



Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen

South Vietnamese Soldiers: Memories of the Vietnam War and After

Westport, CT: Praeger 2016
ISBN: 978-1-4408-3241-3 (hbk); xx + 289 pp.

reviewed by [Emily Dang](#)

1. *South Vietnamese Soldiers: Memories of the Vietnam War and After*, by Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, is a deeply profound work of both historical and current political significance.
2. The North Vietnamese Communist Party's ascension to power at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 signified a watershed moment in Vietnamese history, and saw the creation of an entirely different state narrative. The change in political regime forced 'an abrupt reorganisation of memory' both within Vietnam, and internationally. [1] Nguyen's work seeks to redress the immense lack of literature recording and analysing South Vietnamese experiences, lives and perspectives surrounding the Vietnam War.
3. Though the Vietnam War has been continually subjected to broad historical analyses, Nguyen's work uniquely centres the voices of a group that is often either mischaracterised, or relegated to insignificance, in dominant narratives. As Nguyen explains, 'Histories of the Vietnam War have overwhelmingly privileged the American experience'; despite more recent literature that has explored 'North Vietnamese perspectives and the role of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China in the war, the South Vietnamese experience remains elusive' (12). Nguyen's work contains subtle nuances and depth as she illustrates the complexities within this group; her book contains life narratives from a highly diverse array of individuals from varying military branches, social classes, religions, geographical locations, generations and genders. In particular, the varied experiences of military Vietnamese women, which have been often sidelined in historical accounts of the Vietnam War, are centred in Chapter 4 of this text.
4. On the simplest level, this book acts as a recording of historical facts—containing detailed accounts of the lives of servicemen and women, and displaying comprehensive military insight and thorough research. Nguyen's sources are broad, including accounts from Vietnamese and American soldiers and diplomats, French analyses of anti-colonial movements in Vietnam, and Australian political records from the National Archives.
5. However, her work cannot be read simply as an historical text, but must be understood as an inherently political one. The historical accounts she explores hold tremendous significance in challenging dominant narratives around the Vietnam War. *South Vietnamese Soldiers* is based on fifty-four oral history interviews conducted by Nguyen herself, between 2005 to 2014. Nguyen justifies her usage of oral history interviews as the most effective method to allow veterans to tell

'their story ... their perspective of events' (12). She references Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, who observe that 'the most distinctive contribution of oral history has been to include within the historical record the experiences and perspectives of groups of people who might otherwise have been hidden from history' (12). Nguyen's methodology thus records 'the stories of those who are rarely heard [and she] ... redress[es] the dearth of official histories relating to the RVNAF' and may even have the 'capacity to shift and alter perceptions of the war' (12). As such, Nguyen may also be understood as an advocate for the necessity of oral histories, and the transformative power that memory may have as an active agent of political change.

6. Chapters 1 and 2 of *South Vietnamese Soldiers* explore the life narratives of veteran soldiers from different generations, and their frontline experiences. They provide readers with an accessible introduction to the topic, with sharply recorded accounts from veterans, as well as clearly articulated historical research. Chapter 1 notes the omnipresence of wars in Vietnam through the accounts of three veterans; Nguyen notes that 'in many families, nearly all male adults were in the military ... grandfathers, fathers, uncles, cousins' (20). It includes a distinctive account from one of the 'oldest living veterans of the Vietnam War'—Vu Hoai Duc—who was born in 1917. His account spans 'the French colonial period, three wars, post-war incarceration and migration to Australia in the 1990s,' and includes reflections on the South Vietnamese Diem government and his own sense of resilience and good fortune (22). Nguyen impresses upon readers a sense of the great scale of warfare in Vietnam within these opening chapters.
7. Chapter 2 explores the front-line experiences of veterans from three lesser-known services—the Armor Branch, Air Force and Navy. While their accounts detail the 'unique pressures of combat in wartime, and state repression, internment and forced migration in the aftermath of the war,' they also exude a sense of defiance in their assertions that 'the armed forces in which they served were fully the equal of those of their allies,' and that 'the cause they were fighting for was worth the sacrifice and effort' (45). An account by Vu Van Bao, a former Chinook pilot, illustrates the significant difficulties that South Vietnamese forces operated under (53–54). Bao details a remarkable attempt to evacuate 120 emaciated women and children from the battle of An Loc in 1972, with a Chinook that had a regular capacity of 55 troops. Further on, he relates that while North Vietnamese forces were armed by Soviet Union and Chinese allies with what historians have described as 'the most sophisticated air defence weapons of the day' (54), the impact of American cuts in aid after 1973 were significant indeed:

After 1973, it was very bad due to the lack of supplies—ammunition, fuel, everything ... They cut and cut. There was a squadron of A1 Skyraiders that could not fly because they had no spare parts. And Caribou squadron, no spare parts. Squadrons that could no longer fly (54).

8. Chapter 3 of the book explores the experiences of military doctors, and again Nguyen emphasises both the deeply disturbing impact of their wartime experiences and contrasts this with their evident resilience and resolve. This chapter contained extended accounts of horrific injuries and wartime atrocities, which were at times difficult to read due to their highly emotionally confronting nature. Chapter 5 paints a poignant portrait of friendship among soldiers in wartime, and reflects on the ways in which veterans commemorated their friendships and sacrifices following the war. The lingering impacts of the war on the children of veterans, scattered throughout the Vietnamese diaspora are examined in Chapter 8. Through the narratives of six members of the 'younger generation', Nguyen examines the ways in which the 'Vietnamese experience of diaspora has affected the intergenerational transmission of war memories and narratives' (184).
9. A notable distinction in Nguyen's work is the dedication with which she has researched the lives of South Vietnamese military women; Chapter 4 is entirely dedicated to the experiences of RVNAF women. Nguyen also provides historical and social context to supplement the readers'

understanding of the decisions and actions of these veterans. She notes that the creation of the Women's Armed Forces Corps in 1960 had numerous historical precedents, ranging from the time of the Trung Sisters' rebellion against Chinese forces in the first century CE, to the fifteenth century where a third of Le Thai To's army were female sutlers (90). However, she also notes centuries of Chinese influence and domination, and the internalisation of Confucian tenets emphasising female submission and obedience; as such, the military women of South Vietnam 'had to negotiate and mediate their disparate roles as daughters, wives, mothers, and soldiers' (90). Despite this, Nguyen contends that these women were incredibly 'adventurous, forceful, and resilient,' with a 'clear sense of agency' (88). Her description of Bui Ngoc Thuy's life, which included volunteering for service in the armed forces alongside her sister and two female friends, serving in the Airborne Division for seven years and obtaining parachuting qualifications alongside nine other women, demonstrates that independence, mobility, sense of commitment and patriotism were prevalent amongst South Vietnamese servicewomen. Although 'thousands of women served in the RVNAF and some had military careers stretching for twenty-five years ... historians of the war have remained largely silent on their participation' (89). As such, Nguyen's work is invaluable in redressing this silence, with lengthy accounts of multiple military women's experiences, perceptions and lives recounted in their own words.

10. Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the lives and experiences of veterans following the end of the Vietnam War. Nguyen traces and contrasts the life trajectories of six veterans, half of whom remained in Vietnam and half of whom rebuilt their lives abroad as refugees. All six accounts detail immense political repression following the war, with 'mass internment, forced deurbanization, and forced labour,' and punitive measures targeting former South Vietnamese military subjects and their families across multiple generations (141). However, Nguyen notes 'the experiences of the three Vietnam-based veterans differ markedly from those of veterans in Australia' (160). While South Vietnamese veterans in Australia are entitled to an Australian war pension, which 'signifies ... public recognition of their war service ... official acknowledgement of their status as allied veterans, and their acceptance as members of the Australian community' (169), the surviving soldiers remaining in Vietnam are instead 'unseen, unheard and unacknowledged by the Vietnamese government' (142). Facing immense physical trauma, poverty and alienation following the war, these veterans were observed by Nguyen to be far more guarded in their accounts; one veteran 'still fears possible repercussions on the part of the authorities in Vietnam' (160). In this way, Nguyen draws attention to the contrast between their 'individual or corporeal memory and the political and historical amnesia relating to their war service' (142), reinforcing her broader argument around the importance of oral histories as an invaluable source of counternarratives to official histories.
11. *South Vietnamese Soldiers* holds several contemporary political ramifications for Australian, and broader Southeast Asian spheres. While much of her historical research is based around analysis of past Australian refugee policy, the contrasts with Australia's current, harsher attitudes to refugees are starkly apparent. Nevertheless, Nguyen also exposes some of the less liberal actions taken by previous Australian governments involved in the intake of Vietnamese refugees—in particular, she references confidential documents in the National Archives which reveal how Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, in 1975, personally rejected Vietnamese refugee applications that had already been approved, and required numerous refugees to sign an undertaking to not engage in politics in Australia (this decision was later revoked). Nguyen's analyses of these documents have immense ramifications for our understanding of Australia's ambivalence towards refugees both past and present, and the impact of Australia's refugee policies on both those allowed entry, or denied access.
12. Nguyen's writing is extremely clear, with simple, accessible language. While certain sections containing considerable historical detail, particularly those utilising military terminology, are

somewhat drier to read, her inclusion of large portions of text direct from oral testimonies add immense colour and humanise the events discussed in the work. The book's structure is strong, with each chapter beginning with an extended anecdote, before broadening to summarise its focus, introducing its subjects and summarising once again at each chapter's conclusion. Though there are several recurring arguments and repetitive passages throughout the book, the overall effect is one of thematic coherence.

13. This book is undoubtedly dedicated to 'the men and women who served in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces' and those within the South Vietnamese diaspora more broadly. However, Nguyen's combination of oral and textual historical research, and her accessible delivery make this text a highly important work for advanced undergraduate students, graduate students and those more broadly interested in issues within Vietnamese history, colonial history, refugee studies, gendered histories and the politics of remembrance.

Note

[1] Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt, *Memory and Political Change*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 6.

MAIN

Published with the support of Gender and Cultural Studies, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

URL: http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue43/dang_review.html

Copyright

Page constructed by [Carolyn Brewer](#).

Last modified: 02 July 2019 1109