

# Changing International Perceptions of Vietnam and Its Dark Heritage

Written by Martin Duffy

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## Changing International Perceptions of Vietnam and Its Dark Heritage

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MARTIN DUFFY, APR 19 2022

The very mention of Vietnam is synonymous with the traumas of the country's dark war-time heritage. This author spent a decade working with the Vietnamese State Human Rights Institute on many rights-based subjects which were slowly becoming permissive in Vietnamese academia, and others that remained resolutely taboo. In the shadow of Ho's gargantuan statue, we triaged those maladies of rights which could be publicly treated. There, with some of Hanoi's most respected scholars and politicians, I observed the musical chairs of linguistic stenography. Non-contested rights could be celebrated, but others were never uttered or illusively forbidden. Inevitably, much of our Cabinet of Curiosities of human rights research lay hidden in plain sight. Looking back, my memorised vision is one of realism not of nostalgia. The brilliant Vietnamese-American writer, Ocean Vuong describes his family folk memory "all this time I told myself we were born from war—but I was wrong Ma. We were born from beauty. Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence—but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it" (Vuong, 2019.) Like Vuong, I always thought the achievement of human rights, outweighed or mitigated the violence, even if only with a cleansing function of healing. There is so much more to Vietnam than violence and dark heritage. Vietnam exudes societal resilience, the efflorescence of rich civic fruit and the beauty of life. Nevertheless, Vietnam remains singularly a dark heritage destination. Consequently, until recently, Vietnamese tourism has been intently focused on the legacy of the Vietnam war. Our international perceptions of Vietnam are changing only at a snail-pace. Happily, Vuong propels us to subtly intertwine folklore and modernity.

Vuong's intricate debut novel exudes the redemptive power of storytelling. *On Earth, We're Briefly Gorgeous* is an autobiographical letter from this son (Little Dog) to his illiterate mother. Familial heritage is rooted in Vietnam – and serves as a bridge to the exploration of issues of race, class, and masculinity. The question of how to survive, or even kindle and nurture joy, genuinely empowers this book (Ibid.) It is also a frank lesson in how to dissect dark heritage. There is some evidence that Vietnam is beginning to change, with renewed interest (from Asian neighbours and tourists further afield, such as in Australia and New Zealand) primarily in backpacking excursions to popular Vietnamese beach destinations. The writer can witness that some of this is a "mixed blessing". However, (in any case) this segment of the tourist market is probably still outweighed by the preponderance of dark or conflict-related heritage. For more than a decade "The Vietnam War" – the "American War" for those living in Vietnam – prevailed across every aspect of life in the entire region until 1975. The loss of almost 60,000 soldiers contributed to a national trauma in America. In Vietnam, the death of several million combatants and civilians, and a toxic residue of chemical warfare from the defoliant "Agent Orange" left cruel dioxin-related birth defects, landmines and bitter idiomatic memories (such as) the brutal My Lai massacre. As a consequence of Vietnam's preponderance in combat, touristic coverage of the Vietnamese war is highly selective, eagerly focusing on the Cu Chi tunnels – now a major tourist attraction. Others glamorize via traditional communist styles of socialist realism e.g., at Hien Luong Bridge.

There is also a significant dark heritage beyond the Vietnam War itself, notably the colonial-era Hoa Lo prison and the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum in Hanoi. The latter is one of the world's largest mausoleums (and a candidate for an award in cult-of-personality tourism.) It is pre-eminent as a resting place for communist leaders (joining Lenin, Mao and Kim Il Sung). The modernistic realist adjacent museum possesses pavement attraction for a surreal bizarreness of its kind. It screams communism and totalitarianism at one hundred paces. The Communist brutality of its cement lines juxtaposes with the neighbourhood's ornate Buddhist stupas and French-era relics. While officially communist,

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Vietnam has, like China, embraced capitalist economics, and as part of that process, opened up to tourism. Today the tourism infrastructure can cater for virtually any type of travel, from basic backpacking to boutique luxury. Of the dark sites, some have been incorporated into the mainstream tourism product marketed in the country and (before Covid19) experienced huge numbers of visitors (Light, 2017.) Pre-Covid the Cu Chi tunnels and the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City both attracted several million tickets annually, while others because of remoteness, remain less well-visited (e.g. parts of the DMZ). As the global economy bounces back, and as the Vietnamese transport system competes with tourism, this may change.

In Hanoi (Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, Ho Chi Minh Museum, and Hoa Lo prison) are all on the tourist lists while many operators are offering day trips to former DMZ Vietnam War sites. Of particular popularity are the Hien Luong Bridge, Reunification Monument & Museum, Vinh Moc tunnels and the infamous My Lai (Son My) massacre site. Previously, to enter Vietnam, most people had to fly, usually either into the capital Hanoi in the North or to the southern and largest city of Ho Chi Minh, formerly Saigon. In theory, visitors may enter Vietnam by train from several neighbouring jurisdictions like China, Cambodia and Laos but practically all tourists need a visa for entering Vietnam, obtained at embassies abroad in advance. Tourist visas are normally only valid for 30 days which sets limits on over-land entry by train or bus (Ramlee et al., 2018.) Those who come in search of “Dark tourism” in Vietnam typically come well prepared and with a level of international research which often reflects their service or professional backgrounds. A place with memories for many so sad, still acts as a magnet to old soldiers. With a revered history of resistance against invaders, Vietnam possesses many destinations marking painful years but showing the indomitable spirit of the nation (Light, 2017.) An inexhaustive list of “dark tourism” would certainly include River, Dong Da Mound, Hoa Lo Prison (in Hanoi), War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, Hang Duong Cemetery, Con Dao Prison and Phu Quoc Prison. International visitors have also paid special attention to many other places such as the Cu Chi Tunnels, Dang Thuy Tram Hospital, My Lai Village and Quang Tri Citadel.

## The Preponderance of the Vietnam War Legacy

The places mentioned above bear significant historical and cultural value, helping visitors learn more about the history, especially the unyielding will of Vietnamese people in each historical period of the country. Over recent years, relic sites have received investment and heritage management. As many historical sites have applied technological advances and digital transformation, their value has been promoted, especially to young people (Ibid.) For example, since the activities of Hoa Lo Prison were introduced via social media such as the Spotify and Apple Podcasts platforms, both domestic and foreign tourists numbers rapidly increased. In the long term, management agencies should have appropriate development plans for the development of “dark tourism, focusing on creating and promoting many more visual experience products for visitors, especially young people” (Ibid.) In addition, tourism planners are wise to excessive exploitation and commercialisation so that the inherent historical and human values of these destinations will not be lost.

An area in Central Vietnam that used to be the “demilitarized zone” (DMZ) between North and South Vietnam has been for several decades a mecca for foreign tourists. The Vietnam War was anything but demilitarized and some of the fiercest battles of the war took place in what is now DMZ. Today, it shares the irony of a discrepancy between reality and its name with another, still existing DMZ: that at the border between North Korea and South Korea. In both countries, one gets an immediate sense of stepping back in time. For the writer who served the UN in Cambodia 1992-93, the time-capsule of post-conflict South-East Asia has its special memories. Today the former DMZ should include the wider Central Vietnamese highlands and relevant sites, including the former Khe Sanh US base (now a museum). Vietnam’s underground tunnels there attract global history buffs, intoxicated by dark heritage.

During the dark troubled years of the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong battled against South Vietnam, America, and its allies. Today the Viet Cong tunnels are a testament to the determination of the Viet Cong as well as to the asymmetrical warfare that characterized the bitter conflict. Now in Vietnam, the war is a distant memory and it is a paradise for enjoying its tropical beaches like the southern resort island of Phu Quoc. In the middle of the country at Da Nang, one can find tropical beaches, temples, and cultural attractions. Vietnam is a land of deep history. During the war, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong could not hope to match the overwhelming firepower of the USA. To counter, infiltrate, and avoid the American and allied forces, an unbelievably large network

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of tunnels was built under much of South Vietnam. Indeed, the history of Vietnamese tunnelling dates back to resistance to the French occupation. The tunnels of Củ Chi are probably the most remarkable, forming a network in the Củ Chi District of Ho Chi Minh City (then Saigon). They were the base of the Viet Cong's operations during the Tet Offensive in 1968. The tunnels were used by the Viet Cong soldiers as supply routes, communication webs, hospitals, weapon and food caches, and living quarters. During the conflict, American soldiers termed them "Black Echo" about the difficult and dark life in the tunnels. In the tunnels, air, food, and water were scarce while they were infested with snakes, spiders, and rodents. Often the soldiers would spend the day resting or working in the tunnels and come out to scavenge or engage the enemy at night. In days of heavy bombing, they might have to stay in them for days. Diseases like malaria were ubiquitous with malaria being the second largest cause of death after actual fighting. The third source of chronic illness was intestinal parasites. In all, it is believed at least 45,000 Vietnamese died defending the Củ Chi tunnels. In Saigon, the tunnels of Củ Chi have been elaborately preserved and "tourist proofed" by the Vietnamese government, with 121 kilometres of tunnel networks.

Today they are a popular international tourist attraction and visitors are invited to crawl through the safer parts of the tunnels. The Ben Duoc site contains some of the original tunnels while at the Ben Dinh site there are also reconstructions. The tunnels are very cramped but some have been enlarged for tourism. Additionally, low-power lights have been installed. They also have displays of the different types of booby traps that were employed in the war. Even the underground conference rooms from which the campaigns like the Tet Offensive were planned have been restored. Other attractions for tourists at these sites include firing the prevalent weapons of the time like an AK-47 rifle and having a meal with typical food from the Vietnam war era.

## The Enigma of Dark Heritage & Dark Tourism

Dark tourism as reflected in the burdening number of tourists seeking out dark destinations in Vietnam has rapidly expanded in the past decade. This makes one curious as to what are the crucial motivations that bring international visitors to such ostensibly hostile parts of the world when for example Bali and the paradise islands of the Philippines are much easier travels? Before examining the travel behaviour of dark tourism, we need to approach some conceptualization of dark heritage and why it is of interest in international relations. The concept dates to the late 19th century, describing the act of travel to sites of death and disaster. The increasing volume of people travelling to these unusual sites has spawned the contemporary phenomenon of "dark tourism". Foley and Lennon (2000) defined dark tourism as "the presentation and consumption of real or associated sites of death and disaster". Vietnam abounds with such phenomena, but any tangible definition of dark tourism is elusive. There is no precise label for dark tourism in Vietnam or anywhere else (Fonseca, Seabra, & Silva, 2016.) Some allied concepts have arisen from analysis of tourist behaviour, and of dark heritage sites (Light, 2017). Although, dark tourism itself is comparatively novel, it has its roots in the practice of much earlier peoples to engage in pilgrimage, or witness public executions (Sharpley, 2009). It is also compatible with other fields identified in the literature, like thanatourism (Seaton, 1996), "morbid tourism" (Blom, 2000), "black spot" tourism, atrocity and holocaust tourism (Ashworth, 2004) war tourism (Henderson, 2000; Seaton, 1999) "phoenix tourism", prison tourism, and disaster tourism (Le and Pearce, 2011). Authors perceived these associations and the demand for dark tourism appears to be supply-driven and attraction-based in Vietnam as elsewhere (Farmaki, 2013). Two primary factors prompt people to visit dark destinations; the visitors' typology, and the dark destinations' typology. First and foremost, the criteria and attributes of dark destinations may contribute to varying visitor motives and experiences (Stone, 2006). Sites such as the Vietnamese tunnels exert their interpretation and orientation influences.

For example, education-oriented sites offer a deeper understanding of dark heritage in comparison to dark destinations purposely built as forms of macabre entertainment e.g. the re-creation of London's medieval dungeons (Strange & Kempa, 2003). In the dark tourism spectrum createcharacter06) the characteristics and attributes of dark destinations in countries like Vietnam, assume darkness that justifies the categorisation of a diverse range of sites, and attractions that are linked with death and the macabre. Visitors to dark destinations can be classified into three groups; those with a personal connection to the past event, mass tourists and the local community. Such a typology allows researchers to comprehend tourist motivations in engaging with dark destinations in countries like Vietnam. We might specify (for example) war tourism (Le & Pearce, 2011), and related cemeteries tourism (Raine, 2013). Raine identified a dark tourist typology from the darkest to the lightest shades in line with the dark destinations'

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classification created by Stone (2006). This typology categorizes motivations from mourners, pilgrims, thrill-seekers, or indeed researchers. Agreeing on the existence of these typologies enables us to see that, dark tourism attracts everyone from tourists to pilgrims (Raine, 2013). Many have a personal connection shared with the victims, and this is seen in Vietnam with the return of veterans and the Vietnamese diaspora (Slade, 2003). From 2005 onwards there has been focused research on tourist motivation (Light, 2017) on the battlefield location (Cheal & Griffin, 2013) with war alone constituting the largest category of tourism attraction (Smith, 1998). Other studies have examined the nature of visitors' experience in countries like Vietnam, their motives and intention (Biran et al., 2014) the emotional impact of visiting (Isaac & Cakmak, 2016), and wider public perceptions.

There is well-developed research on thanatopsis (Seaton, 1996) and pilgrimage where people travel to sacred places such as shrines and cemeteries (Durance, 2003). To some extent veterans and their families or diaspora Vietnamese, returning to former war zones may be located against one of these typologies. There has been a growing phenomenon of secular pilgrimage replacing specifically religious adherence (Stone, 2012). In thanatopsis, people were assumed to visit dark destinations due to an emotionally unbalanced "death-fascination" (Seaton, 1999). Conversely, we now have a much broader base of empirical data showing that motivations are often closer to cultural heritage tourism as dark tourism itself contains a mixture of history and heritage. In short, those returning Vietnam vets and their families, and Vietnamese, are more likely to be seeking heritage education than fulfilling a neurosis. Educational motivations feature strongly (Stone, 2012), curiosity (Kamber et al., 2016), and remembrance (Ibid.) Data recorded on dark tourism is strongly influenced by a preference for war tourism sites (Ashworth, 2004), visiting war memorials, seeing specific war museums (Isaac & Cakmak, 2016; Kang et al., 2012), war cemeteries and concentration camps (Cheal & Griffin, 2013; Kidron, 2013) with education and remembrance being a paramount motivation, not some morbid fascination with death itself (as one might have associated with Victorian gallows-watchers). Comparable to Viet Vets are Australians visiting the Gallipoli battlefield (Chael & Griffin, 2013). People also visit dark destinations to validate events (Blom, 2000). Some dark tourism destinations became 'must visit' tourism attractions and an infamous destinations for dark tourism e.g., Ground Zero, Alcatraz Prison, and Auschwitz. Much of Vietnamese tourism still fit within these criteria.

When comparing western and non-western perception, it is noteworthy that in writing about countries like Vietnam, non-western society tends to publicly reject the idea of "dark tourism". For example, in Sabah, Malaysia, dark tourism is seen as an exploitation of death and disrespecting the dead. In Vietnam, western tourists stress (rather) they pay homage to those on all sides who died in a terrible war. There is a particular sensitivity to dark destinations in Chinese culture (Stone, 2012.) The perceived taboo of death has largely deterred Chinese people from visiting dark tourism destinations. The Chinese believed that talking about death should be avoided for it may bring bad luck to the individual. Other studies on perception also looked into visitors' perceived heritage (Poria Reichel, Biran, 2006), and the benefits gained from engaging with dark tourism. It is apparent that in countries like Vietnam, international visitors are genuinely engaged in an educational experience with dark heritage, and that this impulse may transfer itself inter-generationally. Therefore, sophomore students in the USA, in their first opportunities to travel, often step in the footsteps of their parents whose only foreign trip in a lifetime was conceivably to the war in Vietnam. Perhaps the missions of their ancestors constitute a variety of 21<sup>st</sup> century pilgrimage, inspired by inter-generational experience, and desire to understand. To that extent, dark heritage is a dynamic and compelling subject.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly there is still much to explore on visitor exposure to dark tourism in countries like Vietnam. Empirical evidence is heavily concentrated on probing the reasons people have engaged with dark tourism and light on emotional narratives as to inter-generational family curiosity. While there is a remarkable diversity of dark tourism destinations, the literature to date from countries like Vietnam is primarily centred on war tourism memorabilia sites such as battlefields, war museums and memorials. Ironically the impact on extended families of such adventures is rarely catalogued, and yet it confirms how pervasive exposure to a country like Vietnam proves to be. It effects relatives and family members for many years to come. If dark heritage has a cataclysmic effect on travellers, this is multiplied in the sub-trauma experienced by their families. This makes me think of the popular Donegal saying "You Bloody Baluba" internalised fears for our UN service folk out in the Congo in the 1960s. In Vietnam, as elsewhere, we oftentimes neglect the impact on the folks at home.

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To better understand this fascination with dark heritage, research could be conducted on the emerging markets beyond Vietnam and South-East Asia, and at non-western settings, to enable prurient comparison between western and non-western consumption of dark tourism. Such empirical research should propose more sensitive analyses of visitors' behaviour at the 'lightest' shades of dark site category to grasp the diverse and possibly distinctive conduct at dark tourism destinations. If tourists may diversity their interest in Vietnam to the beach and eco-sites it possesses in abundance, it may mean a vacillation of that trans-generational preoccupation with the actions of fathers and grandfathers. Ocean Vuong raises the beautiful and poignant question, "When does a war end? When can I say your name and have it mean only your name and not what you left behind?" (Vuong, 2019.) It may well be that in time we will largely process that generation of dark heritage travellers, inspired by familial memories and kinship. A future international generation may come to understand countries like Vietnam, beyond dark heritage, in so many more diverse and salubrious ways. Surely a time will come soon when such travelling is not the raking of painful ancestral coals, but the creation of happy memories of a new Vietnam. A coming Vietnam may also execrate itself from the ghosts of bitter civil war and the phantoms of an atavistic heritage.

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Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2019.

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Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.