

AN IMAGE OF A CHILD'S BEDROOM: ONLINE OFFERINGS AND GHOSTS OF THE ABORTED DEAD IN VIETNAM

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(Image www.nhomai.vn)

The child's bedroom, above, is lovingly arranged in purple and white, decorated with pictures of beehives. It is an image which evokes feelings of comfort and security, the play of childhood and a world of bright colours; the lively bees swirling around the room will bring no sting. The room is one where a child could fall asleep in the crook of their parent's arm. And yet, the first time I encountered this image was within the Vietnamese online memorial *Nghĩa Trang Online*²⁵, a vast website for remembering the dead in Vietnam, be it for parents or grandparents, friends or partners, revolutionary martyrs or children and babies: the remembrance is multifarious. In this case, an aborted fetus was being remembered in an online tomb and so it reflects a different world; this is a bedroom for a child that exists only in thought, an abstraction of a child. The warmth of the bedroom becomes antithetical, haunted by the absence of a body. The image also throws light on the cultural, spiritual and economic entanglements which arise when Vietnamese women remember an abortion online.

To understand the context of this image, a brief introduction to how Vietnamese remember the dead is required. Ancestor worship is a vital relationship for Vietnamese between this world

²⁵ *Nghĩa Trang Online* (Cemetery Online) is also known as *Nhớ Mãi* (Remember Forever). Founded in 2008, it is the largest Vietnamese online memorial, with roughly 60,000 members. It can be accessed at www.nhomai.vn.

and the other. It is an act which springs from filial piety and also an awareness of the continued existence of ancestors after death. Vietnamese feel that the dead need to be looked after with a proper burial, ritual attendance to the tomb, death days and lunar dates, as well as through ancestor offerings. These can include the burning of incense and votive paper offerings, and the offering of real food and drink. Votive paper offerings are extraordinary diverse, with everything from paper umbrellas, hats, gold and money, to the latest iPhone and motorbike. These votive offerings are displayed and subsequently burnt and, via the smoke, transmuted to the other world. In being remembered and provided for, the dead in turn bring well-being and guidance to the living in a circular act of reciprocity. It is important to point out that ancestor worship is not tied to all acts of remembrance; a friend remembering a classmate does not perform ancestor worship rituals, though they might certainly light a candle and incense for them.

In Vietnam, like anywhere else in the world, a proper burial and ritual attendance is not always possible. For those who die away from the home, in tragic and violent circumstances, for those who pass away before producing offspring who themselves can continue the ancestral lineage; these are forms of bad death. The bad dead in this understanding are perceived as being stuck between the world of the living and that of the dead. Known as hungry ghosts or angry ghosts (among many other terms), these spirits haunt and torment the living.

The act of abortion in Vietnam creates all kinds of bad death. It is death before life, and often one without a proper burial. As Tine Gammeltoft (2010: 66) identifies in her productive body of research concerning abortion in Hanoi, 'if the fetal body was not decently buried, women explained, the fetal soul might keep haunting them, feeling resentment (*oan*) against their families for not allowing it to live'. In this sense, 'as a restless and angry spirit, the fetal soul might cause problems such as maternal mental imbalances or illnesses in the family children' (ibid). Such a finding and fear was also found in my own research. One possible avenue for mit-

igation was through *Nghĩa Trang Online*, an online medium which allowed a place for the fetus to be 'buried'. For Vietnamese women, in particular, who were using the online memorial, it created a potential link for communication to the aborted fetus: online they could apologise, pray to, and also ask for assistance from the fetus. They could 'light' online incense and candles, as well as send ritual appeasements in the form of uploaded offerings (for discussion see Heathcote 2014 and 2015).

Objects which were uploaded onto the tomb were often similar to votive paper offerings, but even more unlimited, with everything from milk bottles and children's toys, through to coloured towel sets for female or male fetuses, as well as the purple and white image of the bedroom. This uploading of images onto online tombs is a new form of ritual attendance unique to these online interactions. The images, the written messages left by the women and others, the candles lit, work together to form a sustained conversation with their fetuses. Such a spiritual deployment does not happen in isolation – in the darkness, and then the pixels of light on the computer screen – it is shaped by the cultural forms of remembering in Vietnam.

The online relationship with a fetus is entangled in the wider economic and spiritual dimensions of everyday life. A religious revival following the economic open-door policy of the *đổi mới* (renovation) in 1986 is well established, and votive paper offerings, funerals and burials reflect economic change. The dead and their ritual attendance have become in part tied to a person's economic means: expensive tomb renovations, lengthy pilgrimages, elaborate paper votive offerings, and offerings transcending the simple to include modern consumerist needs. As stated by one informant, 'the dead need their iPhones'. Vietnamese scholar Shaun Malarney (2003:187) writes that the ascension of votive paper offerings in regards to the economy is 'one of the most interesting manifestations of social change in Vietnam'. To build on his statement then, the uploading of offerings by Vietnamese women after an abortion shows a deep connection to religious revival in Vietnam, to technological change, and also to the sur-

rounding economic circumstances. For the woman, computer access and knowledge, along with private personal time, are usually required, and these circumstances are not available to all. For the fetus, the offerings uploaded reflect their potential aspirations – in this case, the perfectly designed and richly equipped bedroom. Modernity, and our new communicative technologies, were thought by some to be the harbinger of spiritual decline, but online memorial research aligns with Vietnamese scholarship in finding a spiritual flourishing and, in addition, an engagement with internet technology that both reflects the historical and transforms it for the 21st Century.

And so we return to the central image which began this discussion, seemingly simple and benign, and yet from it we can see how online forms of remembering spring from core beliefs and economic circumstances surrounding the dead in Vietnam. The online memorialisation of aborted fetuses is a reflection of contemporary concerns of ghostly fetuses and potential hauntings, and also interacts and creates tensions with technology and economic means. On a final personal note, this image of a child's bedroom was less complicated to me when undertaking this fieldwork than it is now, with the birth of two children having taken place in my life since beginning this research into Vietnamese online memorialisation. As I help decorate the bedroom of my daughter with pictures of Upsy Daisy and Bob the Builder, I experience a keen sense of the absence in that other room, of the ghosts that are conversed with and appeased online.

References

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