



War and Faith: Religious Perceptions in Korean, Vietnamese, and American Vietnam War Novels

Yun-jeong JO and Thi Hien NGUYEN

Abstract

*This study presents a comparative analysis of how Korean, Vietnamese, and American authors who experienced the Vietnam War portray religious perceptions and the oppressive nature of war in their narratives. The works analyzed include Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1991) and "White Clouds Flying" (1997), Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978) and "Church" (1990), and Hwang Sok-yong's "Tap" (*The Pagoda*) (1970) and *The Shadow of Arms* (1988). Drawing from recurring religious motifs in these stories, this study identifies key themes, such as the challenges of translating faith in the context of war, the symbolic significance of demolished religious sites, and the potential for mourning war victims. As the first comparative analysis of war novels from these three countries with a focus on religious themes, this study offers valuable insights into how human faith can be used as a lens to examine political realities or challenge prevailing political beliefs within fictional narratives.*

Keywords: Vietnam War novel, religion, Bảo Ninh, Tim O'Brien, Hwang Sok-yong

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Introduction

The Vietnam War (1955–1975) is pivotal in the modern histories of Vietnam, the United States, and South Korea. In the context of the Cold War, the Vietnam War involved the deployment of 540,000 U.S. troops, followed by South Korea's first overseas deployment of over 310,000 troops between 1965 and 1973. These military interventions by the United States and South Korea in Vietnam have sparked debates shaped by political stances, economic analyses, and personal experiences (Furuta 2007, 189–190).¹ However, these discussions have often overlooked a comprehensive consideration of Vietnam as a central party to the conflict. Particularly underexamined is the complex and sensitive issue of religion in the Vietnam War (Maclear 1982, 156). Unlike North Korea and China, Vietnam refrained from eradicating folk beliefs during communization, allowing religion to maintain a pervasive presence in the daily lives of its people, profoundly influencing their thoughts and emotions.

Vietnam's syncretic religious system blends animism, ancestral worship, and the veneration of mother goddesses with Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, with 90 percent of the population practicing ancestral worship. Ancestral reverence in Vietnam takes place at home altars or tribe shrines, while village deities are honored at đình 亭 (village shrines), and a lineage's progenitor is revered at ethnic shrines (Sim and Kim 2017, 209–212). Despite this rich religious tradition, discussions of the Vietnam War, particularly within the context of the National Liberation Front versus the South Vietnamese government forces and the United States, have primarily focused on political ideologies, often sidelining religious aspects. This oversight may explain the limited attention given to religious representations within Vietnam War fiction.

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1. Related studies can be categorized into three main areas: 1. The examination of troop deployment to the Vietnam War as a bilateral issue between South Korea and the United States, analyzing its impact on their relationship; 2. The exploration of the motivations and objectives behind the deployment, reassessed through the lens of South Korea's political, security, and economic contexts; and 3. The consideration of the deployment in relation to both nations' economic aspirations and the impact of the Cold War structure at the time.

In an interview regarding the Vietnam War, Tim O'Brien noted, "There's that universal ignorance about the culture and history of the place, about nationalism and religion and other differences no one knows anything about" (Tambakis and O'Brien 2012, 150). This widespread ignorance, which O'Brien highlighted, was also prevalent in South Korea. Following the Korean War, young people, indoctrinated with anti-communist ideology and focusing on rebuilding their nation, prioritized political concerns surrounding the domino effect feared by the United States and the perceived economic benefits of participating in the war, often at the expense of understanding Vietnam's cultural and historical context.

However, there were significant differences between the United States and South Korean allied forces. Influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism, Korea has a deep-rooted tradition of ancestral rites. In Hwang Sok-yong's novel, scenes where South Korean soldiers express reverence upon encountering Vietnamese temples or witnessing Buddhist prayers can be understood in terms of "sympathetic identification" (Said 1978, 118). In contrast, the attitude of U.S. soldiers toward Vietnamese religious culture



Figure 1. This picture shows only a church cross standing in a town that had been bombed after American troops were ambushed nearby by Viet Cong.

Source: Mohr (1965, 4).



Figure 2. South Korean military generals and Vietnamese monks cut the ribbon at the dedication ceremony for a Buddhist temple.

Source: Kyunghyang Shinmun (1966, 3).

reflects a process of “demystification.” This approach assumes that human agency unilaterally defines the essence of events or objects (Bennett 2010, 14–15), often obscuring the life force inherent in matter and reducing political actors to mere human entities.

Based on the judgment that the Viet Cong doctrine is to insinuate themselves among the population and that the population is largely powerless to prevent their presence, U.S. soldiers decided to attack guerrillas hiding in shelters through airstrikes. As a result, as shown in Figure 1, many religious facilities were destroyed in Vietnam during the war. Monks and worshippers were frequently killed or injured during prayers. As innocent civilian lives continued to be sacrificed, voices within the U.S. military advised “that the application of sheer violence will never win this war and that we must give top priority to winning the allegiance of the people” (Mohr 1965, 4). Experiencing the devastation caused by indiscriminate bombings, the Vietnamese people requested that the United States and South Vietnam cease temple destructions and grant freedom of religion (*Nhân Dân* 1964, 4). In this context, particularly noteworthy are the efforts of the South Korean military to build Buddhist temples in Vietnam and hold dedication ceremonies with local monks (Fig. 2), while emphasizing the “friendship between Korea and Viet Nam that share religion and culture” (*Kyunghyang Shinmun* 1966, 3). On the one hand, while U.S. soldiers were targeting sites with no military value to eliminate the Viet Cong, on the other, the South Korean military chose a different approach that highlighted the political and cultural value of the destroyed targets and reconstructed them.

Such a distinction risked essentializing the religions in question as inherently communal and empathetic, while also reproducing a binary framework that opposed Asian spirituality to Western (rational) Christianity. Religious rituals can have multiple teleologies, and participants have diverse perspectives on the rituals; relatedly, the moral expectations and visions of moral community that a single ritual mobilizes can be diverse and even contradictory (Malarney [2002] 2020, 12). Considering these factors, this study aims to examine how differing views of Vietnamese culture influenced veterans’ perceptions of Vietnam and their participation in the war. Novels created in the process of healing the memories and scars of war reflect their

authors' battlefield encounters with Vietnamese culture, filtered through their self-awareness, revealing complex human psychologies and distinct ways of understanding the world amid war. Particularly noteworthy are the different ways Vietnamese religion was literally depicted by Vietnamese, Korean, and American authors and how such depictions reflect the unique characteristics of each author, as well as the stances of their respective countries during and after the Vietnam War.

While Vietnam War novels have been translated into various languages and subjected to comparative analyses (Jo 2014; Kagan 2000; Ly 2019; V. Nguyen 2016; J. Park 2007; D. Trần 2017; Yi 2022), few studies have examined the interrelation between war history, memory, and literature with a specific focus on religion. In his study, Richard Kagan highlighted the correlation between war and religion, elucidating how American authors predominantly scrutinize individual psyches through a narrow lens, while their Asian counterparts, particularly from Japan and Korea, situate the Vietnam War within a broader historical and cultural context. This context encompasses geographical landscapes, societal dynamics, religious influences, and the underlying causes of the war (Kagan 2000, 25). However, Kagan only briefly notes how Japanese writer Kaiko Takeshi devoted significant attention to Buddhism in his novel, without analyzing its content in detail, and does not address the religious aspects of American or Korean novels. Furthermore, Kagan's assertion that "none of the major works of American literature" (28) he reviewed explore the intellectual or social role of Buddhists in the war is inaccurate. Works by authors such as Tim O'Brien prominently feature Buddhism and other Vietnamese religions, demonstrating how such religious elements had significantly shaped the U.S. military's perception of the conflict.

Religion is a fundamental pillar of Vietnamese society, and its role in the Vietnam War was deeply intertwined in the nation's cultural fabric. The self-immolation of monks protesting Ngô Đình Diệm's suppression of Buddhism symbolically exposed the systemic conflicts in Vietnam, highlighting the war's close connection to religion (T. Lê 2019, 53–68).²

2. During his rule from 1954 to 1963, Ngô Đình Diệm implemented policies that persecuted

Beyond the Buddhist-led anti-government protests that contributed to the collapse of the Diệm regime, the destruction of religious sites and the violation of religious freedoms during the war revealed the physical violence and mental oppression endured by the Vietnamese. For the Vietnamese people, the war was a national experience with significant religious dimensions.

However, the United States mistakenly assumed that all groups opposing the Saigon government, which was aligned with U.S. anti-communism, were communist. This misjudgment led to an inability to understand or acknowledge the neutral, peaceful anti-war movement within the Vietnamese Buddhist community (G. Park 2010, 582). Religious and anthropological studies on the influence of Buddhism on Vietnam's modernization, the Christian bias among South Korean soldiers deployed to Vietnam, and the significance of Vietnamese folk beliefs in the exhumation of war casualties (Kwon 2008, 1–102; Malarney [2002] 2020, 52–147; G. Park 2010; Ryu 2004) are particularly relevant to the current analysis. As aptly noted by Heonik Kwon, for the Vietnamese, “there is a connection between the historical experience of war and the religious imagination” (2008, 8). Vietnamese commemorative rituals, which integrate gods, ancestors, and the spirits of those tragically killed, exemplify how religion encompasses not only Buddhism but also Confucianism and folk beliefs.

Religion has been marginalized in existing studies on Vietnam War fiction because scholars privilege ideology, trauma, and nationalism over ethical concerns and the exploration of faith. These studies have been even more neglectful of how faith functions as a transnational and transhistorical means of coping with, and rendering livable, what had until then been unfathomable. This is precisely why religion must be taken seriously as a transnational and transpacific analytic for war memory across the asymmetric geopolitics of Vietnam, Korea, and the United States. It emerges more

Buddhists in South Vietnam. The Hue massacre on Buddha's birthday in 1963 sparked a Buddhist protest movement characterized by demonstrations, hunger strikes, and demands for religious freedom. A notable event was the self-immolation of monk Thích Quảng Đức in protest against the Saigon government. See T. Lê (2019, 53–68).

forcefully in war fiction when the language of ideology or politics becomes inadequate.

The novel as a genre has the capacity to both acknowledge and deconstruct the myth of the righteous warrior and the assumption that the United States could comprehend Vietnam through a Western Positivist strategy—a reflection of cultural arrogance (Ringnalda 1994, 94). Comparative research is essential for a more transnational understanding of cultural responses to the conflict and the intertextual overlap of themes and ideas in war literature (Armstrong 2019, 30). Therefore, this study examines the studies of three authors—Vietnamese, American, and Korean—who experienced the Vietnam War during a similar historical period, with a focus on how they foreground religion as practice under wartime conditions and how Confucian and Buddhist aspects emerge in their texts as situational repertoires. In particular, it seeks to demonstrate the differences between the ways these repertoires are activated by soldiers and civilians and the ways religion is appropriated by the state. Through close readings of the three authors' works, this study further explores how religious symbols, such as pagodas, monks, altars, and incense, are perceived differently by writers from the three nations, and offers a comparative analysis of the significance of their writings as literary responses to official war narratives.

Bảo Ninh, Tim O'Brien, and Hwang Sok-yong are all veterans of the Vietnam War who, despite representing different sides of the conflict, commonly juxtapose the oppressive nature of war with religious themes.³ This connection reflects the religious characteristics of Vietnam and South Korea, where ancestral worship intertwines with Buddhism and Confucianism, as well as the United States, where the Protestant tradition has

3. Hwang Sok-yong served as a marine in Da Nang, Vietnam, from August 1967 to October 1968 with the second deployment of the Blue Dragon Unit. He was employed as a market survey agent for a joint investigation team alongside U.S. military personnel. Tim O'Brien was drafted in 1968 after obtaining a bachelor's degree in political science from Macalester College. He served in Alpha Company, 3rd Platoon, 5th Battalion, 46th Regiment of the 23rd Infantry Division from 1969 to 1970. Bảo Ninh was enlisted in 1969 and served in the 10th Battalion, 24th Company, 5th Platoon in the Tay Nguyen B-3 battlefield until the end of the war.

significantly influenced its founding and cultural identity. This study examines the role of religion in war narratives through an analysis of six novels or short stories: *The Sorrow of War* and “White Clouds Flying” by Bảo Ninh, *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien, and *The Shadow of Arms* and “Tap” (The Pagoda) by Hwang Sok-yong. These texts reveal how the authors’ fictional narratives probe questions of faith amidst the devastation of war, pursue cross-cultural understanding, resist the ideologies that sustain war, and commemorate its victims beyond national borders.

Vietnamese Novels Reflecting the Concept of *Three Religions, One Origin*: Rituals for the Living and the Dead

Bảo Ninh’s novels have been discussed as works that represent the trauma of war through depictions of the psychological suffering of human beings in the postwar period. His writings rely on the confusion and ambiguity of consciousness and the unconscious to reveal inverted images of reality, thereby creating a harrowing and melancholic atmosphere. In this respect, they differ from wartime and postwar Vietnamese war narratives, which tended to emphasize epic structures and romantic heroism as dominant ideological tendencies (Cao 2019, 41; Hoàng 2022, 92). For this reason, his *The Sorrow of War* was banned from publication in Vietnam. Nevertheless, his distinctive mode of representing war’s destructiveness and inhumanity offers the possibility of analyzing, beyond ideology, the significance of an attitude that draws war trauma into the sphere of life, where it can be reflected upon and integrated into everyday life.

Bảo Ninh’s novels illustrate how the grief experienced by the Vietnamese during and after the war is intertwined with matters of life and death, and how their religious worldview plays a central role in this experience. Unlike Tim O’Brien’s and Hwang Sok-yong’s novels, Bảo Ninh’s works do not prominently feature pagodas or Buddhas. Instead, he offsets the pain of separation with a belief in the afterlife and intensifies the memory of the dead through profound emotion, highlighting the religious

aspects of the Vietnamese people's inner lives and everyday situations.

Vietnamese religion is a synthesis of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, collectively referred to as “*tam giáo đồng nguyên*” 三教同源 (three religions, one origin). These three belief systems intricately intertwine to shape the Vietnamese worldview. Confucianism upholds social order, Daoism promotes physical well-being, and Buddhism offers spiritual solace (T. Nguyễn 2013, 35–44). In such multifaith communities, individuals can simultaneously adhere to Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, embracing spiritual diversity (Berthrong 1994, 27). Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* is deeply rooted in this complex worldview, exploring themes of fatalism, belief in an illusory world, and the quest for a spiritual realm beyond the physical. Bảo Ninh provides a detailed account of the astrological beliefs that influenced soldiers' destinies on the Vietnamese front, where ominous premonitions were common, altars were erected to pacify the spirits of the fallen, and soldiers sought divine forgiveness amidst the chaos of war. On the battlefield, Vietnamese traditional beliefs coexisted with national independence and revolutionary ideals. Through his exploration of soldiers' faith, Bảo Ninh challenges the war narrative typically framed by the ideology of national heroism.

In Confucianism, the concept of fatalism occupies an important place (V. Trần 1996, 115). *The Sorrow of War* was originally completed in 1987 under the same title but was published in Vietnam in 1990 as *Thân phận của tình yêu* (The Fate of Love) with many sections removed. The novel underscores a belief in predetermined destiny. The protagonist, Kien, who volunteered for military service at the age of 17, spent ten years as a scout and emerged as the sole survivor of a brutal war. After the war, he is assigned with the grim task of retrieving the bodies of his fallen comrades. This unavoidable fate brought on by war prevents Kien from realizing his love for Phương. For her part, Phương, after being raped amid the chaos of the war, withdraws and distances herself from Kien.

From the moment he joined the army, Kien was nicknamed “Sorrowful Spirit” (Bảo 1998, 14), a name that reflected his painful and tragic life. He endured the death of his father, his ill-fated love for Phương, and the loss of his comrades. The so-called “sacred war” brought Kien nothing but sorrow,

leaving him feeling as though fate were dragging him through life, unable to connect with anyone. As Kien writes about Phương, his comrades, and himself, he finds himself unable to escape the war, feeling destined to survive and record the history of that era.

Kien believes his purpose on earth is to write novels about the war as a means of redemption. While writing, he feels as if he is “cruelly reviving the images of his comrades, of the mortal combat in the jungle that became the Screaming Souls, where his battalion had met its tragic end” (Bảo 1998, 82). This process only draws Kien deeper into his memories, trapping him in the past. *The Sorrow of War* not only represents the fate of the war but also the destinies of Kien, Phương, the soldiers, and the novel itself.

As Bảo mentioned in an interview, the novel captures the emotions of “a generation that has experienced war” (Trang báo Hội Nhà văn Việt Nam 2022). The tragedy of Kien and the other characters represents a universal tragedy shared by an entire generation that went to war. This is connected to the enlightenment that Kien’s life offers to readers. In the novel, this realization is symbolized by the Buddhist Four Noble Truths (四聖諦), or the four higher realizations of life: Dukkha (苦), Samudaya (集), Nirodha (滅), and Magga (道). In Vietnam, these are collectively referred to as *tứ diệu đế* 四妙諦. Dukkha involves recognizing all the suffering one endures in life, while Samudaya identifies the causes of that suffering. Nirodha represents the ideal state of liberation from suffering, and Magga outlines the path to achieving this freedom. Kien’s understanding of his own suffering reveals that its roots lie in human stereotypes and desires. He realizes that although war has the power to destroy everything, the original self remains unchanged and that Phương’s beauty transcends time (Bảo 1998, 221). Kien believes he must write about the various fates and adversities people face, and this conviction helps him survive after the war.

Kien’s concepts of the afterlife are connected to the post-war Vietnamese pursuit of solace in the spirit world, where they worship Buddha, God, ancestors, and nature. Spirituality offers answers to questions about the afterlife, the transcendent forces governing human destiny, and aspects of life that cannot be explained by science or religion. Vietnamese scholar Phan Kế Bính once remarked, “Spiritual life is a part of Vietnamese customs”

(Phan 2005, 122–123): Bảo Ninh embodies these latent spiritual elements in Vietnam by setting the scene for the collection of dead bodies in a place called “Gọi hồn.” Gọi hồn, meaning “the calling of the souls,” is a location where many lives were lost in fierce battles. A nameless valley was named Gọi hồn by Vietnamese people who heard “the voices of the wandering souls of dead soldiers” in the forests and rivers, unable to find peace after dying in combat (Bảo 1998, 4).

Vietnamese people communicate with the spirit world through ancestral rites, which have been practiced in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, since before the introduction of Confucian ideas. These rituals encompass a range of practices, including those for gods, ancestors, and heroes (N. Lê 2001, 92). Following the war, many Vietnamese began to offer incense and prayers for foreign soldiers and other unfamiliar deceased. In particular, the souls of those who died painful and violent deaths far from home, known as “*chết đường*” (death in the street), are believed to be trapped between the realms of the living and the dead (Kwon 2008, 20; Malarney [2002] 2020, 179–180). In Bảo Ninh’s novel, scenes of incense burning, memorial services, and prayers reflect these Vietnamese folk beliefs. Burning incense is an integral part of Vietnamese rituals, believed to enhance prayers to spirits or gods and facilitate communication with them (N. Lê 2001, 96). As described in the novel:

Not a place for the timid. Living here one could go mad or be frightened to death. Which was why in the rainy season of 1974, when the regiment was sent back to this area, Kien and his scout squad established an altar and prayed before it in secret, honouring and recalling the wandering souls from Battalion 27 still in the Jungle of Screaming Souls. Sparkling incense sticks glowed night and day at the altar from that day forward. (Bảo 1998, 4)

Vietnamese religion blends Chinese Confucianism with indigenous animistic beliefs (V. Trần 1996, 160). Central to these beliefs is the notion that the spirit of a deceased individual continues to exist, prompting the performance of rituals to appease their soul. The act of burning incense at

the site of a ghostly apparition holds significant public symbolism, transforming the space into one of mourning (Kwon 2008, 17). In *The Sorrow of War*, Bảo Ninh vividly portrays how “soon there sprang up tiny altars in each squad hut and tent, altars to the comrades-in-arms already fallen. And in the tear-making smoke of the incense, soldiers bowed and prayed, whispering in prayer” (Bảo 1998, 11). Despite the widespread acceptance of these beliefs, Kien’s scouts conduct a clandestine rendition of the ceremony at Gội hồn. This secrecy may either critique traditional ideologies in the context of Marxist-Leninist thought or reflect a deviation from the prevailing political ideology, as honoring fallen comrades contradicts established norms. Furthermore, while the constant flickering incense provides comfort and a spiritual connection between the deceased and the living, it also exposes the scout’s position to the enemy. Consequently, Kien’s scouts face the dual task of mourning their comrades while concealing the truth of their deaths.

In Bảo Ninh’s post-war short story, “Mây trắng còn bay” (White Clouds Flying),⁴ the ritual of appeasing the spirits of Vietnamese soldiers is depicted with a sense of derision. The narrative follows a mother who undertakes a journey to perform a ritual sacrifice for her son, who died in the war. Through the perspective of a male passenger, Bảo Ninh captures a brief interaction between the elderly woman and a female flight attendant. The woman takes the flight to mark the 30th anniversary of her son’s death, seeking solace near the site of his demise. Driven by deep longing, she performs a heartfelt ritual for her departed son, setting up a modest altar on the seat table with “a vase of flowers, some green bananas, a few rice cakes, and three incense sticks standing in a glass of dry rice...[and] a small framed photo [of the young]...pilot” (Bảo 2020, 20).

As the elderly woman burns incense on the airplane to comfort her son’s soul, the other passengers react with outrage and disdain. Despite this, the flight attendant hesitates to intervene, and the elderly woman continues to pray, joining her hands before the incense. The narrator, seated beside her,

4. “White Clouds Flying” was first published in the *Literary Newspaper* (Báo Văn Nghệ) in 1997.

places the picture of her son on the table to prevent it from falling. Bảo Ninh uses this scene to highlight the mourning process of a survivor while also reflecting on the mindset of those who have moved past the scars of war. Thus, the story embodies the enduring faith of the Vietnamese people and the pain of war survivors facing the reality of their suffering being overlooked.

Bảo Ninh poignantly addresses the difficulty of navigating life during and after the war. In post-war Vietnam, the revolutionary cultural campaign aimed to forge a unified national identity by replacing traditional ancestral worship with commemorative activities for heroic warriors (Kwon 2008, 11). This political shift marginalized those left out of these new rituals. In the story, the flight attendant's tacit approval of the elderly woman's ritual and the narrator's contemplative response bring the mother's private mourning into the public sphere. Through this, Bảo Ninh's story not only provides solace to the souls of the war's victims but also addresses the grief of those deprived of the opportunity to mourn in the aftermath of the conflict.

Christian Appropriation of Vietnamese Buddhism: Lessons of Kindness and Civility Learned on the Battlefield

The subtle presence of incense in Vietnam creates an otherworldly atmosphere for U.S. soldiers stationed there. In Tim O'Brien's novels *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*, religious symbols such as pagodas, Buddhas, and incense are used to depict Vietnam as an exotic and unfamiliar culture. Pagodas are often portrayed as ruins or secluded sites, rarely frequented due to the ongoing war. As a result, these locations become refuges where soldiers seek a brief escape or momentary respite. In these peaceful, sacred spaces intended for prayer and tranquility, U.S. soldiers are depicted drying their clothes or cleaning their weapons. Encounters with these religious elements often lead U.S. soldiers to question the war's ideology, prompting thoughts of desertion or the desire to cease hostilities.

Tim O'Brien's novels have been regarded as works that reveal a longing

for peace and destiny beyond war through narrative techniques that move between reality and fantasy. What is particularly emphasized in his fiction is *felt experience*. His novels appear free from the moral posturing, thunderous certainties, and fraudulent ideals often found in earlier writers' works on the Vietnam War. For this reason, his fiction has been discussed as foregrounding the tension between a transcendental notion of truth and a more conventional, commonsensical view of what makes a story true (Mariani 2015, 173; Pochoda 1978, 344; Raymond 1983, 103).

Going After Cacciato revolves around Paul Berlin's daydreams and memories of his squad mates' pursuit of Cacciato, a soldier who has abandoned his unit. Berlin views his daydreams as "the best trick to forget the war" (O'Brien [1978] 2014, 10), highlighting his disillusionment with the conflict and the emptiness of the ideology imposed on him. Tim O'Brien's personal war experiences and his longing for escape are intimately connected to various forms of religious reflection.

During a respite at a pagoda, Lieutenant Corson of Alpha Company learns of Cacciato's desertion. The pagoda, described as "a fine house for worship," is likened to a "pillbox," while the Buddha statue, missing its right arm, still maintains a serene expression (O'Brien [1978] 2014, 4). This imagery of the pagoda symbolizes Vietnam during that period: invaded, desecrated, and nearly destroyed, yet enduring, sustained by its culture and spirituality, making the war and its warriors seem insignificant by comparison (Froelich 1995, 182). The scene of Cacciato's desertion within the pagoda, contrasted with the Buddha's tranquil countenance, presents a complex narrative. Given Buddhism's core tenets of non-violence and compassion, Cacciato's act of desertion, when viewed through the lens of artistic imagination, inherently conveys an anti-war sentiment.

In the novel, U.S. soldiers receive help from a Vietnamese refugee girl named Sarkin Aung Wan as they journey through Myanmar, India, Iran, Turkey, and finally reach Paris. Paris, often associated with romance and freedom, is also the capital of France, a former colonial power in Vietnam that justified its presence under the guise of civilizing missions. This historical connection prompts reflection on the shared involvement of the United States and France in Vietnam, driven by Cold War ideologies aimed

at curtailing the spread of communism. Both nations played roles in suppressing Vietnamese politics and culture. As the U.S. soldiers and the Vietnamese girl escape Vietnam for Paris, the narrative underscores the influence of geopolitical forces on Vietnam's history and the ensuing conflict.

O'Brien depicts Cacciato as a monk when the squad pursuing him arrives in Mandalay, Myanmar where Paul Berlin encounters him. Myanmar is a predominantly Buddhist country. Berlin sees Cacciato, who is bald and wearing a vacant smile, among a group of Cao Dai monks during evening prayers. Cao Dai, a syncretic religion founded in South Vietnam in 1926 during French colonial rule, integrates elements from Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as reverence for world luminaries and national heroes (Nho 2014, 390–422). Cao Dai's goal is to reconcile various religions and promote universal values that provide comfort without conflict. The religion emphasizes non-violence, honesty, divine worship, and vegetarianism, aiming to liberate individuals from the cycle of karma and reincarnation (Hội Thánh Cao đài Toà Thánh Tây Ninh 2012). Cacciato's portrayal as a Cao Dai monk in Myanmar raises questions regarding religious representation within O'Brien's narrative.

Despite Sarkin Aung Wan's warnings, Berlin joins the monks during their evening prayers, only to be confronted by the crowd and monks, and awakens feeling suffocated. Sarkin Aung Wan later describes Berlin as "a brave hero disturbing Cao Dai, a hero touching the untouchables" (O'Brien [1978] 2014, 122). This description not only acknowledges Berlin's courage but also critiques the American mindset that led to the Vietnam War. War often captivates individuals under the guise of self-defense, giving them a sense of purpose and meaning. Societies tend to glorify soldiers engaged in conflict, granting them moral authority to engage in lethal actions (Juergensmeyer 2003, 191). Consequently, within the dichotomy of friend versus foe, the perspectives and cultures of others are often disregarded and misrepresented. Berlin's reckless behavior, resulting in the armed response from the Cao Dai monks, reflects this broader context.

Soldiers may seek solace by viewing the world through the lens of war. To maintain a heroic identity, there must be an adversary to overcome.

Berlin's feelings of fear, shame, and anger upon losing Cacciato, who chose a life of monasticism, are rooted in his desire to prove his strength by apprehending his deserter comrade. The Vietnam War created "the absence of a common purpose" (O'Brien [1978] 2014, 165) among U.S. soldiers, prompting a need for targets to pursue and engage in combat. Berlin's relentless chase of Cacciato thus mirrors the inherent uncertainty of combat. Conversely, by relinquishing the concepts of triumph and heroism, Cacciato liberates himself from the violence and anxiety that shapes a soldier's existence. As O'Brien notes:

They did not know how to feel when they saw villages burning. Revenge? Loss? Peace of mind or anguish? They did not know. They knew the old myths about Quang Ngai—tales passed down from old-timer to newcomer—but they did not know which stories to believe. Magic, mystery, ghosts and incense, whispers in the dark, strange tongues and strange smells, uncertainties never articulated in war stories, emotion squandered on ignorance. They did not know good from evil. (O'Brien [1978] 2014, 270–271)

This passage highlights the unit's stationing in Quang Ngai, where a civilian massacre occurred. The soldiers, influenced by longstanding Vietnamese superstitions, are haunted by the fear and anxiety of their actions. The excerpt captures their psychological turmoil, reflecting their struggle with uncertainty and conflicting emotions. The confessional tone suggests an effort to rationalize their actions and portray themselves as victims, challenging the reliability of their war narrative. It underscores the devastating impact of ignorance on individuals and others. The novel urges readers to focus on internal emotions and beliefs rather than externally imposed goals to address the senselessness of war and its consequences.

Cacciato's turn to the Cao Dai faith after deserting his unit is intertwined with the idea that religious practices might alleviate the trauma of the massacre. The dramatic exchange that transpires in Berlin's arrival in Paris should be scrutinized. Sarkin advises Berlin to relinquish his pursuit of Cacciato, stating, "Do not be deceived by false obligation. You are obliged,

by all that is just and good, to pursue only the felicity that you yourself have imagined. Do not fear the scorn of others” (O’Brien [1978] 2014, 318). Berlin responds by asserting that individual dignity and national stability rely on societal honor. This conversation marks the culmination of the encounter between Sarkin Aung Wan and Paul Berlin. Berlin grapples with the agony of separation from his beloved and confronts the anguish of loss as Sarkin Aung Wan departs, leaving a burning incense stick in the kitchen. Through his interaction with the Vietnamese woman, Berlin realizes his internal conflict—he lacks the fortitude to either pursue Cacciato or relinquish the pursuit entirely.

Ultimately, the squad is unable to capture Cacciato, yet O’Brien emphasizes that without the ability to imagine an escape from war, no real escape is possible. This imaginative struggle is notably juxtaposed with the silence of the pagoda, the serene smile of the monk, and the faith of the Vietnamese girl who burns incense and prays for peace. Tim O’Brien found the courage to desert, even if only in his imagination, and explored the possibility of turning away from war through Vietnam’s religious culture.

In Tim O’Brien’s short story “Church” from the collection *The Things They Carried*, the narrative unfolds against the backdrop of a pagoda in Vietnam. The story suggests that human connections can transcend ideology and religion through the experience of the pagoda. O’Brien describes a unit that transforms an abandoned pagoda on the western side of the Batangan Peninsula into a small fortress to serve as their base of operations. This peninsula is located near the former U.S. military bases at Chu Lai and My Khe, and the My Lai massacre site is located 5 kilometers southwest of it. U.S. forces operated in this region to eliminate the Viet Cong and the Vietnamese People’s Army, as it was a stronghold for the Viet Cong. Constant U.S. bombings forced civilians to live mainly in bunkers and caves (Rotter 2010, 356). The monks in the story also live in shacks and care for the ruined pagoda, which is depicted as a dark and cool place, reminiscent of the pagoda’s atmosphere in *Going After Cacciato*. The pagoda’s cold and abandoned state reflects the devastation of war.

Though the pagoda’s spiritual space is repurposed as a military base, the predominantly Christian U.S. soldiers experience a “very peaceful time”

there, despite it not being a church (O'Brien [1990] 2015, 125). Two monks tending to a small garden and a broken shrine show no signs of anger or resentment when the U.S. soldiers suddenly arrive and dig trenches in the yard. Instead, they gesture for the soldiers to wash their hands, offer them watermelon, and help them clean their guns. This response sharply contrasts with the political stance of monks who had taken up arms against the Diệm regime.

The two monks show kindness to all the troops but had a special affection for Henry Dobbins, whom they called "Soldier Jesus" and "good soldier Jesus" (O'Brien [1990] 2015, 126). The three men seem to share a silent understanding, communicating without words. After tending to the machine guns, Henry Dobbins hands the monks canned peaches and a chocolate bar and then gestures for them to wash their hands. This repeated hand-washing gesture between the U.S. soldiers and the monks at the pagoda signifies the *purification* they all seek. Although the clean monks assembling firearms and the dirty U.S. soldiers from the battlefield cannot speak to each other, their gestures convey a mutual desire for each other's well-being and a commitment to peace.

Dobbins contemplates joining the monks after the war, envisioning life as a minister or monk as a way to leave behind religious narrowness and embrace "being nice to people...being decent" (O'Brien [1990] 2015, 126). Kiowa, another devout Christian, tells Dobbins that it was wrong for them to set up camp at the pagoda.⁵ The monks' kindness and courtesy, despite the sudden invasion of their grounds by U.S. soldiers, is a clear departure from the typical antagonism U.S. soldiers often showed toward monks on the battlefield, where they were perceived as sympathizers of the Viet Cong. From the silent monks, the two soldiers learn a lesson in charity that transcends religion.

The author reinterprets the events at the Vietnamese pagoda under the

5. In particular, the two central characters, Henry Dobbins and Kiowa, are depicted as lifelong Christians. Henry Dobbins, in particular, harbored aspirations of becoming a pastor during his high school years. In other stories within the collection, Kiowa is portrayed as having been raised with a belief in salvation through Jesus Christ. He carries an illustrated New Testament, a cherished gift from his father.

title “Church,” and the significance of this is revealed in the conversation between the two soldiers: they agree that the church is a quiet place where they can hear things usually drowned out by noise. For them, the silence of the pagoda also represents a calm that allows them to listen to their inner voices. Through their relationship with the Vietnamese monks, Dobbins and Kiowa come to see the pagoda as a church, a sacred space. In this Vietnamese pagoda, the U.S. soldiers discover the power of human solidarity to liberate themselves from the secular politics that bind them within the narrow confines of the military.

For Tim O’Brien, Vietnamese religion served as a way to distance himself from the violence of war and offer soldiers a means of renewal. This is exemplified by Cacciato, who deserts his unit to become a Cao Dai monk, and Henry Dobbins, who contemplates becoming a monk after the war. The traumas inflicted on U.S. soldiers by the Vietnam War were beyond the healing power of conventional lifestyles. O’Brien drew inspiration from the religious practices of the Vietnamese he encountered on the battlefield, using these experiences to imagine and reimagine the war. His novel illustrates how this understanding of Vietnam reshaped his worldview.

One important aspect to consider is the scope of war trauma. In Bảo Ninh’s novels, war trauma is portrayed as an ethnic issue, impacting the entire population and necessitating collective mourning that extends beyond individual experiences. In contrast, Tim O’Brien depicts it as a personal journey of self-overcoming, akin to the Buddhist concept of an individual leaning toward faith. While this perspective offers a path to personal healing, it may also contribute to the marginalization of Vietnam, suggesting that heroism is replaced by the religious mysticism encountered by U.S. soldiers in Vietnam. In this context, it is noteworthy that a war narrative recounted by a former South Korean soldier who fought alongside U.S. soldiers in Vietnam centers on a faith that is either misunderstood or not understood at all.

South Korean Soldiers' Sympathy for Vietnamese Religion: An Account of a Faith Not Understood

Hwang Sok-yong's debut fiction "Tap" (The Pagoda; 1974), reflects his experiences in the Vietnam War, particularly highlighting the contrasting attitudes of South Korean and U.S. soldiers toward pagodas, which hold deep religious significance. Hwang's concerns deepen in his later novel, *The Shadow of Arms*. Through themes such as the black market, the Phoenix Hamlet program, and the atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers against Vietnamese civilians, Hwang exposes the harsh realities of the war, especially the distortion or neglect of Vietnamese religious culture. In his literary works, faith becomes a tool to highlight the marginalized status of both the indigenous Vietnamese population and South Korean soldiers, who found themselves objectified on the battlefield.

His novels, which articulate this critical perspective, have been evaluated as works that "question the dominant fantasies of South Korean society about the Vietnam War" and illuminate the "neocolonial" significance of the conflict (Choi 1997, 378–380; Jeong 2013, 301; Yi 2022, 150–174). In his fiction, South Korean soldiers experience confusion arising from a dual identity as both guardians of peace and aggressors, as well as rulers and the ruled, positioned between Vietnam and the United States. The sense of identification they feel in their relationships with Vietnamese people and American soldiers develops into a form of self-awareness characteristic of a colonized subject. The trajectory of this awakening resonates with Hwang Sok-yong's own confession that his war experience became the moment when his experience "expanded from the personal to the historical context" (Hwang 1977, 7).

In the short story "Tap" (The Pagoda), the protagonist, referred to as "I," serves in a joint mobile patrol at a U.S. Army mixed support base and is dispatched to reinforce Point R. Despite feeling apprehensive about heading to R, a site of intense combat, he discovers that the eight squad members stationed there are guarding nothing more than a simple tower made of unremarkable stones. This pagoda, which remained under constant military guard since the commencement of the war despite local protests when its

temple structure collapsed and was bulldozed, was preserved “in anticipation that the People’s Liberation Front would seize the pagoda for their political propaganda” (Hwang 1974, 332). Within the context of the Vietnamese battlefield, the pagoda is seen as strategically significant, much like rivers and bridges. Through the protagonist’s perspective, the author skillfully portrays the religious devotion of the Vietnamese people and how this devotion is exploited for political motives by South Vietnamese military leaders and South Korean soldiers. Additionally, the narrative underscores the U.S. soldiers’ difficulty in comprehending Buddhism.

Hwang portrays the pagoda through the lens of a Korean character, weaving a narrative around the character’s psychological journey upon arriving at Point R. Initially, the protagonist feels resentful about guarding what he perceives as an insignificant stone structure, but he gradually develops a sense of attachment to the pagoda. As he observes the pagoda, which he once considered meaningless, he begins to study the faintly etched characters on the structure and the seated Buddha statue. This observation leads him to express his astonishment as he recalls Vietnamese people performing rituals of burning incense and offering prayers. He also remembers how they treasured their censers, even when forced to abandon their homes and lands for safer areas. This portrayal offers insight into the deep spiritual connection the Vietnamese have with their spiritual symbols, even in the face of material loss.

The defense of the pagoda by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and the South Korean army, considering the close relationship between Buddhism and the local people, as well as the strategic calculations of their officers in psychological warfare, reflects their cultural empathy toward Buddhism. The sacrifice of nine South Korean soldiers, some of whom died defending the pagoda, symbolizes this empathy. However, the subsequent attempt by the U.S. military to demolish the pagoda to establish a camp and checkpoint marks a sharp departure from this empathy. When the protagonist intervenes to prevent a bulldozer from demolishing the pagoda, the U.S. sergeant expresses his frustration, exclaiming, “I can’t understand the yellow bastards” (Hwang 1974, 356). This racially charged remark by the U.S. soldier reveals his disdain for and inability to comprehend Asian

religious culture.

“The Pagoda” reveals the contrasting perspectives on war between South Korean and U.S. soldiers. While the pagoda holds profound significance for the South Koreans, who share a “strong relationship” with it and are willing to risk their lives for its protection, the Americans view it merely as a “headache.” The protagonist attempts to convey the significance of the pagoda to a U.S. Army lieutenant, only to realize the lieutenant’s inability to comprehend the intricacies of Vietnamese faith or recognize its strategic value in military operations. He anticipates the lieutenant will dismiss his concerns as nothing more than battlefield sentimentality. When confronted with racist remarks from a U.S. soldier, and upon hearing that “the US army can change and renew anytime and anywhere” (Hwang 1974, 355), the protagonist recognizes the irreconcilable differences between the South Korean and U.S. armies. The conflict between the characters surrounding the pagoda exposes a hidden hierarchy on the battlefield, concealed beneath the facade of an alliance—a vertical relationship extending from the United States to the South Korean army.

Narrated from the perspective of a South Korean soldier, the story underscores the notion that the alliance between the South Korean and U.S. military forces in Vietnam was superficial, with South Korean soldiers depicted as victims of the U.S. military’s political hegemony. While this portrayal of South Korean soldiers might attract criticism, it is important to note that the story was published before the war ended in 1970. Through the lens of Vietnam’s religious culture and the loss of cultural heritage, Hwang elucidates the grim reality of the indiscriminate destruction and violence unfolding in Vietnam, prompting questions about the war’s meaning and justification. Hwang’s critique connects to *The Shadow of Arms*, as it targets the imperialistic ambitions of the United States. Unlike O’Brien, who contrasts the United States with France to construct an image of a civilized nation involved in Vietnam’s history, Hwang focuses on the adverse effects of imperialism.

The Shadow of Arms explores the conflicts between the U.S. military, South Korean military, South Vietnamese officials, and National Liberation Front fighters over the illegal smuggling of munitions. The author exposes

the detrimental effects of imperialist aggression through the flow of U.S. capital in Vietnam, while depicting the ethnic tragedy of Vietnam through the conflict between Pham Quyen of the South Vietnamese government army and Pham Minh of the National Liberation Front. The narrative unfolds in three main strands: first, the story of Ahn Yongkyu, an investigator with the Danang Joint Investigation Team, as he tracks the black market trade routes; second, the tale of Pham Quyen, a bureaucrat in the South Vietnamese government army who plans to escape to a third country while amassing wealth through the theft of munitions and construction of resettlement projects; and third, the journey of Pham Minh, who studies medicine and serves as an auxiliary operative for the National Liberation Front in opposition to his brother.

Hwang highlights the war's political and economic aspects while also bringing attention to the suppressed religious culture within it. Initially, the U.S. military is portrayed as lacking awareness of Vietnam's religious traditions. They transform peaceful villages into military bases and rename Vietnamese locations that reflect local religious values and lifestyles with derogatory terms. For instance, "Dong Dao" is renamed "Pink Mountain," and a village with many young men who joined the Liberation Front is called "Charlie Town," a term denoting a Viet Cong stronghold (Hwang 2014, 57). However, the mountain's original name, Đại Ngộ 大悟 (Dae-o in Korean), carries a Buddhist connotation of great enlightenment, symbolizing "liberation from suffering and realization of the truth." Additionally, the military slang "Charlie" carries the nuance of a "fool" in English, underscoring the U.S. military's demeaning attitude toward the Vietnamese.

The U.S. military's destruction of villages for military purposes, without understanding the indigenous Vietnamese mindset, resulted in conflicts with the South Vietnamese government. These tensions are illustrated in scenes involving the Phoenix Hamlet program, a "political, economic, and military strategy" by the U.S. military and the South Vietnamese government aimed at separating the Liberation Front from the local population and integrating large numbers of evacuees into a strong administrative structure to reduce enemy escape havens (Hwang 2014, 130). However, the plan failed

because the United States lacked an understanding of the traditional Vietnamese way of thinking and living. While the U.S. military prioritized meeting material needs, the Vietnamese focused on “ancestor worship and the maintenance of permanent family life as ideals,” viewing their village as “an entire world in microcosm” (Hwang 2014, 257). The U.S. military insisted that there was no neutrality in the war, forcing Vietnamese villagers to choose between controlled villages and Liberation Front areas, leaving them with the dilemma of being protected by the United States or facing annihilation.

The Vietnamese, whose lives centered around family and village, resisted relocation and became targets for massacre. Moreover, those who relocated to the new villages often modified the appearance of their homes to resemble their old ones or installed Buddhist altars in their new dwellings. This was condemned by Pham Quyen, who served as a liaison between the U.S. military and the villagers. However, Pham Quyen either silenced these practices or deliberately misrepresented their meanings when communicating with the U.S. military. Hwang suggests that the opportunism displayed by the Vietnamese bureaucrat acting as an interpreter in the context of the Phoenix Hamlet program only widened the gap between the United States and Vietnam, with the Vietnamese civilians ultimately being the primary victims of this dynamic.

Interpretation plays a crucial role in the investigation of the torture inflicted on a Vietnamese boy in a U.S. military prison camp. Hwang dedicates an entire chapter to examining the abuses committed by the U.S. military, highlighting the pivotal role of interpreters. U.S. soldiers apprehended a 14-year-old boy in possession of a package of Chinese-made grenades, suspecting him of carrying weapons for the guerrillas. Nguyen, a Vietnamese Army interpreter, and Cole, a U.S. Army private, recount the brutal actions of the U.S. lieutenant and sergeant. The correlation between the severity of the torture and the boy’s resilience is evident. Nguyen points out, “Almost all Vietnamese are Buddhists. As you know, the greater the agony, the harder Buddhist believers fight to endure it” (Hwang 2014, 446–447), highlighting the boy’s religious determination as he endures extreme violence, which ultimately results in his death. However, the U.S. Army

lieutenant dismisses Nguyen's interpretation that the boy is chanting or praying. Even after detaining Nguyen, the lieutenant continues to interrogate the dying boy. In an attempt to offer some solace, Cole falsely interprets the boy's condition as a confession, hoping to afford him "time to die in peace" (Hwang 2014, 454).

The perpetrators' actions against the boy were carried out with a deliberate disregard for his humanity (Morton 2004, 13). Despite the presence of interpreters who could understand the boy's words, the accuracy of their interpretations held little significance for the soldiers. The boy's sincere religious commitment and his identity as a young Buddhist were neither understood nor empathized with by the U.S. soldiers, who had categorically labeled him Viet Cong. Ultimately, the authenticity of the boy's words becomes an untranslatable voice within the war's political context. Yet, his lifeless body acquires posthumous political significance, contributing to a new realm of meaning (Verdery 2000, 127). The boy's body, disposed of in a plastic bag and discarded into a sand pit, serves to institutionalize moral standards by holding the U.S. military accountable and assigning responsibility. Moreover, the boy's cries of "dear Buddha, I want to rest" and his mutilated body prompt us to reflect on the afterlife and the transience of life (Hwang 2014, 452).

While Vietnamese Buddhism, as seen from the perspective of the Vietnamese government forces or the U.S. military, underscores the harsh reality of religious suppression, from the National Liberation Front's view, it represents the historical longing for peace amidst such suppression. Hwang explores Vietnamese devotion in a poignant scene where Pham Minh reunites with his former teacher, Uncle Trinh, after deciding to go to the front. Uncle Trinh lives adjacent to the village temple in Sondin (Sơn Đình 山亭), the only village in Dong Dao untouched by U.S. military occupation. There, he offers prayers for the well-being of his students who have joined the conflict, regardless of their allegiance to the government or the National Liberation Front. When Pham Minh informs Uncle Trinh of his departure for the front, Uncle Trinh expresses his intention to include Pham Minh's name on the altar. However, Pham Minh declines, indicating his determination to survive the war and return home.

Buddhism in Vietnam dates back to the 2nd century BCE. While often viewed as a religion promoting detachment from worldly affairs, Buddhism had historically embraced social responsibility when the country required it (D. Nguyễn 2006, 19). This commitment to engagement with the world was particularly evident before and during the Vietnam War. Hwang illustrates this by referencing Uncle Trinh's involvement in the Buddhist anti-government movement.

In the old days, Uncle Trinh had been the principal of a grammar school in Da Nang. Since leaving the school in 1963, he had been making a living as a horticulturist, cultivating a nursery in his garden. Back in Da Nang he had led the Association of Buddhist Students.... There were many former students who had gone off into the jungle or become NLF officers who had also called him "Uncle." Uncle Trinh was an active participant in the anti-government movement that spread among Buddhists across the country, from May to October of 1963. Tanh criticized him for being too meek a liberal, but Pham Minh deeply respected the man's vast knowledge of Vietnamese history and highly valued his opinions. There were always youths gathered at his feet. (Hwang 2014, 58)

In 1963, this movement in South Vietnam led to the coup against Ngô Đình Diệm, profoundly influencing the Vietnam War and the trajectory of Buddhism in Vietnam. Diệm's regime, under the guise of anti-communism and aligned with the United States, favored Catholicism and suppressed Buddhism. This suppression peaked in 1963, marked by the banning of Buddhist flags in public spaces, prohibiting religious groups, including Buddhists, from owning property, and imposing strict controls on missionary activities. The regime's crackdown culminated in the infamous massacre of Buddhists on Buddha's Day, followed by a nationwide fasting movement. On June 11, 1963, monk Thích Quảng Đức self-immolated in protest against the government's authoritarian rule and its persecution of Buddhism. In this tense atmosphere, the United States could not tolerate the neutral stance adopted by Vietnamese Buddhists or the burgeoning anti-war peace movement. The politics of Buddhism in Hwang's novel must be

understood within this historical context.

Notably, Hwang's novels predominantly feature representations of Vietnamese religion centered on Buddhism. For instance, in *The Shadow of Arms*, South Korean soldier Ahn Yongkyu is asked by U.S. soldier Leon to help the deserter Stapley escape Vietnam. When Ahn visits the base camp where Stapley, having declared his neutrality, is hiding, he observes in the center of the room a "Buddhist altar draped with red silk, holding a white ceramic bowl with rice in which was stuck a red stick of incense shaped like a chopstick" (Hwang 2014, 394). While the author labels the altar as Buddhist, it closely aligns with Vietnamese folk beliefs. In Vietnam, it often takes the form of "*phật tại gia*" 在家佛 (Buddha at home), where a household typically houses both an ancestral altar and a Buddha altar (N. Lê 2001, 92). Burning incense as a prayer for national peace, the safe return of those departing for war, family safety, honoring the deceased, and personal well-being is a prevalent custom in Vietnamese culture.

Although the author simplifies Vietnamese religious practices to Buddhism, the scene where the protagonist contemplates Vietnamese religious symbols holds significance in portraying Stapley's political actions. Stapley's decision to desert resonates with Vietnamese religious ideals of ending violence and seeking peace. In the narrative, the bowls of rice and burning incense on the base camp altar are juxtaposed with Stapley's pacifist-like brown beard and Vietnamese-style black pajamas. While Stapley ultimately fails to escape Vietnam and meets his demise, the author communicates a powerful message through his actions. The placement of incense and prayers for peace on the altar in the house where the deserting U.S. soldier was hiding, the portrayal of a Vietnamese woman who, after sending her husband off to war, resorts to selling her body in the same house where the altar stood, and the tragic fate of the American youth who perishes in a war he opposes—all these elements prompt reflection on the justification of war and serve as an argument against it.

In this way, Hwang critiques the political oppression of the U.S. military by highlighting the juncture at which the legitimacy of universal life is undermined. His novels convey a sense of camaraderie felt by South Korean soldiers toward the Vietnamese, which fosters a feeling of inferiority toward

the United States and a critique of imperialism. However, this also suggests an ambivalent sense of superiority over the Vietnamese (J. Park 2000, 323). This dual perspective encapsulates the complex reality faced by South Koreans allied with Americans in Vietnam. Hwang meticulously observes and records the Vietnamese prayers for peace that persisted throughout the war, underscoring the brutality of the violence they endured. Additionally, he portrays the challenge of fully translating and understanding this faith, implying that the United States' attempt to pacify Vietnam in the name of global peace was inherently doomed to fail. Ultimately, Hwang does not promote peace through Buddhism but instead critiques the ideology of war through the lens of an outsider, an American, whose faith remains incomprehensible.

Conclusion

This study examined the religious rituals depicted in novels by Vietnamese, American, and Korean writers who experienced the Vietnam War, highlighting the significance of faith amidst the war's devastation. Authors such as Bảo Ninh, Tim O'Brien, and Hwang Sok-yong incorporate the faith and religious practices of the Vietnamese people into their narratives, emphasizing their prayers for peace and mourning for those lost in battle. In Vietnam, where ancestral rites are deeply rooted and religions such as folk beliefs, Buddhism, and Confucianism are intertwined, religion serves as a crucial link between the mortal realm and the divine, connecting people with gods, nature, and their ancestors. The depiction of Vietnamese religion and spirituality by these diverse authors serves as a counterbalance to the brutality of war. They employ Vietnamese religion as a lens through which to confront the profound moral and political dilemmas inherent in war.

The Vietnam War was closely related to religion, as demonstrated by the Buddhist uprising against the Diệm regime. However, equating Buddhism in Vietnam with communism would be an oversimplification. In the novels of authors who directly experienced the war, Vietnamese religion occupies a space that transcends ideological boundaries. Bảo Ninh's portrayal of folk beliefs, influenced by Buddhism yet rooted in a uniquely

Vietnamese view of the afterlife, highlights practices that were secretly maintained despite the Communist Party's anti-superstition campaigns. The memories of prohibited ceremonies conducted on the battlefield, the solace sought in recovering bodies after the war, and the resistance faced in commemorating the fallen in the post-war era reveal the ideological repression and challenges of mourning faced by the Vietnamese. In his novel, Bảo Ninh revisits the sorrow of war and reflects on the memory of death, asserting that the suffering endured by Vietnamese war victims surpassed ideological divides, advocating for mourning that encompasses all Vietnamese people.

While Bảo Ninh's novel associates religion with mourning the deceased, Tim O'Brien's work explores how survivors reflect on themselves and their relationship with the world through religious themes. O'Brien's portrayal of religion in Vietnam, likening pagodas to churches, presents it as both foreign and mysterious. He demonstrates a willingness to blend or transcend multiple religions, interpreting Vietnamese piety as an expression of kindness or courtesy from a Christian perspective. Unlike the marginalized U.S. soldiers in Bảo Ninh's novels or the more prominent ones in Hwang Sok-yong's works, O'Brien's soldiers are depicted with a strong sense of humanity. His novel largely avoids addressing issues such as religious suppression and communication barriers, which Hwang critiques. While O'Brien's work emphasizes the camaraderie between U.S. soldiers and Vietnamese monks, it also risks perpetuating the notion of Vietnam as an *othered* entity.

In Hwang's novel, the U.S. military is depicted as demolishing Vietnamese pagodas and torturing Buddhists, disregarding the deeply held beliefs of the Vietnamese people. Hwang also underscores the religious similarities between South Korea and Vietnam and the empathy of South Korean soldiers toward Vietnamese culture. This portrayal reflects a complex interplay of inferiority and self-doubt among South Korean soldiers engaged in a conflict led by the United States, combined with their racial and cultural affinity with the Vietnamese. Consequently, South Korea is depicted in a state of otherness akin to Vietnam, though the situation is more nuanced. Hwang's portrayal of Vietnamese religion as predominantly Buddhism reflects his limited experience in Vietnam and his perception of Buddhism

as the dominant Asian religion. The South Korean military's appreciation for Vietnamese religion might be influenced by its relationship with the U.S. military, potentially reinforcing a broader sense of *otherness* toward Asia.

The portrayal of the relationship between religion and war by these three authors is significant. Comparing novels from Vietnam, the United States, and South Korea reveals distinct focal points: Bảo Ninh on fate, Tim O'Brien on kindness and courtesy, and Hwang Sok-yong on attachment. These focuses reflect the physical violence and psychological oppression experienced by the authors in their respective contexts. The novels diverge from the official ideology of the Vietnam War, offering alternative perspectives grounded in the authors' religious views. Religious themes in the novels not only seek to comprehend Vietnamese culture but also act as resistance against the dominant state ideology shaping the collective memory of the war. Furthermore, exploring religious themes related to death in these novels serves to empower the deceased and recover their untold stories, rather than allowing their memories to be erased.

This study aimed to reevaluate the experience of war and its reflective potential through each author's inner world, viewing them as both participants in and creators of fictional narratives. By examining war narratives from three different countries, the goal was not to glorify heroism but to explore the potential for diversifying the memory of war. Identifying and analyzing religious themes in war novels highlights the literary effectiveness of using fiction to mirror political realities through human faith or to challenge political convictions. In the authors' recollections, Vietnamese faith transcends political dichotomies, playing a central role in social reconciliation and cultural understanding. Departing from the simplistic association of Buddhism with communism and Christianity with liberal democracy provides a deeper understanding of the profound sentiments about faith expressed on the battlefield, independent of specific ideological alignments. This study is highly relevant in today's context, particularly in a globalized world where understanding diverse perspectives on conflict and religion can provide valuable insights. We hope that the findings of this study will deepen understanding of and foster discussions on the intersection of religion, war, and literature.

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