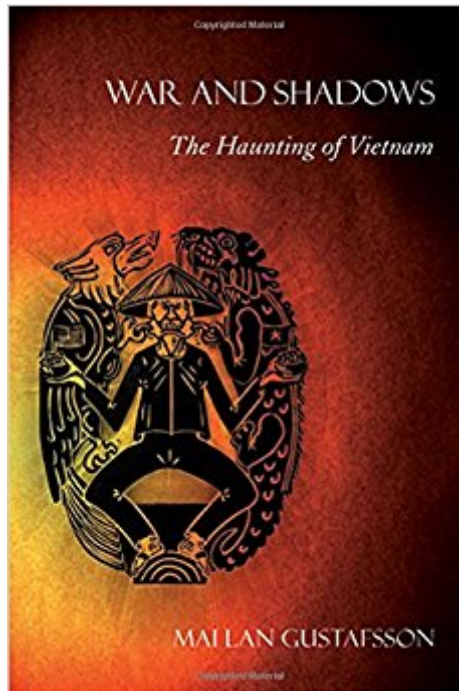


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War And Shadows: The Haunting Of Vietnam



Synopsis

Vietnamese culture and religious traditions place the utmost importance on dying well: in old age, body unblemished, with surviving children, and properly buried and mourned. More than five million people were killed in the Vietnam War, many of them young, many of them dying far from home. Another 300,000 are still missing. Having died badly, they are thought to have become angry ghosts, doomed to spend eternity in a kind of spirit hell. Decades after the war ended, many survivors believe that the spirits of those dead and missing have returned to haunt their loved ones. In *War and Shadows*, the anthropologist Mai Lan Gustafsson tells the story of the anger of these spirits and the torments of their kin. Gustafsson's rich ethnographic research allows her to bring readers into the world of spirit possession, focusing on the source of the pain, the physical and mental anguish the spirits bring, and various attempts to ameliorate their anger through ritual offerings and the intervention of mediums. Through a series of personal life histories, she chronicles the variety of ailments brought about by the spirits' wrath, from headaches and aching limbs (often the same limb lost by a loved one in battle) to self-mutilation. In Gustafsson's view, the Communist suppression of spirit-based religion after the fall of Saigon has intensified anxieties about the well-being of the spirit world. While shrines and mourning are still allowed, spirit mediums were outlawed and driven underground, along with many of the other practices that might have provided some comfort. Despite these restrictions, she finds, victims of these hauntings do as much as possible to try to lay their ghosts to rest.

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Customer Reviews

"The work is a straightforward discussion of a phenomenon evidently experienced by hundreds of people. The narratives supplied by Gustaffson's informants are allowed to stand on their own, supplemented by contextual information that positions them in the broader framework of contemporary Vietnamese social life. Human relationships and human conflicts are given new meaning by the supernatural, and the presence of spiritual phenomena in daily life forces the engagement of individuals, families, and nations with the very real and very pressing legacies of violence." *Journal of Folklore Research* (May, 2012)

"In this engrossing account of spirit-possession illness caused by war ghosts in and around Ha Noi, Mai Lan Gustafson demystifies what are often perceived as mystical experiences without reducing them entirely to well-worn conceptual tropes. No doubt the book's greatest strength can be found in the vibrant and sympathetic ethnography of the wide cast of social actors involved in spirit possession. One theme that emerges as the book progresses involves the connections between angry ghosts and their victims as ways for the living to process wartime experiences, whether their own or not, through idioms of kinship, suffering, and social and moral responsibility. War and Shadows is a pleasure to read and a success in its own right. The book is also a clear introduction and guide to many issues salient to Vietnam Studies and would be an excellent teaching resource for lower and upper division courses on Vietnam." *Allen L. Tran, Journal of Vietnamese Studies*

"War and Shadows is a fascinating book packed with vibrant stories and lucid exploration of their significance. Mai Lan Gustafsson's account of spirit possession in Vietnam is both nuanced and sympathetic." *Ann Marie Leshkowich, College of the Holy Cross*

"War and Shadows is a fascinating book packed with vibrant stories and lucid exploration of their significance. Mai Lan Gustafsson's account of spirit possession in Vietnam is both nuanced and sympathetic." -Ann Marie Leshkowich, College of the Holy Cross --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

War and Shadows combines scholarly approach with real skill in storytelling, in a compact tome that makes surprisingly compulsive reading. I could not put this book down. The book probably will appeal most to three categories of reader: 1) those with an interest in contemporary Vietnamese culture and spiritual practice; 2) those with an interest in the Vietnam War; and 3) those with a general interest in comparative folklore/mythology and ghost stories. Mai Lan Gustafsson gives a fascinating account of the phenomenon of spirit possession and haunting in post-war Vietnam. As

an ethnographic study, this book is an invaluable and unique window into modern Vietnamese culture. The spiritual beliefs and practices of contemporary Vietnamese are explored in the light of supernatural affliction, real or imagined. Gustafsson provides context for the phenomenon with sobering (and not often remembered) statistics of the Vietnam War, in which millions of Vietnamese lost their lives. She also corrects the sunny Western journalism on Vietnam, which asserts that everyone in Vietnam has cheerfully forgotten the war and moved on. As the book shows, the Vietnamese still bear deep scars. Although not a history of the War, this book would be of great interest to anyone seeking to understand the war from a Vietnamese perspective. On another level, anyone interested in ghost folklore would do well to add this book to his library. Thanks to Gustafsson's earnest, unadorned style, the people she interviews come to vivid life. Whether their supernatural afflictions are real or merely "in their heads," some of the anecdotes of possession and ghostly attacks are downright chilling. This slim book is a true rarity: a scholarly work that is also a page-turner.

This is a fascinating book for those interested in spirit attachment, mediumship, ancestor reverence, and Vietnam -- especially the cultural changes in the decades since North and South Vietnam were united.

War and Shadows is finely grained ethnographic foray into the phenomenon of spirit possession in modern Vietnam. Resisting the temptation to reduce incidents of possession to psychological factors, Gustafsson offers context-rich descriptions of the lives of those afflicted by "angry ghosts"--often a restless family member who, due to the circumstances of a sudden and violent death during the war, was unable to receive a proper burial. Gustafsson brings an nuanced understanding of Vietnamese history, culture, and post-war politics to her analysis of the precipitous rise in hauntings in an increasingly cosmopolitan nation.

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