The Experience of War
Four Sino-Indochinese Perspectives

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The study of war has changed dramatically over the last few decades, moving from a focus on classical military history to interdisciplinary reflections on societies at war and the combatant’s experience of battlefield violence. No one text or one school of thought can explain this shift. Nor is it our aim here to do so. However, given that this collection of essays seeks to explore the socio-cultural dimensions of the experience of war in Indochina1 and China in the twentieth century, it is important to situate our work within this larger historiography. It has certainly been of inspiration to us and has opened up new and fruitful avenues of research and points of comparison. We also hope that by connecting our work to this wider body of international research, we can contribute modestly to bringing Asia into the wider picture both empirically and conceptually. This seems important in light of the relative paucity of studies on the socio-cultural experiences of war in Asia compared to those on the West. This despite the fact that some of the most destructive conflicts of the twentieth century occurred in Asia: the Russo-Japanese, the Sino-Japanese, the Korean and Indochina wars.

This collection of essays takes as its point of departure the concept of the ‘experience of war’. While politics, diplomacy and military operations have their place, what interests us most here and in our collaborative research are how socio-cultural approaches can help us to understand better how Asian societies, civilians and individual soldiers may have experienced warfare during the twentieth century in China and Indochina. Few would disagree that George Mosse’s Fallen Soldiers marks an important milestone in the shift towards

1) We are using this term for the sake of convenience, since our work focuses on a geographical area that was embroiled in a conflict known in much of the literature as the Indochina Wars.
studying how societies and soldiers experienced modern warfare as it emerged with deadly force from the industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century.\(^2\) In this seminal text, Mosse, driven from his native Germany by the rise of the Nazis, placed the concept of ‘war experience’ at the heart of his reflection on European societies and combatants during World Wars I and II. On the one hand, he attempted to understand the unprecedented degree to which modern, industrial warfare manifested during WWI ended up ‘brutalising’ societies, cheapening human life, and thereby opening the way to the utilisation of an unprecedented degree of violence against people and societies during the rest of the twentieth century. On the other hand, Mosse examined how post-war governments created national myths, that of ‘the fallen soldier’ in particular, to legitimate mass death by casting it as a sacred, heroic contribution to the Nation.

The Myth of the War Experience was designed to mask war and to legitimize the war experience; it was meant to displace the reality of war. The memory of the war was refashioned into a sacred experience, which provided the nation with a new depth of religious feeling, putting at its disposal ever-present saints and martyrs, places of worship, and a heritage to emulate … The cult of the fallen soldier became a centrepiece of the religion of nationalism after the war, having its greatest political impact in nations like Germany, which had lost the war and had been brought to the edge of chaos by the transition from war to peace.\(^3\)

Although Mosse’s work was linked to his own breathtaking research interests, it was also part of a wider reorientation in the ways by which historians studied World War I, industrial warfare, indeed the question of twentieth-century ‘modernity’.\(^4\) One of the results was the emergence of cultural approaches to the study of the experience of war. On this count, Mosse was certainly not alone in taking to task the heroic, nationalist myth of war by focusing on modern warfare’s destruction of humans and societies. In 1975, as WWI veterans disappeared and the Vietnam War ended, Paul Fussel penned an equally influential study of the combat experiences of British soldiers in World

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