; in daytime, the opposing forces took control. Life in these villages oscillated between two different political worlds governed by two mutually hostile military forces. The people had to cope with their separate, yet absolute, demands of loyalty and with the world changing politically so frequently that sometimes this anomaly almost appeared normal. *Xoi dau* conveys the simple truth that, when you eat this food, you must swallow both the white and black parts. This is how *xoi dau* is supposed to be eaten, and this is what it was like living a tumultuous life seized by the brutally dynamic reality of Vietnam's civil and international war.

The meaning of *xoi dau*, of course, is not the same as the meaning of the Cold War as we usually understand it; yet, the extreme conditions of human life that this Vietnamese expression refers to are very much a part of Cold War history because they were experienced by people in central Vietnam and many other communities in the decolonizing world.

Moreover, the experience of *xoi dau* is very much part of contemporary history, involving vigorous communal efforts to come to terms with the ruins of the past destruction that may continue to exist in communal life. The same is obviously true of the village in South Korea mentioned earlier.

In these places, kinship rarely constitutes a politically homogenous entity. Genealogical unity here is crowded with the remains of wartime political bifurcation. In the customary practices of ancestral commemoration, people face not only the footage of meritorious ancestors who contributed to the nation's revolutionary, or anti-communist, march to independence but also the stigmatizing genealogical background of working against the defined march forward. As in Sophocles' epic tragedy *Antigone*, which inspired Hegel in his philosophy of the modern state, many individuals and families in these regions are torn between the familial obligation to tend to the memory of deceased kinsmen and the political obligation to avoid commemorating those who fought on the wrong side. It is common in these places for a family to have a few heroic fallen soldiers from the war to commemorate. Siblings and others close to those killed in action on the opposite side of the war's frontier are also somehow accounted for. The memories of the dead in these communities are simultaneously united in kinship memory and bipolarized in political history. The initiatives taken by people such as the stonemason's family or the man in the Korean village arise out of this long, turbulent political history. These initiatives continue to evolve and expand today.

The Violence of the Cold War

The violence of the Cold War, such as that which brought such deep wounds and such enduring crises to these families (and many more, including on Jeju Island), was typically intertwined with the process of decolonization. In this sense, we may start thinking about the Cold War's globally encompassing, yet locally variant, histories in terms of two broad realities: the imaginary war in Europe and North America and the postcolonial experience of the bipolar era in which the very concept of the Cold War becomes problematic and contradictory.²

Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis calls the second half of the twentieth century a “long peace,”³ an exceptional period of international stability that contrasts markedly with what had come before, the century’s first half, characterized by two gigantic wars among nations and empires. But the late historian of modern Europe, Tony Judt, was not happy with Gaddis’ characterization of the Cold War as a long peace. He asserts, “This way of narrating cold war history reflects the same provincialism. John Lewis Gaddis has written a history of America’s cold war. As a result, this is a book whose silences are especially suggestive. The ‘third world’ in particular comes up short.”⁴

Indeed, as Walter LaFeber notes, when seen in a broader perspective, the era of the Cold War was far from a peaceful time;⁵ it witnessed over 20 million human casualties across a large swathe of territories. The experience of bipolar politics certainly varied in intensity and in temporality. The most violent manifestation of the global Cold War took its earliest tolls in Northeast and Southeast Asia, signalled by the outbreak of the Korean War and the First Indochina War (1945–1954). In the following decades, while a new total war was being waged in Vietnam and its neighbouring countries, the Cold War’s political violence became much more transnational and generalized, engulfing other communities in Asia (such as Indonesia) and many nations in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. This was the era that the historian of the Middle East, Fred Halliday, called the Second Cold War.⁶ It is against the historical background of the so-called “Cold” War that the celebrated Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez said that the nations of Central and South America did not have a moment’s rest from the threat and reality of mass death.⁷ This reality of mass violence endured by Latin America may have been different in intensity and in character from that suffered by Koreans in the 1950s and by the Vietnamese in the 1960s, which incorporated a totalizing war and, as in places in Central and South America, systematic state political violence. Moreover, not all postcolonial states and communities experienced the Cold War in terms of armed conflict or other forms of exceptional political violence. South Asia is a notable example. Despite these exceptions, however, it is reasonable to conclude that, for a great majority of decolonizing nations,

the Cold War was rarely a time of continuous peace.

To claim, therefore, that the Cold War was a global conflict should not mean that the conflict was experienced on the same terms right around the world. Cold War politics permeated both developed and underdeveloped societies, Western and non-Western states, colonial powers and colonized nations alike; in this sense, it observed a truly global reality. However, the historical experience and the collective memory of the Cold War diverge quite radically in the West and the postcolonial world. This has indeed been one of the key questions in recent Cold War studies. For the past decade, enquiries into the plurality of the Cold War's historical human experience have mostly been focused on the comparison between East Asia and the postcolonial world, on the one hand, and Western Europe and the larger transatlantic world, on the other.⁸ Grounded in the observation that Asia's postcolonial experience of political bipolarization was far from "cold" or an example of "imaginary war"⁹—a warlike condition that is nevertheless contrary to an actual condition of war—a reasoned consideration of this question has been pivotal to the advent of recent Cold War historical scholarship and has provoked a number of innovative comparative studies of Asia's modern history.¹⁰

Although this recent development in Cold War studies (sometimes called global Cold War studies or new Cold War studies) has made a notable contribution to pluralizing Cold War narratives, an equally important question remains critically unexplored. The plurality of the Cold War experience is not merely an issue of comparative history between Asia and Europe but is deeply entrenched in Asia itself as a region and society of nations. As witnessed in the relatively narrow sphere of northeast Asia, the early Cold War was manifested in radically different ways among the societies that constitute this regional entity. For instance, Japan experienced the early Cold War (1950s and 1960s) in a manner that is closely akin to the nations of western Europe: an imperative for post-World War II socioeconomic reconstruction, growing economic prosperity, and international peace. In the late 1960s, Japanese society underwent its share of that series of forceful social protests and generational upheaval, which Immanuel Wallerstein dubbed a

“revolution in the world-system.”¹¹ Provoked by the tragedy of the Vietnam War and the West’s role and complicity in it, the multi-sited, simultaneous civil protest in 1968–1969 transformed the social fabric of Japan as well as that of the United States and several western European nations. However, the so-called world revolution had few ramifications elsewhere in Asia, including those societies situated in Japan’s immediate neighbourhood.

We can apply the same idea of Cold War historical plurality to the other political societies in Asia. The fate of Korea in the 1950s, which involved a destructive civil war, is not that remote from the experience of the political societies in the Middle East and in Africa during the Second Cold War of the 1970s. At the time, many of these societies were swept up in civil war or other social crises. The behaviour of some of the East Asian states (such as China and North Korea) in the 1970s comes close to that of some of the Western states during the general crisis of the early Cold War in the 1950s: maintaining the peace of an imaginary war at home while playing a role in the escalation of total war crises elsewhere in the postcolonial world. It is a known historical fact (although one that has not yet been satisfactorily researched) that North Korea and China were deeply implicated in the crises of the Second Cold War across the African continent, from Sudan and Uganda to Angola and Zimbabwe. By then, these state entities were both inside and outside the Cold War, having assimilated an ideology of non-alignment in thought yet, in practice, engaging vigorously in the international postcolonial sphere with a self-conscious and sometimes self-centred revolutionary zeal.¹² Meanwhile, South Korea, together with Taiwan and other political entities in Southeast Asia, joined, with considerable success, what some Cold War historians have called “the right kind of revolution”—economic development as a Cold War power struggle¹³—while maintaining within the domestic political sphere a military-led authoritarian political order and a radical politics of containment with regard to civil society, somewhat akin to how societies in Latin America underwent the Cold War.

Considering these historical facts, we can argue that the themes of inter-regional diversity discussed in contemporary global Cold War

studies (such as Asia's Cold War, Africa's Cold War, or Latin America's Cold War) can be meaningfully discussed not only across regional unities but also within the single regional context of Asia. We can also argue that it is only through regional studies open to the horizons of a global history that the region's historical evolution, and its related contemporary regional conflicts and cleavages, can be properly grasped.

Conclusion

If we approach the plurality of Cold War experiences in this way, we may say that Cold War history has a fractal formation. A fractal theory of social structure and political system is very much a part of the development of modern social anthropology. It posits that the whole—and each of the parts that together constitute the whole—have an identical structural form—as in the study of the segmentary kinship and political system of traditional Africa.¹⁴ Concerning the subject matter at hand, this idea suggests that a new way of conceptualizing Asia's place in modern global history may be both possible and necessary. Asia's Cold War experience is in many ways distinct and even contrary to the way in which Europe underwent this era of political bipolarity. The Cold War in Asia was far from an imaginary war, and some of us are unsure whether it is entirely over and done with even today. Parallel to these differences in form and temporality, however, Asia's Cold War has elements within it that suggest for the region's experience of bipolar modernity an image similar to that of the global Cold War. Considered in this way, Asia's Cold War was both something other than an imaginary war and, at once and in part, very much an imaginary war. We can see in it not only the long peace of Europe but also the turbulent fates of Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. In the end, it appears that Asia's Cold War is not an Asian history but rather a global history in the guise of an Asian history.

There is no such thing as an Asian Cold War modernity. The various communities in Asia did not experience the Cold War in an identical way, just as bipolar politics was manifested differently in post-World War II Europe and in postcolonial Asia. How to reconcile the radically

different historical experiences and related divergent historical memories of the global conflict existing in Asia goes beyond an issue of academic research in significance. Instead, it constitutes a vital, unresolved issue of public policy in the international sphere, relevant to efforts to build up transnational solidarity in the face of common contemporary threats to human security, as manifested in the debates about territorial disputes in East Asia and about climate policies in a broader terrain. I argue that attending to these differences, within Asia in this case, can contribute to coming to terms with differences in the broader global horizons.

And yet the real distinctiveness of Asia's Cold War experience would appear to be discovered on a much smaller scale and in the intimate spheres of human life. The humble shrine for the powerful grandmother south of Danang is one example I am aware of—although I am certain there are many more similar phenomena and sites of memory elsewhere in Asia. That grandmother lost her life amidst the crisis of the First Indochina War. She became transformed into a powerful spirit at the start of the Second Indochina War, and she listened and responded to the many hopes against hope enunciated by the many people whose lives had been turned upside down by the violence of the Cold War. Today, she continues to be responsive to a multitude of other human hopes.

Notes

¹Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 161-64.

²Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

³John L. Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Enquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁴Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 371.

⁵Walter LaFeber, "An End to Which Cold War?" in *The End of the Cold War: Its Meaning and Implications*, ed. M. J. Hogan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 13.

⁶Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁷Quoted in Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 170.

⁸Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

2005), 73-109.

⁹Mary Kaldor, *The Imaginary War: Interpretation of East-West Conflict in Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

¹⁰Hajimu Masuda, *Cold War Crucible: The Korean Conflict and the Postwar World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

¹¹Immanuel Wallerstein, "1968, Revolution in the World-System: Theses and Queries," *Theory and Society* 18, no. 4 (1989): 441-49.

¹²Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 135-43.

¹³Michael E. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 10-35.

¹⁴Meyer Fortes and Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, eds. *African Political Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940). See also Roy Wagner, "The Fractal Person," in *Big Men and Great Men: Personifications of Power in Melanesia*, ed. Maurice Godelier and Marilyn Strathern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 159-73.