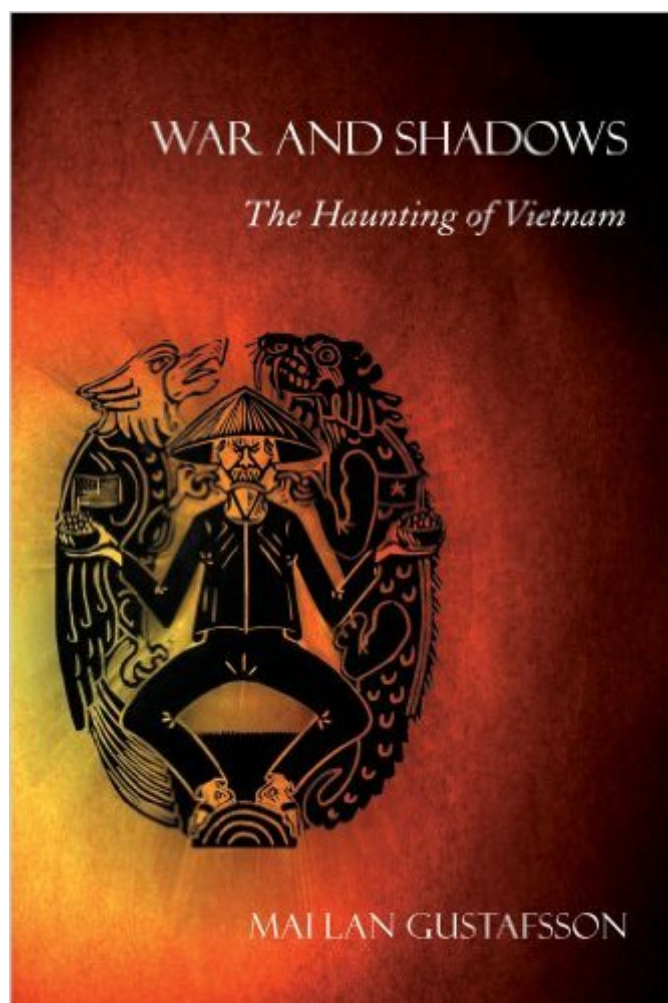


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War And Shadows: The Haunting Of Vietnam



Synopsis

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

Book Information

Paperback: 224 pages

Publisher: Cornell University Press; 1 edition (July 23, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0801475015

ISBN-13: 978-0801475016

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.5 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (3 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #255,878 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #57 in [Books > History > World > Religious > New Age, Mythology & Occult](#) #208 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Occult & Paranormal > Ghosts & Hauntings](#) #249 in [Books > History > Military > United States > Veterans](#)

Customer Reviews

War and Shadows combines scholarly approach with real skill in storytelling, in a compact tome that makes surprisingly compulsive reading. I could not put this book down. The book probably will appeal most to three categories of reader: 1) those with an interest in contemporary Vietnamese culture and spiritual practice; 2) those with an interest in the Vietnam War; and 3) those with a general interest in comparative folklore/mythology and ghost stories. Mai Lan Gustafsson gives a fascinating account of the phenomenon of spirit possession and haunting in post-war Vietnam. As an ethnographic study, this book is an invaluable and unique window into modern Vietnamese culture. The spiritual beliefs and practices of contemporary Vietnamese are explored in the light of supernatural affliction, real or imagined. Gustafsson provides context for the phenomenon with sobering (and not often remembered) statistics of the Vietnam War, in which millions of Vietnamese lost their lives. She also corrects the sunny Western journalism on Vietnam, which asserts that everyone in Vietnam has cheerfully forgotten the war and moved on. As the book shows, the Vietnamese still bear deep scars. Although not a history of the War, this book would be of great interest to anyone seeking to understand the war from a Vietnamese perspective. On another level, anyone interested in ghost folklore would do well to add this book to his library. Thanks to Gustafsson's earnest, unadorned style, the people she interviews come to vivid life. Whether their supernatural afflictions are real or merely "in their heads," some of the anecdotes of possession and ghostly attacks are downright chilling. This slim book is a true rarity: a scholarly work that is also a page-turner.

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

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

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