

REMEMBERING THE UNFORGETTABLE: THE MEMORIAL AT MY LAI

Karil Kucera, St Olaf College

September 11, December 7, and March 16--ask Americans today what these three dates have in common and most could not tell you. They would be quick to respond that 9/11 was a day etched in memory, when the twin towers fell and the Pentagon was in flames in an unprovoked attack on a peaceful United States. Dec. 7 will resonate, especially with a somewhat older generation, as the day Hawaii was bombed and most of the U.S. Pacific fleet sunk in another unprovoked attack, a day that “will live in infamy.” But the date March 16th does not register with the American public. As with all public memory, it is the dates of loss that live on, not the dates of disaster and infamous U.S. actions, such as the My Lai massacre on March 16, 1968. To the average American, March 16th means nothing, and My Lai even less. Unless one is a student of the Vietnam War, My Lai is thought to bear little relevance to this time and our place in it.



Fig. 1. Entrance to the Son My Vestige Site, May 2006.¹

Photograph courtesy of the author.

The photograph above shows the entrance to the memorial commemorating the atrocity committed at My Lai on March 16, 1968 as it looks today. To the villagers of that small hamlet known today by the larger geographical grouping of Son My, March 16, 1968, retains a constant presence. The events of that morning at My Lai, in which American soldiers committed an atrocity of sheer violence and terror--the massacre of hundreds of civilians, mostly older men, women and children--came to be seen by the majority of the American public as the lowest point of our failed engagement in Vietnam.

Numerous U.S. scholars have sought to unravel the complexities of the events that transpired on March 16th. Although the event took place in early 1968, the actual initial

¹All photographs included in this article were taken by the author at My Lai in May 2006. An earlier version of this paper was first presented at the Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs in Madison, Wisconsin in October 2006. I would like to thank those who attended my talk, asked probing questions and provided useful suggestions for helping me move forward with this project.

reporting of the My Lai massacre was delayed for over a year, and was finally brought to light only through the form of a letter from former Army soldier Ron Ridenhour to his congressman Morris Udall and an assortment of over thirty other government officials in Washington, D.C., including President Nixon.² While not directly involved in the My Lai massacre, Ridenhour felt compelled to report on stories he had heard from various U.S. members of "C" Company [often referred to as "Charlie Company"], whom he had known earlier while in training, and met again by chance after the attack on My Lai.³ Their stories told of a mission designed to root out possible Viet Cong sympathizers in a place referred to as "Pinkville," not far from Quang Ngai City in central Vietnam. His friends told how they had rounded up and killed all the village's inhabitants. Ridenhour's sources spoke of a death toll of "between 200-400 civilians." Although accounts vary, one source places the final number for the combined Son My village area at 504.⁴ Further reinforcing the truth behind Ridenhour's letter were the graphic color photos taken of the massacre later brought forward by Army photographer Ron Haeberle, who had accompanied C Company into My Lai that March morning.⁵ What followed was an internal military investigation that culminated in the court-martial of C Company's leader Lieutenant William Calley.⁶ Scholarly debate continues over the causes of the massacre, whether or not the actions taken were limited to those directly involved, and whether higher-ranking officers had ordered Calley to proceed.⁷

Regardless of the complex issues surrounding responsibility for the My Lai massacre, the realities remain the same; hundreds of people died that day, including entire clans. No proper burial would come until years later. While most Americans have chosen to forget My Lai, the villagers of this tiny coastal town cannot. This paper explores how the memorials to the dead have evolved over the years at My Lai, from simple stone monuments marking the points of mass executions of villagers by American soldiers to a recently built two-story museum. It further considers how the site of Son My as a whole has been re-designed to present and preserve the pain of the past for future generations of visitors as well as villagers. Underlying this entire project is the question of why the site has been memorialized in the fashion in which one finds it today: who is

²David L. Anderson, ed, "Ron Ridenhour's Letter of March 29, 1969," in *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre*, appendix A, (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998), 201. According to Michal R. Belknap, the site was referred to as "Pinkville" solely because it was colored pink on military maps. For one version of the events of that morning see Belknap's *The Vietnam War on Trial: The My Lai Massacre and the Court-Martial of Lieutenant Calley* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2002).

³Ibid, 202-205.

⁴Ibid, xi.

⁵Belknap, 111-112. The Haeberle photos would only reach a wider American audience in December of 1969, when *Life* magazine published a ten-page spread of the photos; this would be followed by publication of the images in a number of international publications (Belknap, 120).

⁶Calley was sentenced to hard labor for the rest of his natural life, and lost all pay and benefits (Belknap, 190); however, due to public outcry over the harshness of the sentence, Calley's sentence was commuted to one of house arrest, having spent only a few months in prison (Belknap, 235).

⁷Calley was found guilty of 22 counts of murder in April of 1971 (Anderson, "What Really Happened?" in *Facing My Lai*, 1). The series of essays presented in *Facing My Lai* considers many of the issues still open to debate regarding the massacre, its effects on American society at the time and today, as well as providing a discussion of possible rationales for the actions taken [or not taken] by those who were directly involved in the massacre.

the intended audience, what is the site's overall message, and through what means does the site seek to get that message across.

This paper is the first element of a broader study that will look at the evolution of the modern commemorative museum and memorial in Asia. This paper will focus on My Lai as a case study and, by comparing the modes of evoking the memory of the civilian dead here with other commemorative sites where great civilian losses occurred such as Nanjing and Hiroshima, attempt to analyze methods and representations of traditional approaches to mourning in Asia. Framed by a theoretical discussion of memory, meaning, and mourning, this larger study considers the cultural and political issues surrounding the creation of each site, the desired and real impact of the places upon varied audiences, and the media chosen to present the past at each memorial site.

Traditional Commemoration in Vietnam

The choice to commemorate ordinary soldiers of war is relatively new to the West, dating only to the nineteenth century.⁸ Commemorative memorials to civilian casualties appear only after World War II, the majority related to the concentration camps in Europe. If these types of memorials and the changes in warfare they represent are new to the West, they are even newer to Asia. The modern memorial at Son My came into being in a place where historically one did not put personal pain permanently on public view.

The majority of Vietnamese have a strong sense of ancestral obligation that mitigates how one treats the memories of those now deceased. As the anthropologist Shaun Kingsley Malarney states, “. . . funerals are not simply disconnected events that periodically enter one's life, but are, instead, profoundly significant events woven into the everyday experience and texture of time and existence.”⁹ Public displays of filial piety pre-date the modern era, and rules and regulations related to them can be seen to mirror those of China and other parts of East Asia. Funerals and subsequent memorial activities must be performed in very definite and morally appropriate ways.

Linked to a Confucian system of maintaining earthly harmony, appropriate displays of filial piety at specific times throughout a year and over the course of one's lifetime were seen as vital to the well-being of the family as well as the larger community. The Vietnamese government attempted to standardize filial acts in an effort to limit costs of funerary activities along with other socialist reforms in the 1950s. Sociologists note that these restrictions were met with opposition and achieved only limited success.¹⁰ This highlights the continuing belief within Vietnam of the importance of proper treatment of the dead. Ultimately the actions of the living were, and still are, responsible for the peace of the dead ancestors and, by extension, the prosperity of future generations. “With the parent's passing, the child must organize an appropriate funeral

⁸David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 24.

⁹Shaun Kingsley Malarney, “Weddings and Funerals in Contemporary Vietnam” in Nguyen Van Huy and Laurel Kendall, eds., *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind, and Spirit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 174.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 176-177.

that publicly demonstrates the child's piety. To do otherwise shows the child to be a *significant moral failure* and risks censure from kin, friends, and others."¹¹

Honoring the dead at My Lai and other sites in Vietnam presented problems on a number of levels. Within the official realm, these were not casualties of war in the heroic sense, but civilians, upon whose shoulders it was difficult to lay the same honors befitting those who fought in the war effort. Within the domestic realm, the dead at My Lai, buried in mass graves for years, without proper burials or due funerary rites, presented another dilemma--these were victims of unjust death, and perhaps worse yet, dead without living family members to honor them. Viewed as wandering ghosts, these souls desired funerary recognition, but for many years none was forthcoming, given the ruling Communist Party's edicts against looking back to the past rather than forward to a brighter future.¹²

In his work on Ha My and My Lai, two sites in which massacres of civilians by military forces took place, anthropologist Heonik Kwon notes that My Lai is unique in its position as an official heritage site maintained by the Vietnamese state, yet dedicated to civilian war dead.¹³ The status given to My Lai has created a certain amount of ill-will among those whose family members also died in a similar fashion but whose deaths have not been commemorated in a like manner with a permanent memorial to offer official recognition of deceased family members.¹⁴ At the same time, Kwon points out that few villagers feel comfortable with the My Lai complex, preferring instead to honor the deceased privately. They are strongly encouraged to attend the yearly March 16th commemorative memorial events by local party leaders, yet few choose to go.¹⁵ Kwon cites this lack of interest in utilizing the My Lai memorial on the part of the local inhabitants as indicative of a failure on the part of the site's creators to achieve what they had set out to do, i.e., "to provide a place for remembering the dead."¹⁶ In the following discussion, I propose that the museum and the 300-acre park area that surrounds it was not designed for the local Vietnamese villagers to remember and worship the dead inasmuch as it was clearly created to edify other, mostly non-Vietnamese, visitors.

Preserving Pain

The first memorials at My Lai were erected in 1976, eight years after the massacre and one year after the war's official end.¹⁷ The largest of these, a stele commemorating the deaths of 170 villagers killed by members of Charlie Company under

¹¹Ibid, 186.

¹²Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 46-47,

¹³Ibid, 148. Ha My remains less recognized in the American mind, perhaps due to the fact that the 1968 massacre committed there was perpetrated by soldiers from the Republic of Korea (Kwon, 44-45).

¹⁴Ibid, 149. Kwon notes that this new approach to memorializing the war dead has in effect created "a further category of ghosts in the category of ghosts of tragic death" [Ibid, 150], in that, for the local Vietnamese populace, there are now ghosts who have the benefit of the large memorial structure and those who do not.

¹⁵Ibid, 148.

¹⁶Ibid, 152.

¹⁷Cao Chu, *A Look Back upon Son My* (Vietnam: Quang Ngai General Museum, 2005), 57-8.

orders from Lieutenant Calley, was erected near the canal where their bodies were heaped after having been machine-gunned. Scattered around the central vestige area, as it is now referred to in English, other memorial stele were erected over time to commemorate other specific sites of death and acts of atrocity.

The first museum to be built on the site was a single-storey structure, a building that by all accounts looked like a nice village “home,” with a long, low tile roofline and stucco walls (fig. 2).¹⁸



Fig. 2. Photo of the 2006 museum exhibit of visitors to first museum at Son My.
Photograph courtesy of the author.

Situated on the north side of the massacre site compound, it looked out on the empty village area where the atrocities of March 16th had taken place, adjacent to newly planted paddies. Western visitors to Son My have left copious testimonials to the site’s power, many remarking on how the simplicity and quiet solitude--*the emptiness*--evoked powerful feelings of what had been lost.

¹⁸The new museum at Son My includes a reading area where one can peruse newspaper memorabilia and notebooks filled with visitor comments collected since the first museum opened in 1976. Excerpts from several of these are cited in this paper.



Fig. 3. New museum complex at Son My Vestige area, 2006.
 Photograph courtesy of the author.

Thirty years later, the Son My vestige site has received several facelifts. Many of the stone memorial stele have been replaced by more numerous works made of metal. The small low-slung museum has now been abandoned in favor of a two-storey edifice with a strikingly more palatial, less “local” appearance (fig. 3). Perhaps most problematic aspect for the returning Western visitor, the empty fields have been filled with replica castings of burnt-out buildings and faux animal cadavers.¹⁹ Since the museum and the surrounding area differ considerably in composition if not in function, consideration will first be given to the museum complex then to the grounds. This approach echoes the physical experience of most visitors to the site.



Fig. 4. Entrance to the second floor museum at the Son My Vestige Area.
 Photograph courtesy of the author.

¹⁹Author interviews with Son My tour guide Phan Thi Van Kieu and Western colleagues in Ho Chi Minh City in May 2006 generally gave voice to a strong desire on the part of Westerners that they had kept the place “empty” or “simple.”

Located on the first floor of the two-storey museum structure, the reception hall allows visitors to gather their thoughts before entering the exhibit space upstairs and encourages reflection and response after completing the tour. Upon climbing the stairs to the second floor of the hall, the visitor first encounters a carved stone stele listing the names and ages of those killed, a traditional Vietnamese marker for the dead (fig. 4). Beyond this point, the museum unfolds in a directed circular fashion in what can only be described as a Western or modern approach of putting the past on display. Moving through the exhibition, the visitor is taken back in time with bi-lingual captioned images from the buildup to the massacre and into the events of March 16, 1968. He or she comes out at the close of the circular path with the re-building of Son My and plans for the future.



Fig. 5. Visitors in the second-floor exhibit at the Son My Vestige Area museum.
Photograph courtesy of the author.

Interspersed among the images are maps relating the massacre images to specific sites, and photos of some of the deceased. Small everyday items recovered from the Son My site such as bowls and pots, tools and farming implements, as well as bits of clothing or jewelry are placed in glass cases or on shelves. Some cases also contain documentation related to either the earlier planning of the attack or the later trial (fig. 5).



Fig. 6. Images taken by U.S. Army photographer Ron Haeberle on display at Son My Museum and artifacts from the site.

Photograph courtesy of the author.

On the central back wall of the museum, the visitor encounters several large, framed color backlit images of the massacre, procured from Ron Haeberle, the United States Army photographer who accompanied the troops to record the day's events (fig. 6).²⁰ Sharing the back wall with these images is a life-size plaster recreation of one of the massacre events, depicting a grouping of American soldiers, guns raised, in the process of rounding up and shooting cowering villagers. There are also photos and mementos connected to the American infantrymen Hugh Thompson and Laurence Colburn, who stepped in to stop the killing and managed to save lives.²¹

Photos are the mainstay of the Son My exhibition, for without them precious little would remain to show a visitor the atrocities that occurred there. Haeberle's photos of the massacre shocked the world when they appeared in the press in 1969. Backlit and enlarged, these same photos make visitors to Son My feel as if they were present at the massacre itself. Just as this type of memorial museum is a new concept, photos as a part of the museum world are themselves relatively new. Appearing in a museum context only in the late nineteenth century, photographs originally were used to introduce the viewing

²⁰According to my Son My guide, Do Thi Kim Chung, the Haeberle photos were purchased by the Vietnamese government in 1970 via a broker for \$11,000 or approximately \$1000 per photo. I have not yet been able to verify this claim.

²¹For a thorough discussion of the events of the morning of March 16, 1968, see Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Viking, 1992).

Hugh Thompson and Larry Colburn went on to decry the actions of Charlie Company at My Lai. Both worked toward educating the public at large about the event and Hugh Thompson specifically worked with the U.S. military in an effort to train soldiers to avoid similar actions in the future. Their historic return to My Lai thirty years later was recounted by Mike Boehm in his documentary *Sound of the Violin in My Lai* produced in 2000.

public either to unavailable artworks or to edify the audience with regard to new industrial designs or new exotic locales.²²

In an abstract sense, photographs in the early days of museum use were surrogates for real places and objects that were absent, not unlike the plaster cast displays and dioramas that also were prevalent in many museums at the time. Yet when photography tried to move into the realm of the art world, critics were quick to decry it as a lesser art form, too populist in nature and availability and therefore lacking in the attributes necessary to equate photography with “high” art. The value of the photograph since then has been hotly debated, spanning the spectrum from inadequate to enlightening and revolutionary.²³ However, the very populist quality of the photograph that made its entry into the art world problematic, in essence makes it ideal for use at the Son My museum and other exhibition spaces like it.

Vietnam was not the first war to be covered by photographers. The use of photography to document war scenes goes as far back as the Crimean War of 1853 and the American Civil War. Yet, photographing the war in Vietnam, in both still and television formats, was the first time that the “other” side was presented to the American public, underlining the pain and loss of the enemy as much as the victories and losses of the American troops.²⁴ The transformative effect of the images taken by Haeberle and other photographers in Vietnam fulfilled the vision of Walter Benjamin, an art critic who predicted in 1936 that photography and film would revolutionize people, prompting them to press for social change.²⁵ While politicians and scholars continue to debate the multiple reasons why the United States ended its engagement in Vietnam, the effect of the media’s portrayal of the war on public opinion cannot be ignored.

Insofar as photographs can be manipulated, questions can be raised as to veracity; do they truly document what was seen, or has the photographer chosen to focus on one aspect only, creating a new truth that was perhaps not real at all? The images at My Lai tend to be viewed as truths, and there is no evidence to support claims to the contrary. Ron Haeberle took a dual approach in photographing these scenes. He shot official images to be handed over to the U.S. government in black and white but kept other, color photographs privately until he was discharged. These images match. Haeberle’s procedure mitigates any possibility that he might have intentionally tried to create new truths. The images are furthermore backed up by numerous eye-witness accounts of the atrocities committed at My Lai, a number of which figured in the trial of Lieutenant Calley. Thus, the display of the Haeberle’s photographs at Son My, while disturbing to the viewing public, seems appropriate in light of the site’s overall goals. Here, the dead are remembered and the public is reminded of an atrocity against human rights that has been universally denounced.

²²Anne McCauley, “Invading Industry: The South Kensington Museum and the Entry of Photographs into Public Museums and Libraries in the Nineteenth Century” in *The Museum and the Photograph*, Mark Haworth-Booth and Anne McCauley, eds. (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, 1998), 27-30.

²³Susie Linfield, “The Treacherous Medium: Why photography critics hate photographs,” in *Boston Review* (Sept/Oct 2006).

²⁴Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), 366-371.

²⁵Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” translated by Harry Zohn in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217-251.

Upon entering the grounds of the Son My Vestige Area where the museum now stands, one immediately notices the manicured area to the left of the structure. Intermingled with planted rice paddies are the hillocks where many villagers attempted to hide, stand a few low thatch-roofed buildings with benches nearby, now mainly used for shade on exceptionally hot days, and pathways down which the visitor can wander (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Grounds of Son My Vestige Area and site of My Lai massacre.
Photograph courtesy of the author.

Along these paths the visitor encounters stone and metal markers that explicate the number and names of the people who died at each area. One also comes upon recreated burnt-out buildings and fake slaughtered animals. Some of the paths are cement with little footprints cast into them, some of which are squashed out with an overlay of larger booted feet. Hence, one can literally follow in the footsteps of the villagers in their attempts to escape the slaughter of that sunny spring morning. Towering over the fields is a monumental concrete sculpture of a family grouping, the central female figure defiantly raising her right fist skyward even as she cradles a dead infant in her left arm. Crouched at her feet are the dead and injured, alongside those who are caring for them. Stylistically akin to earlier Soviet Socialist works seen elsewhere in Vietnam and China, the statue was commemorated on the thirtieth anniversary of the massacre in 1998.²⁶

²⁶Kwon, 141, refers that this type of monumental art form as the “Stone of Fury” style popularized in the first half of the 1980s, and differentiates it from the more accommodating “Stone of Spirit Consolation” style popularized in the latter half of the 1980s.



Fig. 8. Replica at Son My Vestige Area showing a burned home and slaughtered cow.
Photograph courtesy of the author.

The replicated castings of recreated dwellings and animals scattered around the vestige area seem to cheapen the seriousness of the memorial and have caused some visitors to refer to the new Son My memorial site as “the My Lai theme park.”²⁷ Yet like photographs, museums once collected and exhibited plaster castings, allowing them to serve as surrogates for unattainable works of art, recreating distant or foreign places inside museums walls. What appears to trouble the modern Western viewer with this approach at Son My is not the fact that the site is recreated, but that the recreation is post-mortem. Plaster replicas in Western museums served to highlight some glorious moment in the past; no one today would recreate the Parthenon with its roof blown off and the statuary gone. Such replicas recall the golden age of Pericles rather than the more recent days of later empires, a quality that makes the visitor more comfortable inhabiting that space. Some visitors complain of the quality of the recreated buildings and fake animal cadavers at Son My. They are seen as inauthentic, or kitschy. “They’re not done very well” is an often-heard remark, as if doing them *better*, making them more *real*, would in some way *improve* the site. But when no physical evidence is left to remind one of the past, replicating it may be seen as one viable way to preserve that moment in time.

One can easily see the replica casts of the park as part of a larger rubric designed to create an archival memory of a site that no longer bears the physical traces so vital to keeping its lived reality as a part of the larger consciousness. My Lai is not unique in this somewhat experiential approach to preserving the past. Other attempts to re-create the actual war experience within a museum environment can be seen at the Imperial War Museum in London, which has two such sites: the “Trench Experience,” intended to replicate the sights and sounds of the First, and “the Blitz Experience,” which recreates similar experiences for the Second World War. One could also argue that some of the installations found at Nagasaki and Hiroshima are meant to evoke, if not actually

²⁷Michael Sullivan, National Public Radio, reporting from Quang Ngai province, Vietnam, April 29, 2005.

recreate, the arrival of the planes and the dropping of the bombs in August 1945. Undoubtedly as technology continues to improve and moves further into the museum world, such types of experiential recreations will become more and more commonplace.

Given the Vietnamese government's efforts on the new museum, the newly replicated burnt-out buildings and the new faux animal cadavers, one must examine the purpose of the Son My Vestige Area. Who is the intended audience for the site and is it successful in what it has set out to do?

Promoting Peace and the Positioning of Memory

Over the course of the past twenty years, the Son My massacre site has been transformed into a place where one is encouraged "to pray and struggle for peace so that the world will never witness such things as Son My."²⁸ Peace parks have achieved a certain amount of popularity over the past few decades, connected in part to rising interest in promoting tourism at sites that historically would not have been seen as appropriate for commemoration, such as the concentration camps of World War Two. The list of such sites in Asia is growing. Hiroshima's peace park and memorial was the first and at Nanjing, a large-scale memorial is now in the final stages of preparation, designed to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the 1937 massacre. Others outside of China and Japan have also recently come into existence.²⁹ Multiple rationales are given for the creation of these sites, the main arguments of which I will briefly comment upon here.

The first rationale is economic. Scholars have noted that public image-making in Vietnam, at one time controlled by the government, is now being undertaken by outsiders interested in commercial development.³⁰ Hence, one possible rationale for the new improvements at My Lai is add the site to the attractions of the area and to make the beaches of the greater Son My area more alluring to tourists. This type of image-making could also be argued as a form of nation-building. The Son My area will undoubtedly bring in local as well as foreign tourists, and a new memorial site reflects well on the state of the country as a whole. Thus promoting peace becomes in essence a part of a national agenda, seen as good for the local economy if not for the actual local soul.

The second rationale is psychological. Peace on a personal level may also have been a motivating factor. The transformative nature of the Son My site is one aspect to consider when assessing its effectiveness. There are at least two types of transformations taking place at Son My. One is the educational effect on the visitors to the massacre site; the other is commemorative effect for the families and survivors of the massacre.

²⁸Hoang Nam Chu, Introduction to *A Look Back upon Son My* by Cao Chu (Vietnam: Quang Ngai General Museum, 2005), np.

²⁹Several peace parks exist in Korea, most notably the extensive complex at the United Nations Peace Park in Pusan. Discussion is underway to dedicate the Demilitarized Zone as a peace park at a future date. In Cambodia, the killing fields outside of Phnom Penh, while not yet officially a peace park, have made connections with other sites of great loss, such as Hiroshima, and a peace park may soon be in the making.

³⁰Laurel B. Kennedy and Mary Rose Williams, "The Pain Without the Past" in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. by Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 136.

Consideration will first be given to the commemorative nature of the site for the local village population.

Cynics may see the government-funded face-lift of the Son My site as an attempt to cash in on a tragedy; however, Pham Thanh Cong, the new museum's director and a survivor of the massacre, sees it as a means to "close the past and move on."³¹ From a local perspective, the continually improving memorials at the Son My site may be viewed within the traditional context of Vietnamese burial rituals. As the villages of central Vietnam grew more prosperous with the economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, and homes and ancestral altars began to be renovated, new attention was given to commemorating those who had yet to receive proper burials and memorial activities increased.³²

In fact, many of the villagers in the area were already working toward appeasing the victims of the massacres who had died unjustly by holding memorial ceremonies for them. Those massacred without a family to continue their sacrifices on their behalf were seen as "wandering ghosts," entities who needed closure in order to provide benefit for the community as a whole. Since whole families had perished, a considerable number of the massacred were left without surviving family members to honor them and little remained of the actual village in which to hold those ceremonies, any and all communal attempts to appease the dead at My Lai seem appropriate. Thus, memorialization on a larger scale was probably inevitable. Clearly the villagers seek closure in a very real sense, even if they do not outwardly demonstrate their desires by active participation at the memorial site. The same could be said for other sites in Asia that now share in this unique type of post-mortem pain—Hiroshima's *haniwa* house, in which the names of the dead fill books placed in a stone sarcophagus, or Nanjing's stone courtyard, where the numbers and names of the killed are inscribed on rocks scattered like small stones across a barren, burnt-out city. The dead need to be honored and remembered.

Critical to identifying the rationale for the construction of the Son My Vestige Area is also an understanding of how the site is situated within a broader, more global perception. If the site is not fully successful, as Kwon argues, as a place for the local villagers to remember the dead, then the greater question must be asked: who does "remember" at My Lai? Historians have noted that for the American public the events that transpired at My Lai were unfathomable, a mystery as Tim O'Brien notes in the title to his essay within the book *Facing My Lai: Moving beyond the Massacre*.³³ By viewing the museum and accompanying reconstruction from the perspective of an outsider, either in time or place or potentially both, the Son My Vestige Area makes complete sense.

While the Vietnamese approach the site in search of closure, Westerners come in search of understanding. How successful has the Son My site been in aiding the understanding process and bringing transformation to non-Vietnamese souls? This would be a difficult thing to assess if it weren't for the copious written comments of visitors

³¹Pham Thanh Cong, as quoted in interview with Michael Sullivan on National Public Radio, April 29, 2005.

³²Heonik Kwon, 60-84. A rise in ritual activity has also been documented in the north during this time period. See Hy V. Luong, "Economic Reform and the Intensification of Rituals in two Northern Vietnamese Villages, 1980-90" in *The Challenge of Reform in Indochina*, ed. Borje Ljunggren (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 259-291.

³³Tim O'Brien, "The Mystery of My Lai" in *Facing My Lai: Moving beyond the Massacre*, in David L. Anderson, ed. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998).

found in the first floor reception area of the Son My museum. Based on these writings, the transformative effect on the visitors to the massacre site is apparent: “This is the most horrifying story I have ever heard . . . ,” “We will keep telling the story of My Lai so the world can learn,” and “If My Lai were unique it would be a tragedy. The appalling truth is that it is but one of many such events.” One American wrote, “As a son of a Vietnam vet, I am ashamed of what took place here.”³⁴



Fig. 9. Images of those killed in the massacre.
Photograph courtesy of the author.



Fig. 10. Vietnam veteran at the site from Son My museum.
Photograph courtesy of the author.

³⁴Excerpts taken from Son My Vestige Area reception hall notebooks.

Like Walter Benjamin, the cultural historian Alison Landsberg also recognizes the potential of the media in the creation of memory. Landsberg makes a case for what she calls “prosthetic memory,” in which people from differing places and times gain access to and empathy for the memory of others. She paints a compelling case that one must consider in regard to the approach taken by the site’s creators to representing the past at Son My.³⁵ Landsberg notes that memories are most often mediated through visual representations.³⁶ In this respect, the layout of the Son My museum, with its pre-massacre historical photos, followed by artifacts from the site and the Haerberle photos, makes it clear that the display is not for those who know the story, but rather for those who do not. Those who are intimately connected with the story of the My Lai massacre do not need to see the visual evidence of it per se in order to remember what happened there. Having their own memories of the place and event, they do not need affirmation through visual representations, although they may still choose to seek it out.

Secondly, Landsberg believes that the physicality of objects is vital to gaining a prosthetic knowledge of the past, “for the second generation, and even more the third, the only access to the Holocaust is through objects, through the piles of objects left behind. . . . A practice of memory then, relies--metaphorically and metonymically--on the objects that remain.”³⁷ The objects are now functioning as signifiers, standing in for what has been lost. Akin to the piles of shoes and haunting black and white photos that line the walls and fill rooms of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. the My Lai museum displays baskets and hairpins coupled with photos of the deceased villagers. (fig. 9). Such poignant remnants serve to re-humanize those who once were de-humanized, lumped together as faceless “Viet Cong” in an effort to make military operations such as that at Son My more easily achieved by the perpetrators.

Lastly, Landsberg argues that although the objects themselves are mundane, the visitor is drawn into a type of relationship with the deceased through them. This then makes the museum a ‘transferral space,’ a place where the visitors take on of the memories of those now absent, where they can achieve an empathy outside of themselves.³⁸ These artifacts put a “face” on the tragedy for posterity, a face that although potentially recognizable in other parts of Vietnam where we now know civilian massacres occurred, is forever linked in the Western public’s mind with My Lai, due entirely to historical circumstance. While no one could claim to have had an equivalent experience of an event such as the My Lai massacre through a visit to the museum, the insight and empathy gained through the experiential approach is invaluable in its transformative effect. Figure 10 shows an American veteran before the My Lai monument.

All told, multiple audiences are being accommodated, and economic, political, and personal rationales are all in evidence at the Son My Vestige Area. A desire to understand what happened at My Lai and similar sites will never entirely vanish, yet life

³⁵ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 118-9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

has already moved on for the local villagers. Although perhaps not its sole purpose, the most important function of the Son My Vestige Area, is that of preserving the pain of the morning of March 16, 1968 for future generations. The experience is global in nature; it has been and will continue to be an on-going and ever-evolving effort. As time passes and memories dim, the caretakers of these painful memories will need to work harder to be certain that the past is not forgotten, the pain and tragedy never again repeated.³⁹

³⁹That the events that took place at Son My in 1968 have little or no immediate relevance to the younger generation from the fact that two-thirds of Vietnam's population today was born after the war ended in 1975.