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Film Review: *Ghost Tape #10*

Operation Wandering Soul was a small yet curious episode in the Vietnam War. Organized and run by the US Army's Fourth Psychological Operations Group (PSYOP), the operation created "ghost tapes" and played them in areas of communist strength in order to encourage defections. The tapes attempted to manipulate Vietnamese belief that the lack of a proper burial would result in restlessness for the soul of the deceased. Since communist soldiers were often far away from their home village and families, their deaths would mean that their souls would be homeless and would wander the earth. According to one of the speakers in this documentary, a retired officer from the Fourth PSYOP, the first usage of these tapes occurred on a Swift Boat in the Mekong Delta during a moonless night. There were thirteen defectors afterward, which, presumably, encouraged the US Army to continue broadcasting the tapes.

The documentary *Ghost Tape #10* tackles the subject ambitiously but also somewhat loosely and in fragments.¹ Among its merits is allowing a host of voices to speak about Vietnamese beliefs about wandering ghosts and their tradition of appeasing them with offerings of prayer and foods. In addition to the narrator and the aforementioned US Army officer, viewers hear from a tour guide in southern Vietnam, a captain of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), a 1.5-generation Vietnamese American author in Los Angeles, a Buddhist monk in Hà Nội, one lay man and one woman also

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in Hà Nội, and an American academic specialist in the culture and history of Vietnam. The voices of the Fourth PSYOP officer and the PAVN captain come from archival interviews; those of the rest of the speakers come from interviews by the filmmaker. It is impressive that the documentary packs so many voices into a running time of less than thirty minutes.

Each speaker contributes helpful bits of information on the subject of wandering souls. Reinforced by the visuals of the Củ Chi Tunnels, for example, the voice of the PAVN captain explains the experience of missing home among communist soldiers. It was this context that encouraged the creation of the ghost tapes. From the young monk and two lay people in Hà Nội, it emerges that the belief in filial piety is closely tied to Buddhist belief. The belief is nicely reinforced by many brief clips of children: actual children, children depicted in visual representation, and children's toys. Children are expected to take care of their parents' burial after death. Death during war and far away from home, however, would not only make a soldier become a wandering spirit but also prevent him from fulfilling that duty. The film also utilizes the expertise of a US-based anthropologist for explanations of the religious feast day Ghost Festival [Tết Trung Nguyên]. This collaboration reflects the growing field of Vietnamese Studies and cooperation among a large community of local experts in Vietnam and specialists based outside of Vietnam, especially in North America and Europe.

By the end of the half hour, the film certainly conveys the prominence of the belief in wandering souls among Vietnamese. Supported by clips of ritualization at home and temple, it also sufficiently describes the cultural and religious expectation of caring for them. At the same time, the film does not amount to more than the sum of its parts. Promisingly, the documentary begins with the hiding and homesickness among communist troops and their listening to incessant broadcasts of the tapes at night. Their reaction to those broadcasts or how they coped with homesickness is much less clear. Although the significance of filial piety is established during the course of the film, it is not entirely clear how filial piety was related to the experience of separation during the Vietnam War. Similarly, the film leaves viewers guessing at the origin, rationale, and consequences of Operation Wandering Souls itself. The section on the operation is also ill-served by the inclusion of an archival clip showing a woman reading from a Chinese language script.

This section demands clarification about the subject and how the Chinese script fits into the production of the tapes.

Finally, the film shows a Vietnamese American author, who gives a thoughtful response on one of the tapes as she listens to it, longer than any other speaker. Yet the film never explains the relationship between Vietnam and the diaspora regarding the belief and ritualization surrounding wandering spirits. Near the end, the same author shares a dream about a deceased family friend from Vietnam who used to live in Paris. At best, it is suggestive of the common experience of separation among Vietnamese during and after the war. The dream itself, however, does not unpack the complicated relationship that Vietnamese have with the dead and wandering spirits.

In the end, the tripartite threads of the documentary—Vietnamese beliefs about wandering souls and familial relations, the Vietnam War and the use of ghost tapes, and relations between homeland and diaspora—are not quite brought together. During the last third of the film, for instance, the director plays the ghost tape to a family in Hà Nội who betray little reaction, facial or otherwise. It appears as if the recordings were completely a relic of a past without any connections to the present. *Ghost Tape #10* introduces the worthy subject of wandering ghosts, especially during wartime, to a non-Vietnamese audience. This subject provides a potentially fruitful window to examine the place of culture in warfare. Indeed, it has merited studies from Heonik Kwon and Mai Lan Gustafsson, among other scholars of the Vietnam War. But the film lacks a center to hold its various threads together. It would have helped to include one or two case studies of individuals and families who were affected by the ghost tapes. Such an addition would balance the largely theoretical content of the narrative in this documentary and, likely, make the subject of wandering ghosts more compelling to a new generation of students of the Vietnam War or Vietnamese culture.

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no. 1 (2019) and “From Reeducation Camps to Little Saigons: Historicizing Vietnamese Diasporic Anticommunism,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 2 (2016).

Note

1. *Ghost Tape #10*, Sean David Christensen, produced for the Masters of Arts in Visual Anthropology, University of Southern California, 2018.