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Sand and Dust

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Thien Hoang Doan

Committee in charge:

Professor Kyong Park, Chair

Professor Brian Cross

Professor Ricardo Dominguez

Professor Yen Le Espiritu

2021

The thesis of Thien Hoang Doan is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2021

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Preface

Over the years I have been producing work about the history of Vietnam, I have gained so much diverse information about the war. During my first and second year at UCSD, I recollect, rebuild Vietnam war stories, based on many oral stories, coming from my family and older relatives who lived through the post-Vietnam war era. From those stories, I create artwork that corresponds to my understanding of life post-Vietnam war. My primary medium was photography, sculpture, and installation. Moving to my third year at UCSD, I spent my entire year living in An Bang village to create a new body of work for this thesis exhibition. In this series of work, I mainly use moving-image as the dominant medium of conveyance for my research about remittances, refugee history in An Bang village.

Throughout my studies on post-Vietnam-war history, there is so much debate over the ideology, policy, and history that surrounds the region. For many years, I have sought both physical and non-physical evidence to learn more about the trauma such as post-war and political instability left fear lingering in the heads of Vietnamese. This thesis generates a body of artwork that suggests my struggles of finding and researching about the post-Vietnam war period, because of the heterogeneous-education that I received from Vietnam and the U.S. As a result of this parallel-knowledge education I could reinterpret the hidden or removed evidence that remains in vacant spots of Vietnam war history, especially in rural areas. In searching for accurate history, I have gone beyond simply linking my knowledge with the public data. I examined the information from specific cases. In this instance, I thoroughly researched the people of An Bang who I believe hold the original history relevant to the war. I investigated different generations in the village and the diaspora of boat people. Through this, I could

independently present my discoveries, my imagination, and my interpretations of An Bang history as complementary to my artistic production.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In many ways, completing this thesis has been the most memorable experience of my whole time at the University of California, San Diego. It is also difficult because of the pandemic in 2020. In that regard, I want to mention my academic committee for helping, advising me from the beginning till the end. Kyong Park, Brian Cross, Ricardo Dominguez and Yen Le Espiritu. A special mention should also be given to Jennifer Ray, who helped me broaden my visual art horizons during my first year at Wichita State University. Most grateful thanks go to them all.

To all my friends and colleagues - Juan Bastardo, Bailey Davenport, Grace Grothaus, Kirstyn Hom, Işık Kaya, Alexandra Neuman, Oscar Magallanes, Carolina Montejo, Matt Williams, Lauryn Smith, Alan Skelton, Victor Castañeda, Alexis Hithe, Paolo Zuñiga, Lucas Coffin - I can only mention some of them by name. I have appreciated your support and encouragement on many amazing conversations and projects.

Despite everything, my thesis project would not have been completed in Vietnam without your help - Rem Nguyen, Hieu Chau, Tai Nguyen, Huy Phan, Vi Minh, Hung Minh.

As ever, I have received extraordinary support from my partner Dieu Hang Luong. She is the one accompanying me from the beginning of the whole project. The one who intelligently addresses me during the preparation of the Transit's script, storyline. My family reinforced my mental and physical strength to keep up with the project. Delightfully, all my verve for researching new artworks in 2021 comes from my in-coming daughter Vania My Doan.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Sand and Dust

by

Thien Hoang Doan

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2021

Professor Kyong Park, Chair

In this thesis work, *Sand and Dust* is an installation containing multiple types of work, including short videos, short film, sound, photograph, and documentary. “*Sand and Dust*” title is inspired by the title of the song written by Trinh Cong Son. This song abstracts the concepts of life and death in Buddhism. I use this title to refer to the discussion of existentialism which is embedded in the survival and struggle of An Bang villagers through the war and post-war. They strive to have a fulfilling life by pursuing a rich lifestyle and hope to reach “the other shore” through inevitable death.

The exhibition is divided into three sections. Each section suggests an ingredient to create a wide picture of An Bang village. The exhibition is a showcase of my discovery of the hidden history, untold stories, trauma memory of An Bang people who lived through the Đổi Mới policy. This also shows my observations centered on the relationship between remittances and life conditions of An Bang's in-waiting migrant villagers. This body of work captures the contradictions and incompatibility of truth and falsity of belonging, living, dreaming, and dying about the complex memory of war which they are intrinsically connected and yet perhaps, also removed. First part of the short film Transit shows the relationships between remittance and ancestor tomb in An Bang village and how this view is in a transnational remittancescape. The second part comprises three short videos titled 1 second, 30 years, Cha- Cha- Cha, and I am going to die anyway. The videos document three different elder women who are determined to "fail refugees" surviving through Vietnam's "re-education camp". These videos are also the observation of the way people of An Bang prepare for their death which correlates with the war history and locates continuities between the spirit and physical worlds. The third section contains the installation of a photograph that is associated with the local religious realm and the history transposition. As viewers experience this whole exhibition, they will discover how conflicting views of the afterlife accurately capture their ambivalent feelings about death and alive.

While Transit has been rather a traditional film pursuit, I also involved some experimental approaches. Rather than showing documents of my interview with the villager, I paraphrased his exact words into the script so that my main character could manifest the interview with the montage alone. At one point, I can ensure the authenticity of information as well as the consistency "docu-fiction" tone in my film.

INTRODUCTION

Many examinations of the Vietnam war and the boat people emphasize destruction, death, and devastation. This body of work shifts the focus to return, recovery, resurrection, and rebuilding. Emphasizing the abiding resilience of locals and refugees. It is also about the insidiously hidden political, socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic agendas that create transformations that have profound and lasting effects on the land and the people who live there. Consider, for instance, the new-build remittance necropolis in An Bang village that is attached with history and imagination. This architecture partly embodies in unselfconscious collective local practice and in villagers' reflection about what it means to relate their practice to ancestor and refugee history.

This exhibition was inspired by my early video *The Hazy Days of May* made in 2018. This video is a realm of short disjointed visual metaphors and documentary footage of actual “May 23, 1885, incident ritual processions, edited into a non-linear narrative that is visually and palpably coherent. By following the journey of the young man in helping his mother prepare for the “May 23, 1885, incident” ceremony processions. The video uncovers the forgetting or mistaking history in Hue city. Along with other honor wandering soul ceremonies throughout Vietnam culture, people often confuse Hue's wandering soul ceremony as one event.

At the time, my fascination with my own video, which I had encountered over and over again, was connected to the way that I saw it reflecting aspects of An Bang village that I had just exposed to in 2019. *The Hazy Days of May* video shows a social event that reflects on the result of a historic massacre. In remembering departed soldiers, friends, family, and loved ones, Hue citizens effortly created a ceremony honoring them as well as holding up the memory of the fall

of the citadel on May 23, 1885. The video also touches on the unsighted social stratification in most underdevelopment areas in Vietnam. This work returns to my interest in how the Vietnamese recovered, resurrected, and rebuilt their culture and society after wars.

After making a couple of early artworks located in Hue, Vietnam, I found that video work, in the appropriate manner, delivers a greater amount of information to the Vietnamese audience for reasons. First, the unstoppable increasing rates of smartphone ownership led Vietnam to become a top 5 country streaming on online platforms such as Youtube, Facebook, Tiktok¹. Because of this, my video work has a bigger chance to be exposed to the digital audience. To me, among the many art forms, video work seems to be the most directly comprehensible medium art form to ordinary people. Second, this body of work focuses on the rural area where lack of mobility, fine art space is unsuitable or unreachable for my audience but the digital video platform. Last, time-based visual work is where I can bring “poetic truth” methodology in a propaganda format that replaces my right to freedom of speech. I could easily fabricate photography, installation, sound, and text in one video or film to poetically refer to my political viewpoint. With this method, I also deliberated on avoiding political censorship in Vietnam.

The Hazy Days of May video work has been limited to the traditional social event that is rooted in the war in Hue city. I found the video did not cover enough the many hidden layers of history. As such, the experimental approach is not well suited to the audience because of some considerable surrounding the vague narration. Even though, my aim of the video was the social stratification attached to war history and past achievements. I failed to give a cohesive

¹ See CNBC article “Five of YouTube’s biggest markets in the world are in Asia” by Saheli Roy Choudhury, published April, 24 2019.

panorama of past-to-present events due to my knowledge of Vietnam is largely based on very limited data. I did not do enough research on the variety of this ceremony in other places in Vietnam and how people view this wandering soul ceremony in different ethnicities and religions.

Although my methodology approach to the topic failed, I still want to find out the key problem. I am aware that my research may have two limitations. First, the possible error is the gappy history sources that were intentionally covered by the Vietnam government. The second is the difficulty of collecting data from the generation who experienced the real event. This burden occurred because of fear and paranoia over sharing of “sensitive” stories². In recent years, I have been growing interested in how and why communist propaganda could replace one’s right to willingly share historical events. To find the answer I moved to a smaller village. I started the series with a short 23 minutes film called Transit. In the process of making this film, I discovered many undergoing immense tales of An Bang history in relation to their attitude toward death. I found out a vast chronicle of An Bang boat people's history was altered or even erased after Vietnam’s 1986 reform. While the initial work centered around refugees’ history and the subsequent time, I decided to embrace An Bang local tradition and belief which reorient my own perspectives on what otherwise might be considered the mundane aspects of refugee and afterlife. Taking the whole midst of a global pandemic year, I moved to the village to further my research. Thereafter I finished Transit, I began generating a collective type of medium supplemental artworks such as photography, videos, and found objects. This body of work functions as a guide to my next series of work in Vietnam in the next few years.

²Prefer the Vietnamese phrase to describe the history story which may result in arrest because of the censorship policy.

I want to spend this paragraph explaining the “poetic truth” phrase which I used in describing the context of my work. The story in the thesis film is adapted from a real incident. I reconstruct and contextualize the locations and details of the source events to create an independent narration, characters, and evidence. I use moving-image as a language that is sometimes very direct, sometimes meditative, and sometimes prosaic to depict my contradictory ways of seeing Vietnam. I employed dramatic monologue, music, poetry, even a mantra to illustrate and document the social problem. Furthermore, to avoid severe sanctions for those who have an open discussion about refugees and re-education camps, I fabricate my own character and location based on the real oral story. This “poetic truth” strategy helps me to address both the critical view of the defects in the reform and rebuild and the other eyes seeing Vietnam as a beautiful and sublime nation. In the short film Transit, the traumatic image of the failed refugee is stocked in the fantastic colorful mosaic ancestor tomb. As to generate meaning, the viewer navigates to the layers which lie beyond the compelling, analogous narrative. At the end, the viewer will poetically and quietly engage with the gloomy truth. Ultimately, the whole series resonates visually and metaphorically with the presence of a distortion of the actual truth.



Figure 1: Sketch Plan for Transit film Installation. Stocks are found on the internet, 2020.

This is a sketch of potential projecting for the film in the future. In the process of creating the Transit film, I was drawn to the abandoned or forgotten spaces theater in a way of showing the film. It is envisioned as a neighborhood meeting space, a place where strangers may sit down and start a conversation about, among and perhaps because of the film. The floor is

covered with sand dunes to create a sitting area for viewing the film. The purpose is to create a space that allows loose sand particles to migrate and accumulate as a result of the viewer's movement while watching the film. Sand dunes are illuminated by the red light beams from the back. A large part of the installation is devoted to re-creating the heat and sandy environment of An Bang village. As this thesis evolves, I modify the installation to fit with three other short videos and a photograph. I manage to screen Transit on a big screen at the primary focus. On the other left side of the gallery, I place projectors on a pedestal showing three shorts videos 1 second, 30 years, Cha-Cha-Cha, and I am going to die anyway. Video clips are timed so they play after each other. The photograph entitled The Stillness of Death is projected on the other wall with size 30x20 inches.

An Bang History

The fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975 marked the beginning of one of the largest exodus in Vietnam's modern history. Cities near the coast like Hue city are the hot zones of fleeing. An Bang was a tiny fishing village, halfway down Vietnam's eastern coast near Hue City. It is separated from Hue's land by a wide Tam Giang lagoon. Before the Truong Ha bridge was built in 2003, the only way to reach this village was by boat. It is an unusual geographical location which separates the village from the area of the war zone. People in the village only have a limited exposure to the American War in Vietnam. However, the village obtains a complex refugee skein of aftermaths. An intricate weave of unresolved failed-refugee sagas comes back to haunt the village in post-liberation. Based on the local oral history, from 1975 to 1990, over 3000 people fled from this village including An Bang villagers and people from the central of Vietnam. Most of them landed in Hong Kong refugee camps, then transferred to the U.S. afterward.

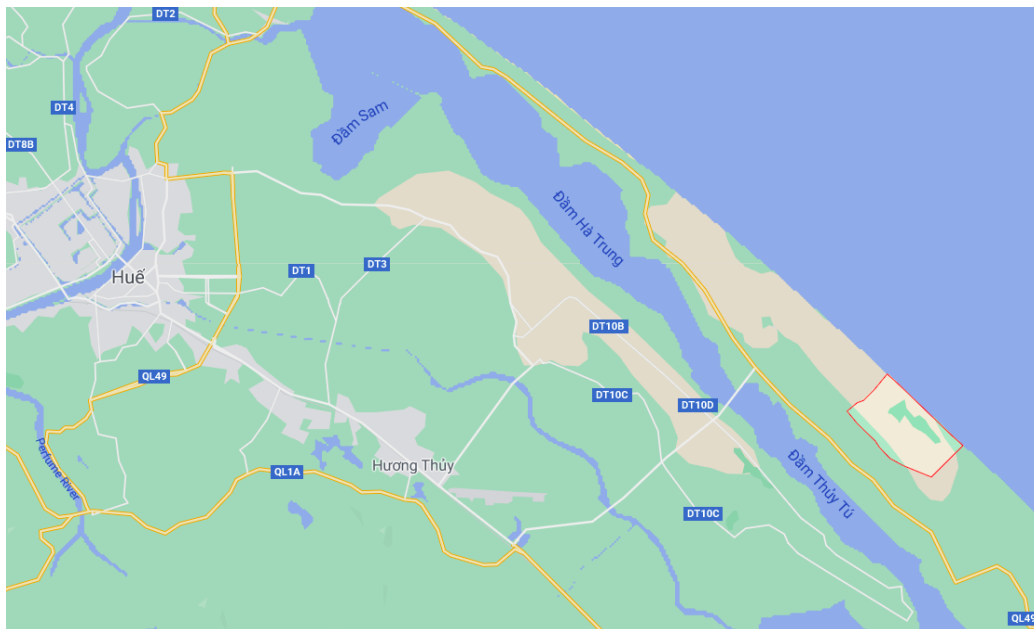


Figure 2: An Bang village location on Google Map, 2020

The ancestor tomb building activities significantly enlarged in early 1990 when An Bang villagers received more money from diaspora financial returns. The number of formal transfer channels such as banks or money transfer services like Western Union and MoneyGram as well as international money transfer services has increased significantly since the early 1990s. The remittance landscape has transformed. The locals could get an extensive amount of overseas money. Therefore, at the beginning, the aged cemetery has been subject to large-scale excavation. People started with the purpose of fixing, modifying their ancient tombs. Beginning in 1991, An Bang's rural landscape suddenly shifted with the appearance of the larger and rather spectacular tombs and modern houses. The An Bang diaspora has become more and more inclined to invest in new cemeteries. Each one has improved on the last. However, most of these new built ancestor tombs remain vacant or occupied by a villager who guards and maintains the property. Besides being a necropolis for ancestors, the land is also a graveyard for refugee families living abroad.

According to the locals, this An Bang necropolis covers over 40 football fields with over 3000 ancestor tombs. It depends on the type of tomb but is usually in the vicinity of 50,000 USD, according to 80-year-old villager Ms. Hue who recently constructed her own tomb in 2019. It can take up to six months to complete a tomb which often uses three or four builders. Local in the commonly discussed motivations behind their constructing, design features in this manner is to "remembering the moral debt to ancestors".



Figure 3: Ancestor tombs at An Bang village, internet photograph. 2019

Relationship Between Remittance and Ancestor Tomb

To study “transnational remittance necropolis”, this section focuses on An Bang village. The An Bang case is a unique one. It illustrates a remittance necropolis effect on the country of origin that is applicable across remittance landscapes around the globe.

In the recent century, the increasing scale of remittance affects the development of their homeland’s economy and architecture causes the rapid growth of the local economy. In recent years there has been considerable change in the remittance spending behavior of the non-migrant relatives in transnational families. With the smaller amount that is used to transfer to the homeland, non-migrant family members spend the remittance income to amend their quality of life quality. The average pattern of spending is on purchasable items such as daily

expenditures and durable goods. When the amount of receiving goes beyond the cost of daily expenditures, remittance receivers make investments in productive production or waste the money on nonproductive, such as leisure activities. In the case of An Bang village, locals spend enormous amounts of remittance on modifying and enlarging their ancestor tombs which is unidentifiable either as productive or nonproductive action.

Hung Cam Thai once used Viviana Zelizer's term "special money" to describe what is migrant money within low-wage transnational families. Approximately, the analytic "special money" can apply to the An Bang remittance case. An Bang ancestor tomb funding is "special remittance" for several reasons. First of all, the money is used for their deceased. It brings no financial benefit to their families, but religiously inclined. For this reason, An Bang's "special remittance" practically reroutes, economically, the velocity of money circulation. Second, this money provides the physical transformation of An Bang's landscape and architecture which embeds in newly built ancestor tombs and enormous modern houses.

World Necropolis, Comparison with other Culture

The religious concept and philosophical ideas of the human soul were brought to Vietnam from China through the warring states period, between the 1st century BC and the 15th century AD. In relation to the Chinese religion beliefs that was shared and modified in many aspects to fit with Vietnam's tradition, one of the popular folk belief is a Đạo Thờ Cúng Tổ Tiên or Đạo Hiếu (Dao of Vietnamese Ancestral Worship/ Filial Piety) the origin from Daoism and Taoism. Over time, Vietnamese people have quintessentialized this worship into socio-religious philosophy, religion, and cultural life, in the existence, immortality, and protective powers of the divine souls of all their past ancestors. Shaun. K Malarney overviews Vietnam's "filial piety" in

his book *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam* that the most basic obligation of a Vietnam child is putting their ancestor's soul in a scrupulous custom resting place. Not only in An Bang but in many places in Vietnam, descendants spend their money to build graves for their past ancestors. The fundamental differences between the An Bang tombs and the other places are that: An Bang tombs are mainly funded by remittances, some living refugee elders prefer to choose the size and design of their tomb before they die. In some cases, numerous enormous vacant tombs bide the owner's death. The wealthier family would build bigger graves. Heonik Kwon argues in her book *After the Massacre* that in Vietnamese mortuary art, the tomb is an encasement of the deceased that both shelters his body and demonstrates social identity. This is particularly the case, the tomb also reflects the wealth and social position of the owner.

An Bang's tombs are built with the motif design of the Khai Dinh emperor. The structures are two-three levels high, decorated with porcelain mosaic mascots such as dragons, unicorns, and phoenixes. In the old days, building decorative ancestor tombs especially for the wealthy was an elaborate affair. In the early revolutionary era, these kinds of architecture were discouraged but are now making a comeback in An Bang village. The details of the construction of general Vietnam graves are described in *The Religions of South Vietnam in Faith and Fact* book. Families with financial means often erect cement barriers and decorate around the graves, using the same materials and decorations commonly found on temples like lotus flowers. In many rural areas, graves are merely piles of soil and sand in a round cone shape alike. In the other case, Shaun Kingsley Malarney mentions that during the revolution time, Thinh Liet³'s government dictated the burial of all caskets appropriately forbidding the practice of geomancy, the large construction tomb. They also require the use of simple headstones.

³ Thinh Liet is a commune in Hanoi municipality

Distinguishable from Vietnam's general traditional cemetery, An Bang's cemetery is an erected cacophony of architectural styles. Because it is built with the royal tomb motif, the most architectural fusion of Chinese, Vietnamese, and European Gothic elements. It is remarkably customized with interdenominational decorations such as moon, sun, cross, Chinese word, mascots. There are either two or four unicorns guarding the steps leading up to the forecourt at the tomb's entrance. These unicorn statues are hand-built with cement, some wealthier families use hard stone instead. In the upper chamber, graves are identically built above the ground. It depends upon the family's wealth as well as religious beliefs, which will vary in accordance. Some tombs have the main grave, for the highest rank ancestor, size about 10 feet in radius. Most of the tomb surface is covered with mosaics, no matter which religion is practiced by the family. Those who specialize in hand-building traditional ceramic mosaic mascots are called "thợ kếp". This is a long-standing traditional hand craft that developed in the Thuan Hoa (Thua Thien Hue province) land. Thợ kếp in charge of hand shaping the dragon, phenix and other unicorns. Most of the Thợ kếp training is through informal apprenticeship and doing the work. This type of work will take most of the construction time.

In comparison with the world, Guatemala, Todos Santos Cuchumatán cemetery is special in its funding and decoration. The construction and decoration are much plain and simple. In most of the tomb, Cuchumatánes paint American flags on the tomb wall as a way to thank the land that provides economically by way of family remittances. The New York Times explains the painted American flag on the wall of tombs "signaling the provenance of the money used to build them". In the past decades, evidence shows that at least one member of every

family in Todos Santos migrated to the U.S. In addition, larger-scale Americanized architecture was built with such remittances.



Figure 4: The cemetery of Todos Santos Cuchumatán, American flags are painted on tombs. Daniele Volpe, The New York Times, 2018

The second example is the mausoleum city of Manila, Philippines, which developed many styles influenced by Western and Chinese artistic traditions. Occasionally, people compare this cemetery to the “Beverly Hills of the Dead” because of its lavish design and decoration. This cemetery side originally established by the wealthy Chinese community living in the Philippines. The exterior appearance illustrates how Chinese culture was mixed with European imposition during the Spanish colonial time. Some mausoleums merged various traditions into one which was reflective of the Tsinoy⁴ community. The tomb's interior lays out

⁴ Filipino with Chinese roots

with fully functioning kitchens, bathrooms, and bedrooms. It is deliberate that family members can stay along with the deceased ancestor.



Figure 5: The Chinese cemetery of Manila, Philippines. Mithun Divakaran, 2014

The similarity is that An Bang, Todos Santos Cuchumatán, and Manila tombs are funded with remittances. The importance of remittances goes beyond the circumscription of survival of a family or even village. It becomes an essential segment to preserve and strengthen the local tradition, day after day. In fact, the vast necropolis left behind in ancient civilizations, such as the old Egyptian colony and Mayan civilization, are the source of a great deal of explanation about those civilizations. In the same manner, the An Bang, Todos Santos Cuchumatán, and Manila tombs are part of architecture archives in examining the relationships between remittances, migrations, and homeland transformation. Remittance is generously tight with metaphors of

memory and sentiment, its thoughts are connected to the migration life practices that made the transnational necropolis possible.

Artworks

Chết là Thử Phách, còn là Tinh Anh (Nguyễn Du⁵)

When a body passed on, their soul remains

“Sinh ký Tử Quy: Sống gửi, Thác về” (ngạn ngữ⁶)

To live is like being a lodger in the world, and to die is to return home.

Inspired by these two quotes, the short film entitled *Transit* for two reasons. First, in the realm of reality, An Bang Village is a transit area for the locals departing to the U.S as their next destination. On the other hand, religiously, this is a place where the An Bang diaspora transit to the afterlife world after they die and return to their homeland. Second, within the process of transit, often involved with a “waiting” gesture which suggests the An Bang life condition. The elder refugee anticipates their death to return home, the in-waiting migration relatives wait for their migration procedures, and the tomb workers prospect for the remittance for new-build construction.

This is a docu-fiction film centered on a character named Thuyen, a 1985 dead “boat people” wandering soul in Chao Linh⁷ village over the course of 30 years. He thought he was

⁵ Creator of the poem *Kim van Kieu (The Tale of Kieu)*, written in *chu-nom* (southern characters). He is considered by some to be the father of Vietnamese literature.

⁶ Ngạn Ngữ is an ancient proverb

⁷ Chao Linh is a replacement name for An Bang village that I use in the film.

alive as a tomb builder and fought to end his poverty. His dialogue and monologues unpack the rich layers of intermingled insidiously hidden migrant history, political, socioeconomic. In consequence, creating transformations that have profound and lasting effects on the land and the people who live there in the modern-day. The film is a premonition of a fantastical imaginary vision of the afterlife through An Bang's man-made mythological necropolic village. The film began as a personal exploration, but it has evolved into an investigation of the way history, memory, and mythology have been resurrected in An Bang village.

Thus editing develops in a style of "magical realism". Mingling the documentary of oral stories with fictional elements. The transfix in time and space makes the film special. The remystification technique associated with the process of reconstructing history and narrative. In traditional film, the rendering of space and time tends to be realistic. This film's shot sequences focus on delineating the protagonist's mind which would make sense. It also eliminates any logical component montages that hinder the man from his free expression. Following the subjective time, the film references the original discontinuity narrative that is based on a narrator's memory. Subjective time- fomic time, elliptical (compressing time), other space time, discontinuity. In editing the film non-linearly, the aim is to present a real event based on a personal memory, which can sometimes provide vivid details that do not correspond to the actual events. In consequence, the story might be incoherent as a whole. It also portrays, in reality, lives in a small village, paralleling a dead village where only spirits live. The viewer could recognize a separate world in the film through the cuts that are irrational of both the transfixing of time and the location's change.

The film shows many aspects of transnational remittances, such as “in-waiting migrant generation” (in-waiting refugee) struggles, the local attitudes toward Việt Kiều,⁸ and remittance income. In the detail of the film’s mise en scene, a young boy with an international brand American Eagle embroidered onto shirts when he first introduces appearance. I suggest a generation subscribe to the American dream. In his role, he is waiting for the procedure to migrate to the U.S.

The film narrative has less to do with a romantic sensibility than with a reflection on An Bang history. In the film, the information is gleaned from the locals expressed in the dialogue and monologue of the lead actor. Although, some of the discourse surrounding this topic still has something of defensive and attenuated. It still reveals their motivation, purpose that guided An Bang people in building their ancestor's tomb. Clearly, there are some profound fantasies or romanticized in the villager’s description as well as the film dialogues.

A detailed look at the scene above illustrates Thuyen returning home and telling his wife about his long-time Viet Kieu friend’s offer to build a new tomb. Thuyen said that his family is about to get enough money to purchase a motorbike once he starts the construction. According to the original interviewee narrative, his wife passed away a long time ago. In reality, after having met his Viet Kieu friend, he returned home to deposit money for buying new construction equipment for the upcoming contract. By framing, composition, and also creating filmic drama dialogue, this scene serves to emphasize the sense of poverty, loneliness of Thuyen. It shows his desire to get enough three meals a day, and buy a motorbike. Although he was talking to his wife, the viewer can notice the absence of his wife in all the cuts in this scene. This tracking shot

⁸ Oversea Vietnamese who returns to Vietnam often called Việt Kiều

of Thuyen hints at the presence of a ghost in the behind, in this case his wife's spirit. The mi-sen-scene evokes loneliness and haunting in Thuyen's house due to the sheer blurred lines between his dialogue and narrative monologue to the unknown soul and the viewer.

Rather than follow the traditional documentary pattern, this film shows an application of filmic dramaturgy as a creative expression, one that reflects on the character's memories flowing out of time. In a final scene setting, Juan Rulfo Pedro Páramo's book was the main inspiration. At one point in his novel, a man leaves his family for the Criteros war, followed by the migration. Juan Rulfo wrote: "Recuerdo días en que Comala se llenó de 'adioses' y hasta nos parecía cosa alegre ir a despedir a los que se iban", "I remember days when the only sound in Comala was good-byes, it seems like a celebration every time we sent someone on his way. As though to emphasize the tension between reality and a nostalgia for the future "y después parecieron olvidarse del pueblo y de nosotros, y hasta de sus cosas." "and then they seemed to forget the town and us, and even their things." In the Transit film, toward the end Thuyen realized the place he lived in had dramatically changed. Most of the villagers have left the town and only ancestor tombs remain. The last words he spoke to Tay were in sorrow and grief:

"It's so quiet in our village, do you think so? Nobody's here."

After a moment of silence, Tay apprised that "he will head to the U.S soon with his family." This scene portrays a realistic image of An Bang's life. The young generation (in-waiting refugee) abandons his home village and pursues their life in another country. Historically, this is a long migration progress of the boat people followed by economic migration and generation after generation. Predicable, within a few generations, the village will become a dead village,

filled only with the ancestor tombs and spirits. When engaged in specific migration activities, construction of ancestor tombs and sending remittances to their homeland, refugees mentally stay connected to their roots and homeland.

1 second, 30 years, and Cha- Cha- Cha videos are produced in collaboration with the locals. *1 second, 30 years* is based on the real story of an old woman in her diminishing last strength. She told her family member about the cemetery plot that she secretly bought for \$500. She has been preparing for her death by saving some little remittance for her resting land. According to her family, she was among the re-education boat people. At the end of her life, she was diagnosed with some psychiatric disorders caused by the electric shock torture at her early age. This is a strategy used to use to get information about people attempting to flee the country after the war ended. Inspired by the story, this work shows the last words of Ha⁹, second before she reincarnates. She tells us about vivid things she can recall from her memory. Sometimes her memory shattered as her soul wandered in the village over the course of thirty years.

Through the narrative, it is impossible to determine when she dies. Her death time remains unknown as she keeps telling us her death was thirty years ago or one second ago. This particular element shows that there was a bold historic event happening in her life thirty years ago that might cause her death. In fact, in the 1990's many Southeast Asian countries announced that the boat people in the camps definitively ended. The video opens a discussion of what caused one's death. There is still mute witness to what has been repression and removal in history. Thus the character created memories, and so her soul and identity, with each moment, and cannot escape them without erasing herself. This short clip is divided into two

⁹The character Ha is a fictional character created based on a real story.

parts. The first part combines mostly pictures of words and actual document materials and sites such as handwritten land exchange agreements, her young age photograph, her abandoned house, and cemetery spot. This part portrays the flashing in her memory about the remittance, her own tomb, how she bought her own cemetery. In creating the sequence of images of text, the spectator (reader) will actively employ their mental visualization to watch the film. Once the film starts on screen, the viewer is unable to slow down or reverse it to re-read the text. The film brings the audience to experience the “cognitive overload” which the character undergoes. The second part is an *Usnisa Vijaya Dharani* mantra play along with soft wind and weak breath. In Buddhism, the *Usnisa Vijaya Dharani* mantra is reputed to help during troubled and violent times. It can heal disease, lengthen life and purify karma for those with faith. The clip suggests the chaos of images and events in the memory bank which influence the complex memory of the Vietnam war in one's lifespan. As the viewer echoes the *Usnisa Vijaya Dharani* mantra at the end of the clip, Ha's soul extricates from the suffering.

Cha- Cha- Cha video captures a moment of old women singing along to the karaoke next door. The protagonists are a lonely old lady who is sitting on the veranda and the karaoke singer. The soundtrack consists of loud karaoke in her neighborhood, and birds chirping ambient. As the video plays, viewers hear the sound of the karaoke before seeing the slow zoom of the old lady. This clip highlights a connection between an in-waiting refugee (the karaoke man) and the failed refugee (the old lady) through a song. In the detail, the lady tries to keep up with the lyrics and is responding to the rhythm. This is particularly not surprising in light of the fact that she is unfamiliar with this fairly new song. It abstractly shows her desire to connect with the younger generation. While both characters share the same goal, which is migrating to a better country, one has failed to flee, and another is waiting to migrate. The video suggests

one's desire is not only to keep up with younger activities but also shows her perseverance in chasing the migration dream. The song used in the video is entitled “Hãy Cho Tôi” tentatively translated as “Please Give Me”. Because this song was written and sung in the U.S by a Vietnamese singer, people prefer this as “overseas music”. Despite the meaning of the song, the strategy of using distant sound and a zoom shot to render a median space for the spectator. Thus, in viewing the video, the viewer is set in between two characters, two generations, two histories, which is the so-called “transit space”.

The Stillness of Death is a photograph that is being installed behind a semi-transparent curtain. The photograph depicts a found cracked altar porcelain vase and flat winnowing basket. The semi-transparent curtain functions as a windowpane partly denying the viewer access to the sacred space. Thus the details of the photograph are barely revealed. This setup gives the viewer a three-dimensional space to share the feelings unfolding on a flat depiction image.



Figure 6: Yasujiro Ozu, Late Spring

The vase is widely regarded as being strongly connected with Asian cinema. It is often used as a metaphor object for true esoteric and spiritual. Through the influence of early Japanese cinema, I was inspired to create this photograph from a cut in Late Spring by Yasujiro Ozu. In the film, the vase cut appears during the scene of the father and daughter spending their last night together before the daughter turned into married life. There are shots of her soft voice sharing her day with her dad. At the moment she turns to look at her father, Ozu cuts to the vase shot with the sound of her father snoring in the background. For more than ten seconds, it returned to a close-up of the daughter's sorrowful eyes. Ozu ended this scene with the cut back to the vase. This shot cuts exactly at the moment of the main character's emotional transition. An American film theorist, critic Noël Burch worded, in his book *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese*, calls this a "pillow shot" which he prefers a

transitional cut that reflects on or shifts the meaning of the following scene. By using this “pillow shot” technique, this work prefers as a film-still to bring together the past, present, and the future. In this case, the photograph manifests a desolation of history, the failure of preserving history, and also the An Bang future to arrive.

During the re-development of An Bang cemetery, many of the old white blue altar porcelain vases were discarded. It was replaced with a modern design vase. As history indicates, this white blue altar vase design is based on Chinese royal porcelain “Bleu de Hue” which was exported from China in the early 18th century. During the Minh Mang and Thieu Tri dynasties in Vietnam, local versions of Bleu de Hue were produced locally. Throughout Vietnam’s Đổi Mới (renovation) period, this type of porcelain was widely produced as household dishware. As such, the action of photographing the vase reflects the end of Vietnam’s renovation product by replacing the shrine vase with a newer one.

The flat winnowing basket is a thin wicker bamboo woven basket. The winnowing basket has been an important tool used in Vietnam agriculture for centuries. The flat and round shape basket is specifically designed to jog the grain from its husk by borrowing wind and gravity forces. In addition, the basket has an important ritual role in many rural families. It presents a symbol for the plenitude of life. Because it is fabricated like a basket boat, which is used for fishing, water cargo, and historically to escape to America during the Vietnam War, this basket sometimes symbolizes independence or freedom. Placing the basket in the background of the photograph suggests an investigation into the history of boat people in the village.

The composition of a single vase in the middle of the photograph resonates directly and fixes the viewer's gaze upon it, evoking their imagination of all the potential meanings that hide within the object. Detached from past owners, the photograph of the vase transformed from an ordinary functional physical object into a museological. This allows the viewer free to see new elements in the ordinary.

In speaking about the general theme, this whole series of works depict the complex and trauma memory embedded in storylines, artifacts, and ancestor tombs. Each piece was developed as a story in itself, but by installing them in the gallery together, the show provides insight into local transnational activities which connect with the history of refugees..

The endless financial support and the “burden” of in-waiting migration generation

In fact, death is an inevitable reality that people will have to face in the past, present, and future, leading to more and more tombs being built to serve the dead. Seeing as the tomb construction is inextricably linked to remittances, I would argue that as long as such activities are still active, remittances are insufficient to sustain these activities. There are factors that lead the “special remittance” fund for ancestor tombs will be depleted in the future.

First, the migrants who send money to their ancestors are mostly the old refugee generation with limited income. Due to this reason, many old An Bang migrants often raise the fund from their descendants. According to them, descendants donating money for their ancestor's grave is typical of Đạo Thờ Cúng Tổ Tiên or Đạo Hiếu (Dao of Vietnamese Ancestral

Worship/ Filial Piety). On the one hand, elders believe that this activity also helps Vietnamese American connect with their roots. However, when asked Vietnamese American about sending the money for an ancestor tomb, most of them express a transnational perspective, this is an unnecessary-driven supporting consumption. Thus, most of them are unwilling to donate a lavish amount of money to a distant dead ancestor almost they have never contacted. Their reactions indicate an unfamiliarity with Vietnamese traditions of ancestor worship/fiduciary piety. On the An Bang side, young in-waiting migrants are in the waiting mode. Due to the large supportive oversea money, An Bang's in-waiting migrants slip into an unproductive period. In fact, there is evidence of the rapid decline in the number of fishermen, which used to be the main financial-driven occupation in the village. According to the villagers, many of the fishing boats are disappearing, in replacement with dinghies. Locals use dinghies for their everyday amusement, particularly for inshore fishing. As a consequence, An Bang non-migrant do not deliver sufficient income to satisfy the primary income-driven generation. Therefore, in terms of building ancestor tombs, the major funding source relies on overseas money. Certainly, there is the domestic money given by non migrant relatives with high incomes to build tombs, but remittances remain the most reliable comparative source of funding.

Near the end of the film *Transit*, Thuyen learns that the tomb construction will be cancelled due to the incompetent raising of funds. The character portrays a customary mindset of an An Bang villager, he argues "they definitely know nothing. Building tombs for grandparents is the important thing that has to be done". But Tay the young boy pointed out that "many refugees and second generations haven't come back to Vietnam yet since they left, so they're unaware of our land's tomb-building traditio". In addition Tay added "But some people said they couldn't afford that big money. Some supposed that it was a colossal waste to build a tomb, then

leave it empty when the grandparents were still alive. So no one gave money. “ This scene provides a foreshadow of the conflict perception between old villagers and overseas diasporas. Building an ancestor tomb is an unaffordable process for locals but the “Viet Kieu”. Although there has been a move to build a greater number of tombs, not all the “Viet Kieu” would consider spending that much money for a tomb.

From a financial point of view, the tomb is a “liability” item rather than an “asset”. This type of “liability” is a property owned by a family that cannot be expanded economically for the family or the community in the future. As a way to preserve the architecture of the cemetery and provide family members with graves, a remittance "special fund" for this "liability" continues to be utilized. Many immigrants did not anticipate the future cost when building them. In fact, the cost of the land has been increasing due to the growth of new construction being overcrowded. In contrast, family tombs space must expand overtime in response to the increase in the number of deceased. On the other hand, some may argue that building tombs serves an income purpose for the local tomb's builder which is not true. In fact, according to the locals as most of the tomb's builder, especially "thợ kép", comes from the next village or Hue city.

This issue is illustrated in the short video¹ second, 30 years. At 2:43, viewers could witness the drafting of a written agreement on the acquisition of land for 500 US dollars. It is implied in the video that this land had been purchased by a character to be used for her tomb; the video describes that she had bought it for her tomb and family. Due to the increasing number and size of newly-built tombs, many villagers are compelled to pre-purchase a burial plot for their future deaths. In the written agreement, it is noteworthy that An Bang used U.S. currency to buy and trade the land. In this detail, money that is commonly used in the village is

remittance. Due to such a common process, villagers will not need to exchange USD for Vietnam Dongs.

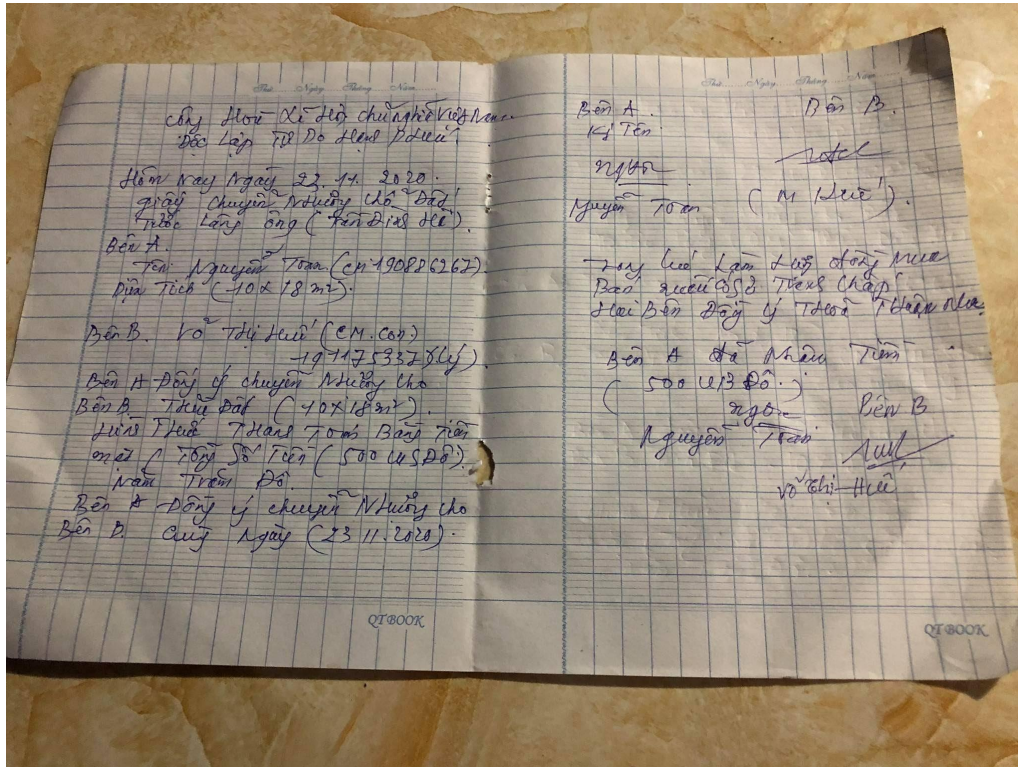


Figure 7: Land exchange agreement. 2020

Although the An Bang necropolis is the most striking feature of remittance construction, the village struggles to attract the attention of travellers. First off, these tombs are family sacred property that will not welcome any disturbance. Second, The haunting nature is embedded in the construction which makes the travelling market hard to scant attention. Lastly, the village also has a gloomy history about boat-people that is the typical political topic unwelcoming to any discussion in Vietnam. This is also the main reason the local administration avoids promoting any travel activity to this town. In consequence, An Bang's ancestor tombs, fundamentally, cannot contribute to the family or community economic growth.

I also argue that the burden of tradition, culture, and finances will continue to haunt the young in-waiting migrants once they migrate to the U.S. Families assume that the new migrant will take care of the remittance “special fund” for the ancestor tomb. This is an untenable assumption, particularly it links to the filial piety responsibility. Sending money to the grave of ancestors is a tradition in almost every family. However, it is unlikely for new immigrants to earn enough to do so during their early immigrant period. For this young immigrant to succeed he must surpass many challenges. In a case study by Geraldine Pratt in her book *Families Apart*, she discusses the issues involving the “failing children,” who are Philipino immigrants who struggle to attain a skilled laborer. In the chapter “Enterprising Women, Failing Children” the author indicates that Philipino women workers with Live-in Caregiver Program status in Canada are deskilled long-term, their youths are often not able to find their way out of the low level service jobs, and that reflects on the low high school completion rate. In the An Bang case, in addition to being “fail children” similar, many young migrants do not have a high school diploma before migrating to the U.S..

In the Transit, Tay once said, “...My family will sponsor me to the U.S. sooner or later. Why should I study so much?”. As a matter of fact, their mindset would be that once they immigrate to the U.S., they will become a Nail technician at any Vietnamese Nails salon. This is the radical job that most of the An Bang new-immigrant join-in. In the short-term and temporary, this is a highly earned job without the high education requirement. Shortly if they do Nails, young migrants will save enough money to send back to their homeland to support their family, and part of remittance for the ancestor tomb building. A generation later might fall into this trap, where children would be held responsible for remittances of “special funds’ ’ for the ancestor’s

tomb, thus being forced to sacrifice in any tedious job, which unrequire a high education diploma. In the meantime, significant disparities in the value of the local currencies are the obstacles that hesitate migrants from seeking opportunities for elevating their financial status and education. This is a migration threshold that continuously transpires the young An Bang in-waiting migrants and generation after. The threshold is embedded in the system of family, culture, belief and expectation, and shares a reality among many transnational families.

In an example, Cha- Cha- Cha video shows a view of An Bang that “in-waiting migrant generation” slipping into an unproductive period and “waiting” mode covers a wide range of behaviors. In this case, the young are singing karaoke that spotlight a typical waiting activity while waiting for the migration procedure. The notion of repetition of this activity reflects in the response of the main old woman to the song. Her lip-singing abstracts the boredom and tediousness of this karaoke routine, as she almost memories the lyrics of this song.

Conclusion

“They’re so cold, these scholars! May lightning strike their food so that their mouths learn how to eat fire!”

— Friedrich Nietzsche

How does the tension between making art and constructing history affect my way of creating film?

I have been using photography, sculpture, and installation in the past few years to address my statement in the work of art. I built objects from collective information such as books, news, and the internet. The first years show entitled *Hybrid Home*, *The Coordinate of Here* which I investigate my cultural displacement, assimilation within the context of hybridity. Despite the concept of linking me to my artwork as well as myself to my home country, I haven't found any connections yet. Yet in spite of all this, I see this series as the raw materials derived from the event, has not been transformed or processed into an artistic context. Overall, the sculptures are purely derivative from culture from my homeland.

There is no doubt I need “the lightning strike to food so their mouths learn to eat the fire!””. In order to explore beyond the possibilities of a new medium perhaps representing history, I experiment with docu-fiction films. At this research, I found a meeting point of multiple research and materials coming together. My argument is that through making moving image works, I can achieve three objectives: archival, explanatory and representational the history which I am searching.

By archiving many An Bang anecdotes, which is clearly reflected in my videos work, help explain my approach. A particular interest of mine is the failed boat people as well as the hunt for the hidden history which communist intentionally modify. As these materials are oral narrative, it may fall to cognitive biases. My aim is not the extraction of truth from anecdotes, but to produce the art of my imagination, conjuring images of possible events into one's mind. My film is a means not only for viewers to access the original materials but also to represent the phenomenon of memories of people who were present during the event. I believe history can not exist without forgetting-memory, faulty-memory, and erase-memory. In juxtaposing history's archives with those memories, I hope to extend the scope of history's accurate account.

Certainly, documentary/video work only has the ability to depict reality through its imagery and sounds. For the viewer to fully grasp the issue addressed in the videos, the consequences of these proximal events need to be clarified. In part of the explanatory objective, this body of work elaborated on the reasoning of the past that manipulates the present. Through the process of archiving the resources for this project, I became increasingly aware of how complex remittances and migration are in An Bang. In addition, how the "ancestor tomb" can be other than a projection of the present state of affairs. In order for An Bang society to function through massive shifts in the cemetery landscape, it accompanied the returning of Viet Kieu and remittance.

In the representational state, I focus on the context of the film, which involves re-telling a story to the viewer through images and sounds. Thus, in re-telling the story, this is an act of recall the history in one's memory. The narrator can incorporate relevant memories and provide meaningful messages. As a result, my body of work attributes the preservation of history and

memory which are intentionally erased by Communist. My videos depict a history that is free of storytellers decisions and imagination to narrate. In this case, both the An Bang villager and I are the storytellers. Furthermore, the storyteller does not have to fulfill the controllability of any dictatorship in order to complete his novel or artwork.

In Vietnam the State always exerts vigorous control over arts products, both by enforcing a predefined ideological set of guidelines, and by censorship. Especially, An Bang is a zone of political conflict, due to the history of boat people. My works do not constitute forms of historical criticism implemented by artists or historians. Conversely, the goal of this body of work is to reflect on the perception through the lens of a psychoanalytic understanding of desire, trauma, and memory which are intrinsically connected to An Bang's remittance, ancestor tomb, and boat-people.

More generally, I hope to reconnect myself to Vietnam and its history. The process of finding and hearing the history story of Vietnam helped me fill in the gap of the missing year I lived in the U.S. My discovery of the many hidden pieces of history allows me to tie the past into the present, promoting the idea of simultaneity and of the intersubjective, allowing myself to independently join up pieces of history. As in the video works in this thesis, it is the collection and re-contextualization that contributes to my desire to comprehend the sublime in Vietnam history. It stimulates my desire to explore new creative mediums. This possible framework largely shaped my understanding of An Bang local culture, and remittance towards those who had the means to create lasting ancestor tombs.

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