

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

Museums, Collections and Social Repair in Vietnam

GRAEME WERE



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Museums, Collections and Social Repair in Vietnam analyses the relationship between museums, collections and social repair in contemporary Vietnam.

Drawing on fieldwork in a range of museums in the country, alongside interviews with museum workers and stakeholders, and analyses of museum exhibitions, the book explores how museums help ordinary people overcome loss suffered during conflict. Focusing on key objects in museum collections that elicit strong emotions or feelings, Graeme Were examines their relationship to social repair and transformation, in order to understand what mobilises survivors, families and communities to recover and re-evaluate memory and give prominence to grievances and loss or future hopes and aspirations. Arguing that nationalist frameworks no longer adequately account for the diverse agendas of Vietnamese museums, this book brings into question the dynamics between history and memory; the capacity of the museum to repair injury, loss or suffering; and the limits of historical memory beyond the control of a one-party state.

Museums, Collections and Social Repair in Vietnam analyses the role of museums in transforming lives and creating a just future. It will be of interest to academics and students engaged in the study of museums, heritage, Asia, tourism and anthropology.

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Introduction

Museums, Collections and Social Repair

The notion of social repair has, over the past two decades, provided fertile ground in academia – including anthropology, social policy, and peace and conflict studies – for a critical examination of post-conflict societies such as Vietnam. Social repair is predicated on the idea that if a society or a group has suffered disaster, trauma or loss of some kind, then repair attempts to reverse this wound, through a process of healing, reconciliation and justice. Anthropologists who have addressed the issue of social repair have, in general, focused on the significance of commemorative practices, rituals, reunions and resistance in the aftermath of violent episodes, describing the historic context of crimes, conflict and disaster and the frameworks for societal recovery (Argenti and Schramm 2010; Nan 2017; Rowlands 2008; Wilson 2001, 2003). Much of this work, however, is framed around the nation-state, situating commemoration as a conscious act of remembering, rebuilding or unifying while ignoring alternative forms of repair and recovery taking place in society, and in particular, from the perspective of ordinary people (Nora 1989).

This book fills this gap in knowledge by taking a holistic approach to social repair to reveal the alternative and ad hoc processes by which people seek to rebuild their lives after loss and trauma outside the framework of the nation-state. It addresses this by foregrounding how museums and collections play an instrumental and yet largely unacknowledged role for ordinary Vietnamese people as sites of social recovery and positive action, seeking to redress and repair injuries suffered during successive conflicts with the French and the Americans. Moving beyond nationalist frameworks that no longer singularly account for the diverse agendas of Vietnamese museums and those that engage them, my aim is

to bring to the fore everyday peoples' efforts to craft social repair through their engagement with museum collections – in the form of objects, photographs, documents, maps and human remains – and the possibilities these bring in Vietnam for resolving losses, injustices and past grievances. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnamese museums which represent warfare, conflict and violence, alongside interviews with museum workers and stakeholders inside and outside the museum, I offer an anthropological analysis of the complexities, paradoxes and contestations of museum collections in Vietnam for the purposes of transformation, justice and social repair and how these relationships articulate a particular discourse of the legitimacy of the museum and why it matters in contemporary Vietnamese society (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2012).

This study reveals how, for some, the museum is more than just a symbol of the authoritarian state: instead, it is recognised as a potent resource to begin the process of healing and repair, one that is future oriented, looking forward as well as back. Focusing on how diverse actors (survivors, families, curators and communities) outside and inside the museum recover and re-evaluate memory and give prominence to grievances and losses or future hopes and aspirations, I highlight the centrality of museum collections in this process of rebuilding lives. Museum objects, in this sense, are active agents in social repair (Gell 1998), and through access, exchange and display, they become focal points for transforming lives through their efficacy in rituals and their use in political claims for recognition and reparation. In examining the types of memory-work that take place in museums (e.g. witnessing and testimony), this book asks, much like Adorno (1986), what does coming to terms with the past mean in a one-party state where the very concepts of history, memory and commemoration have themselves come under contestation and scrutiny? In the context of a thriving museum sector in Vietnam, and in Asia as a whole, I show how continued public support of museums is rooted in the public's understanding of museums as sites of efficacious objects that make things happen (Gell 1998). The memory politics that emerge as a result of these activities (which may have remained hidden or repressed until recently) emphasise the changing landscape of Vietnamese museums, one not immune to the far-reaching influences of international museum and heritage discourse, which focuses on prioritising the ability of individuals and communities to determine their own values and aspirations (Evans and Rowlands 2021).

Anthropology, Museums and Social Repair

The chapters in this book offer a fine-grained analysis of the activities inside and outside of museums and beyond the normative nation-building activities, foregrounding diverse voices and opinions other than just those of the state (Nora 1989). Revealing how ordinary and everyday Vietnamese engage the museum for the purposes of seeking positive outcomes in relation to loss, injury and injustice, I concentrate on sets of museum objects that offer hope and a better future, providing families the chance to finish the ritual work for the dead or to receive official reparations from the state. My approach echoes the contribution made by Argenti and Schramm (2010) on the anthropology of violence, who explore how traumatic experiences are transmitted across generations amongst communities marginalised by the nation-state. In a field that has traditionally been dominated by psychologists and clinicians, their work is important to defining the mechanisms for social repair as they highlight the manifold ways in which bodies, landscapes, objects and performances become conduits for the expression of trauma and act as reference points for future generations to remember. Similarly, Das (2007) has described how violence experienced by survivors of the 1947 Partition of India and the massacre of Sikhs in 1984 has become woven into the fabric of everyday life. Her argument follows that social repair has to be enacted through a reinhabiting of everyday life – the site where violence was witnessed and experienced – a process that involves recovering the ordinary and mundane, despite the memories of loss and injury.

Das's (2007) notion of reinhabiting the everyday is central to my analysis of social repair as it reflects the way ordinary Vietnamese use museums as productive spaces to pin their hopes and aspirations for a better future. I describe how processes of access, collecting, displaying and donating objects breathe new life into the meaning and significance of museums, revealing the ways in which ordinary Vietnamese are 'reinhabiting' museum collections in their effort to craft social repair. To reinhabit collections is to reactivate dormant collections, populating them with testimonies of violence, injustice and loss. In airing these traumatic histories, people are transforming them into life-giving objects in a bid to move on in their lives. In a departure from Argenti and Schramm (2010), I emphasise that what is significant about this process of social repair is that there is no simple dichotomy between official histories and

counter-memory in authoritarian Vietnam. While Argenti and Schramm (2010) remind us of how violent histories of marginalised communities may conflict with official or written narratives as a form of counter-memory and resistance, I believe that any analysis of Vietnamese museums demands a more nuanced approach to museums and memory-work which obviates the requirement to frame their activities simply in terms of the glorification of the dead and the commemoration of sacrifice (Girard 1972; Nguyen 2016). For instance, while not dealing with the notion of social repair directly, Tai's (2001) volume *The Country of Memory* recognises the need to unpick the complex politics of commemoration in Vietnam. This collection of essays discusses a broad range of commemorative activities that have sprung up in post-war Vietnam, taking a particular interest in the logic of state ceremonies associated to martyrdom and sacrifice in the conflicts with France and the United States and how these activities are channelled through ancestor worship. Crucially, Tai's volume reveals how both the state and families appropriate ancestors and commemorate them through diverse rituals and ceremonies, for the purpose of rebuilding selves, families and nation-state. Following Tai (2001), my approach is to assert how people's engagement with the museum is driven by the need to insert family ancestors into state memory and receive recognition in a bid to rebuild lives and move on from the past. Focusing on a holistic understanding of social repair that encompasses the hierarchical relationship between state and society, I argue that Vietnamese people are drawn to the museum on the basis of its capacity for productivity and efficacy, which, in turn, legitimises the museum's continued relevance in contemporary society.

In anthropology, approaches to questions of truth, justice and reparation have been dominated by a critical analysis of state-sponsored mechanisms for transitional justice (Thompson 2002). Shaw (2007) and Wilson (2001, 2003), for example, both look at the use of testimony in the truth and reconciliation commissions set up in Sierra Leone and South Africa in the aftermath of civil conflict and state violence. These two studies reveal the complex ways in which testimonies of violence become aired through official mechanisms and thus form part of an effort to craft national consciousness to move on from violent pasts. I am concerned, however, that an attention to official processes ignores other forms of social repair taking in society, such as in Vietnam, where there has never been a formal process of reconciliation even after the government

encouraged overseas Vietnamese (Việt Kiều) to return home (Nguyen 2016). Even where anthropologists have placed families at the centre of analysis, the state is the framework through which repair is enacted. For example, in East Asia, Nan (2017) examines the role of family reunions in brokering Korean national reconciliation, focusing on the families divided by conflict between the North and the South who have long been separated and perhaps presumed to have died. Lists of names of separated Koreans are passed on for selection by the respective governments who then undertake visits across the border to meet families separated by war. Brokered as a Joint Declaration between the North and the South, Nan (2017) reveals the uncertainties associated to relatives' lives on either side of the border and wider political dynamics of the reunions in political negotiations and the stability of the region. How processes of social repair take place amongst families and what role do museum collections have in this process are the questions explored in this book.

It is surprising how the museum has featured much less prominently in scholarly discourses on social repair, even after its positive reframing in terms of tackling inequality, social justice, community empowerment and human rights issues (Janes and Sandell 2019; Message 2013; Murta 2019; Sandell 2017; Sandell and Nightingale 2012). Instead, those few studies that address the museum in relation to social repair rely on a narrow framework of nation building and reconciliation, ignoring the significance of how the museum plays out in ordinary people's lives and why they should buy into this process. This body of work falls into two interconnected strands of research. The first explores the relationship between heritage, healing and social repair in post-conflict Africa (Basu 2008; Coombes 2003; De Jong and Rowlands 2008; Giblin 2014; Rowlands 2008). The interest of these scholars is to examine post-war reconstruction such as the establishment of new museums and commemorative sites for the purposes of reconciling divisions in society. Museums and sites are linked to remembering and forgetting, through which processes of national healing can begin. The second approach is concerned with public history and archival studies. Drawing mainly on scholars such as Trouillot (2015), Connerton (1989) and Foucault (1972), this work examines the politics that influence historical representations and the consequences of this for interpreting archives, particularly in times of conflict or conquest (Ernst 1999; Esbenshade 1995; Miller 1999; Peterson 2017).

This book recognises the productive nature of museum collections and their capacity to assert themselves in everyday life beyond the physical walls of the museum. Their vibrancy is recognised by Caswell (2012, 2014) who not only illustrates how the multiple meanings of archives change over time but also underlines the mobility of the archival collections as they circulate through global networks, asserting themselves in various contexts. Her research focuses on the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam), an archive documenting the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge era that took place in the late 1970s. Caswell narrates how the archive has enabled an international court to charge former Khmer Rouge officials of genocide, revealing ways in which archives are intimately connected to shifting political environments. Beyond her framing within international justice, Caswell's work is important to my analysis of Vietnamese museum collections as it uncovers the afterlives of archival photographs and documents, emphasising how they come to life again through their reproduction and use by tourists and art curators, and the ethical problems this presents for those that bear witness to images linked to atrocity. Indeed, I argue that a key feature of Vietnamese museums is the dynamic way objects move into and out of the museum, creating life, value and significance to those that are attached to them. Highly emotive objects – such as a soldier's possessions loaned from museums to be placed in family altars or maps conspicuously donated to museums at times of crisis – are reinhabited by ordinary Vietnamese due to deeply personal attachments and reactivated for ritual purposes or to make ethical demands for a better future.

Across Asia, the museum is undergoing a new age of growth and renovation (Qiang 2019; Wei 2015; Yan 2018). Alongside this boom, one can also assume that museums are generating new meanings and debates which require further research and investigation. As Wang (2021) and Byrne (2022) stress, new frameworks and models are required to account for the changing museum and heritage landscape in Asia, one that accounts for the flow of people, objects and ideas beyond the state and for understanding how these impact on the remaking of museums in the region. Thus, the time has come to re-evaluate museums and the processes that sustain their legitimacy and impact in Asian society, especially those in one-party states like Vietnam, where museums fall under a paternalistic state and continue to flourish. And yet, much of the scholarly literature on Vietnamese museums points to their exclusive support of the

nation-building project, acting as sites which espouse narratives of national unity and strength, particularly after reunification in 1975 (Bodemer 2010; Nguyen 2017; Pelley 2002; Tai 1998). Having visited state museums over the past decade, this appears at first sight to be completely true (Were 2018). As the quintessential public space where the nation can present itself as the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983), exhibitions glorify military victories and communicate powerful messages about resistance, fortitude and national spirit (Nguyen 2017; Tai 1998). As such, there is little room for critical reflection on history, or to enact what Nguyen (2016) refers to as just memory, an inclusive and respectful process recalling the memories of the North as well as those of the South – after the reunification of Vietnam in 1975. It is only inevitable that scholars see state museums as dogmatic institutions, languishing under a form of centralised control that demands compliance (Humphrey 1994; Salemink 2012; Tai 1998).

As Vietnam transitions into a market economy and an international tourism destination (Nguyen, Ho and Nguyen 2019), I move away from thinking about museums as static institutions towards a framework that embraces and recognises their shifting meanings in the post-conflict society. As some scholars, such as Logan (2009), Schwenkel (2009) and Sutherland (2005), have observed, there are changes taking place inside Vietnamese exhibitions, due mainly to shifts in the political landscape, international relations and tourism, underlining the capacity of authoritarian institutions to change. In these analyses, it is the hierarchical relationship between the state and the museum that drives these transitions, as state policies change within the wider geopolitical landscape. However, it is not exclusively external factors driving change in museums. Bodemer (2010) and MacLean (2008), in contrast, focus on the agency of museum workers as producers of new historical knowledge. Their research underscores how temporary exhibitions are a kind of experimental activity that acknowledges the personal and collective memories of Vietnamese people (Macdonald and Basu 2007; Marstine 2006). As Bodemer (2010) reveals in her behind-the-scenes ethnography of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, museum workers and ethnologists navigate state policies and projects in ways that deviate from the national narrative. In this way, she demonstrates how the incorporation of ordinary peoples' stories into the exhibition process offers a space for the indirect negotiation between the people and the state.

In order to understand the complexity of the meanings of museums in Asia, people are placed central to my analysis of social repair and recovery because a state-focused approach ignores the needs and agendas of individuals, curators, visitors and other groups related to the museum (Giebel 2004; Hamber and Wilson 2002; Malarney 2001). This ground-up approach is also reflected in the field of peace and conflict studies where scholars have investigated local forms of peacebuilding and resolution amongst victims, survivors and perpetrators (Feron 2018; Theidon 2013). This book adopts this framework to focus on ordinary Vietnamese people, exploring how museum collections are productive of social repair, enabling families and groups to begin to confront or overcome loss or trauma suffered during conflict through the retrieval of personal possessions, photographs and documents related to the dead. This study pursues the journeys of individuals, families and groups, alongside the social lives of objects, all of which traverse the boundaries of the museum, undergoing transformation as they move. These engagements with museums demonstrate how others, beyond the state, have tried to occupy the space of memory (Nora 1989; Tai 2001: 3). Their competing imaginings of the past are not so much forms of counter-memory (Foucault 2003); rather, I demonstrate how they are situated alongside official histories and reinforce what Watson (1994) refers to as the diverse *memoryscape* of socialist reality. As this study makes evident, exhibitions, objects, documents, maps and museum spaces are pivotal for memory and witnessing, channelled in ways which are neither invisible nor hidden (Scott 1990). The visual and material constitution of testimony in public spaces is a reminder of gaps in the socialist past and reflects a concern by groups and individuals to readjust state histories by reinserting their family and their ancestors into national narratives, as well as family genealogies and ceremonies (Malarney 2001; Watson 1994).

A defining feature of the museum's effort to support social repair in Vietnam is its ability to encompass the secular and spiritual meanings of collections, transforming objects related to death and loss into positivity and strength. Anthropologists have underlined the importance of ancestor worship amongst Vietnamese families and their veneration of the dead (DiGregorio and Saleminck 2007; Jellema 2007; Malarney 2001; Roszko 2012; Taylor 2007). As I describe, museum displays often take on religious significance, evidenced in the architecture and design of gallery spaces with

altars and prayer ceremonies taking place inside museums (see Chapters 3–5). In Asia, a notable body of scholarly work has explored the similarity between museums and shrines, examining their parallels as special places of spiritual contemplation as well as potency of religious objects on display (Giebel 2004; Robson 2010; Sullivan 2015). This study contributes to this debate by not only investigating ways in which museums double as spiritual spaces where ancestor worship and offerings are undertaken to the dead; they also function to ensure the safe passage of fallen soldiers into the ancestral world where the state has failed or not intervened. How the museum takes on this form and the transformations that are effected as a result are key aspects discussed in this book.

A Brief History of the Development of Museums in Vietnam

So as to understand how museums have moved towards social repair, I introduce a brief history of their development since the nineteenth century. The history of Vietnamese museums is covered by a range of scholars who identify three key stages in their development (e.g. Bodemer 2010; Nguyen 2012; Pham et al. 2001; Tai 1998). These studies describe how the first wave of colonial museums was established under French colonial rule in the 1900s. For example, the Louis Finot Museum in Hanoi was opened in 1932 to house the collections of the *Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient* (EFEO) and used as an institution to display the wealth of empire.¹ Others were built in Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City, some in Indo-French-style architecture such as the *Musée Henri Parmentier* (later renamed the Cham Museum of Sculpture) that housed Cham antiquities collected by French archaeologists from the EFEO in Da Nang, and opened in 1915 (Thu and Ryan 2013).

The second wave in the development of museums began in Vietnam after French withdrawal in 1954 after their routing at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. This period was characterised by the museums' support of nation-building projects (Pelley 2002). During this period, the Soviet Union provided training materials to assist in the development of museums (Bodemer 2010: 71). Soviet museums functioned as a didactic tool for the Communist Party and played an important role in national secularisation – places of national ritual significance, propaganda and education (Zabalueva 2017: 41). The influence of Soviet cultural policy still permeates in the purpose, design and

processes of exhibition such as the use of Marxist-Leninist chronology in displays, anti-imperialist tone of the exhibition didactics and the use of colour coding and exhibition design.²

The third wave in the development of Vietnamese museums commenced in the late 1980s. In the aftermath of a post-war period defined by economic austerity and rationing (*bao cấp*), a number of new museums were established such as the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (Bảo tàng Dân tộc học Việt Nam), which was opened in 1997; the Ho Chi Minh Museum (Bảo tàng Hồ Chí Minh), opened in 1990; and the Vietnam Women's Museum (Bảo tàng Phụ nữ Việt Nam), opened in 1995. With the establishment of a national museum management system by the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, one of the goals was to build a local museum in each of Vietnam's provinces (Bodemer 2010: 79). In 2021, there were over 150 registered museums located across the provinces of Vietnam, with four designated as national museums.

The opening up of the country after the Đổi Mới (renovation) reforms of 1986 has had many positive benefits for museums in Vietnam. With the normalisation of international relations and aided through Vietnam's membership of ICOM (International Council of Museums) and ASEMUS (Asia-Europe Museum Network) (Prosler 1996), museums participate in international collaborations, loans and training programmes. Each national museum has dedicated staff whose role is to manage international collaboration, and the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism has regional specialists to manage overseas partnerships. Through these international networks, invited curators and museum workers have supported museums in-country, such as staff from the American Museum of Natural History, the Musée du Quai Branly as well as diplomatic missions from the UK (the British Council) and Sweden.

As a result of international networks, Vietnam has taken on a leadership position for museums in Southeast Asia. This is demonstrated by a scholarly network centred around the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology which publishes the quarterly journal *Bảo Tàng & Nhân Học* (Museum & Anthropology) and a series of ethnographic research books and papers focused on analysing the role of museums in community building and heritage safeguarding (e.g. Nguyen and Bodemer 2008). Coupled with this drive towards adopting a more critical museology, a number of exhibitions in the 2000s have tried to expand official histories, such as *Chuyện những bà mẹ đơn thân* (Single Mothers' Voices) at the Vietnam Women's Museum in

2011 and *Cuộc sống Hà Nội thời bao cấp* (Life in Hanoi under the Subsidy Economy) at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in 2006, both of which employed first-person testimony and multiple narratives to diversify the voices inside the museum.

Methods

This book takes a case-study approach using first-hand data gathered as part of my anthropological fieldwork in Vietnamese museums, mainly in the north and central regions of the country. As an anthropologist, my approach has been from behind the scenes (Macdonald 2002), taking an insider perspective through participant observation of museum processes. Over the years, my work in supporting Vietnamese museums has meant that I have worked closely with colleagues in the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism and have participated in several national conferences and training programmes. Through these activities, I have met a considerable number of museum workers who share a passion, like me, with museums and cultural heritage. Undertaking fieldwork in and within the vicinity of the museum underscores the importance of the museum as a process, especially since much of this involves working with communities and bureaucrats. As Silverman (2015: 2) has observed, museum activities are processual in nature, often fraught, sometimes experimental.

The study is undertaken using ethnographic methods of participant observation, interviewing and content analysis of exhibitions over almost a decade. Countless interviews and repeat interviews were conducted with museum directors and staff over the years in Hanoi, Da Nang, Hue, Hoi An, Vinh and Ho Chi Minh City, as well as various stakeholders in the wider community and the cultural sector. Undertaking long-term fieldwork has meant building strong professional relationships with museum workers and stakeholders in Vietnam and learning much more about the complexities of managing state and private institutions. Coupled with participant observation and interview techniques, methods also included content analysis of museum texts and signage, the architectural design and layout, publicity and websites, visitor books and media coverage. These emphasise how meaning is mediated in museums through a variety of media. Primary materials were collected by visits to museums over a period from 2013 to 2019, much of which was collected through working with a Vietnamese interpreter.

Book Orientation

The book is divided into six chapters. The introduction has provided an overview of the book's main themes and approaches, setting out a notion of social repair in terms of framing how ordinary Vietnamese people engage with museum collections and their search for recognition from the state. What is being repaired or recovered in their participation with the museum, and what do processes of social repair involve when dealing with museum collections? The book explores these questions in the remaining chapters.

Chapter 2 focuses on memory-work taking place during a wave of reactive exhibitions that occurred during a period of heightened tension when skirmishes broke out between Vietnamese and Chinese shipping vessels in the South China Sea in 2014. Concentrating on two temporary exhibitions of photography and cartography that were hastily put on during the conflict, this study reveals how these exhibitions and their associated performances orchestrated by the museum transform Vietnamese people into witnesses of Chinese aggression and threats.

The chapter highlights how methods of witnessing, inscription and testimony are utilised in the museum to make visible calls for justice and intervention on behalf of the Vietnamese state. It also considers how the museum mobilises assistance on a transnational scale through its call to support maritime borders. By tracing artefacts sent in from Vietnamese living overseas in response, this chapter frames these donations as conspicuous acts of patriotism and attempts to repair individual relations with the state from those exiles who are opposed to the Vietnamese Communist Party and who had left at the end of the American War – commonly known in Vietnam as 'kháng chiến chống Mỹ' (the resistance war against America).

Chapter 3 reveals how museums play an instrumental yet often unacknowledged role in supporting families conduct proper burials of soldiers who died in the anti-French and anti-American wars in Vietnam. Using the Museum of Military Zone 4 in the industrial northern city of Vinh as a focus, it reveals how the core activities of museums – collecting, research and display – are linked to social repair through their participation in the work for the dead in Vietnamese society. The chapter considers the significance of the museum's shrine-like architecture and the displays of disinterred soldiers' possessions, together with the activities undertaken by

the museum in repatriating the remains of deceased soldiers who died in the American War. By searching for and acquiring the remains and possessions (including metal shrapnel with names of the dead engraved), it describes how the museum takes an active role in alleviating the anguish and torment of relatives, in the knowledge that the souls of the deceased can finally rest in their ancestral homeland. In tracing the trajectories of disinterred possessions and human remains, from fields to museum and to family altars and cemeteries, this chapter demonstrates how museums try to channel a negative outlook on loss into positivity (as a form of repair) through devotion to the dead and their collective remembrance.

Chapter 4 explores how colonial archives held inside museums hold the potential for repair. It introduces the Nghe Tinh Soviets Museum, a state-run institution in the city of Vinh built on the site of a former French colonial prison. The museum holds a highly sensitive archive of photographs and paper records relating to the Nghe Tinh Soviets, a proto-revolutionary movement that opposed French occupation in a series of uprisings in the early 1930s. It explores the complexities of present-day family associations to the movement including accusations of complicity with the French colonial regime and how access to these documentary records is now enabling ordinary Vietnamese families to insert themselves into revolutionary narratives and reintegrate themselves and their ancestors into national narratives. In tracing out how people access, secure and use sensitive information in the archive, the chapter describes how these documents, once authenticated, offer families the chance for state recognition and transform loss and stigma into a positive outcome.

Chapter 5 focuses on a privately run military history museum situated near Hanoi, dedicated to displaying North Vietnamese soldiers' testimonies of torture conducted in prisoner-of-war camps during the American War. The museum is managed by military veterans – most of whom are survivors of the notorious prison camp at Phu Quoc, an island in south Vietnam. The exhibitions display testimonies of torture, airing the workers' own experiences of incarceration and suffering, asking visitors to empathise as an ethical imperative to refrain from conflict and violence again. Regarding the museum workers as both curators and ritual experts, this study revisits the notion of the museum as shrine (Giebel 2004; Robson 2010; Sullivan 2015), exploring how the military veterans use the museum to communicate with their dead comrades and care for

their souls. As such, this chapter demonstrates how the museum becomes a potent site for curatorial action, repairing connections to the dead who suffered violent deaths and condemned to roam the earth in torment.

The conclusion examines the broader implications of the museum in its capacity to transform lives, repair historic ruptures and seek justice. In assessing the impact of the recovery of documents, maps, artefacts and human remains on ordinary people, it considers how the museum creates new forms of relationships and meanings in Vietnamese society as it democratises interpretations of the past for the building of a new future. In encompassing the secular and the sacred, it explores how the museum in Asia can be understood as an adaptive institution, one that demonstrates intuition and responsiveness to link families, politicians, curators and others through the veneration of ancestors and national heroes (Janes and Sandell 2019). By tracing activities inside and outside the museum in which memories are retrieved and re-evaluated, the chapter underlines the permeable and contested nature of museums, and how the struggles of claiming authorship of history are far from over.

Notes

- 1 The Louis Finot Museum was renamed the Vietnam Museum of History and reopened in September 1958.
- 2 The cultural influence of Soviet Russia is evident in multiple ways. Several senior members of the department that oversees museums in the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism in Hanoi have undertaken training in Russia. Notably, in Hanoi's only museum studies programme at the University of Culture Hanoi, much of the material taught to students still draws on Soviet models of museology and policy.