

Assembling Authenticity: The Afterlives of U.S. Army Uniforms in Thailand

Chayaporn Singdee^a 

^aChiang Mai University, Thailand

*corresponding author: singdele@gmail.com

Received: 29 November 2023 / Accepted: 8 September 2024 / Published: 28 October 2024

► Singdee, C. (2024). Assembling authenticity: The afterlives of U.S. army uniforms in Thailand. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies*, 17(2), 135-151.

In Thailand, U.S. military vintage clothing and insignia from the Vietnam War era are highly sought after by passionate collectors. This article explores how Thai collectors engage in a practice of ‘assembling authenticity’ through their pursuit and acquisition of these items. By examining collectors’ intimate relationships with these material objects, this article reveals how personal memories and understandings of the war are shaped, often diverging from grand historical narratives. Furthermore, the competitive dynamics within the Thai collecting community, where Vietnam War materials become a form of capital that collectors leverage for commercial and social benefits, is investigated. The role of collectors’ networks in negotiating and trading these items is also examined. By attending to these various dimensions of Thai collectors’ engagement with U.S. military vintage fashion, this article explores the possibilities these sartorial materials hold for recreating and reshaping memories of the Cold War era within the Thai collecting arena. Through this exploration insights into the complex interplay between material culture, personal and collective memory, and the social worlds of collectors are offered.

Keywords: Collective Memory; Thai Collectors; U.S. Military Uniforms; Vietnam War; Vintage Fashion

~

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the enduring presence of materials from the Vietnam War era in contemporary Thai society, specifically focusing on the transformation of U.S. military uniforms and relics into cultural artifacts instilled with significant symbolic value. Although the physical battles of the war ended in 1975, its memory and resonance persist through various mediums, including personal narratives, collective memories, and cultural representations. The Vietnam War remains an ongoing, evolving, and contested narrative that continues to shape the lives of subsequent generations. Research on this topic has focused on the effects on combatant nations, such as the United States and Vietnam. However, this phenomenon extends beyond American and Vietnamese societies to other

10.14764/10-ASEAS-0115

www.seas.at

































contexts, such as Thailand, where consumers actively engage with the war's artifacts to construct and contest meanings and memories.

Christina D. Weber elucidates how the Vietnam War's legacy affects subsequent generations of Americans, highlighting the war's ongoing impact on American society (Weber, 2015). Similarly, other scholars have examined the war's enduring influence on Vietnamese politics and society (Nguyen, 2016; Schwenkel, 2009). While these studies provide valued insights into the war's afterlife in the primary combatant nations, there is a gap in understanding how the war's material culture and memory extend to non-combatant nations, such as Thailand, which were indirectly affected by the conflict.

This study addresses this space by examining how Thai collectors of Vietnam War-era U.S. military uniforms and insignia create, negotiate, and assign new meanings and values to these objects, diverging from their original purposes. By employing an assemblage perspective and ethnographic methods, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of how the interplay between material culture, individual experiences, and socio-cultural contexts shapes the construction of personal and collective memories surrounding the Vietnam War in Thailand.

This study employs an assemblage lens to extend beyond the limitations of material culture approaches and explore the complexities surrounding military vintage clothing consumption in the Thai context. Material culture theory, pioneered by scholars such as Jules David Prown (1982) and Daniel Miller (1987), focuses on the study of objects and their implications within cultural contexts. While this approach has been widely used to examine the relationship between people and things, it has been criticized for treating objects as static representations of cultural meanings. In contrast, assemblage theory, derived from the works of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), provides a framework for considering the dynamic interplay between material artifacts and human practices within networks that evolve to reflect changing social, cultural, and economic dynamics. This theoretical approach allows for understanding the complex connections between objects, people, and their contexts.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs ethnographic methods to investigate the practices and experiences of Thai collectors of Vietnam War-era U.S. military uniforms and insignia. The research, conducted from 2019 to 2021, utilized multiple data collection strategies, including in-depth interviews with 25 Thai male collectors, participant observation at collector gatherings, online ethnography of Facebook groups, and interviews with international vintage clothing dealers.

The study traces the historical context of U.S. military vintage consumption in Thailand from the Cold War era to the present day. It examines Thai collectors' acquisition and redecorating practices, uncovering how the materiality of these artifacts interacts with human practices to challenge conventional notions of authenticity. The research explores how Thai collectors reinterpret and assign new meanings and values to these U.S. military garments, diverging from their original purposes.

Case studies of individual collectors reveal how these uniforms and insignia serve as conduits connecting the past and present, fulfilling various personal and social needs. By shedding light on the complex relationships between Thai collectors,

Vietnam War-era artifacts, and their socio-cultural contexts, this study provides a theoretical understanding of how material culture, individual experiences, and collective memories intersect to shape the ongoing significance of historical events. This research brings a new perspective to the study of war memory and society by theorizing about the direct effect of indirect material flows on society decades after the war. While previous research has examined the long-term societal changes caused by the direct influence of the war on active combatants and supporting nations, this study is distinctive in its investigation of the afterlives of material goods circulating in a non-combatant nation decades after hostilities. The findings have practical implications for museums, collectors, and others interested in preserving and interpreting the material heritage of the Vietnam War era.

U.S. MILITARY UNIFORMS AND INSIGNIA: THE PATH TO THAILAND

Thailand is renowned as a prime vintage clothing market in Southeast Asia. Thai consumers have collected vintage items since the Cold War, influenced by American culture during the 'American Era.' Strengthened U.S.-Thai ties during the Vietnam War and increased economic connections and interactions through American soldiers' vacations and media influx. Initially, Thais acquired vintage clothing from wealthy households and American soldiers trading clothes for services. In the mid-1970s, Thai-Malaysian entrepreneurs began importing used clothes from U.S. charities to sell along the southern Thai border. Vendors then brought these second-hand items to retail and wholesale markets in Bangkok.

These clothes were distributed to various markets, including Bangkok's famous Sanam Laung weekend market, and later relocated to Chatuchak Market.¹ This history reflects Thailand's unique position in the vintage clothing market, shaped by its cultural and economic ties with the United States, particularly during the Vietnam War era.

During the Cold War, U.S. military uniforms gained popularity among Thai consumers through two channels. Thai folk musicians and young activists, influenced by anti-Vietnam War movements, used secondhand clothes to deliver political messages. In the 1970s, Thai folk singers like Caravan, Carabao, and Pongsit Kumpee wore Vietnam War-era U.S. military uniforms to protest the Thai government and U.S. involvement, highlighting working-class hardships, and supporting democracy (Myers-Moro, 1986, p. 108). Hollywood films also shaped this trend. *The Green Berets*, the only American-made film about the Vietnam war during the war, starred John Wayne and featured the popular Tiger stripes jacket. The M65 jacket, designed for extreme cold weather in 1965, became highly sought-after from the 1970s onward, known in Thailand as the 'jacket field.' Despite being unsuitable for the local climate, these jackets were collected for both wear and display, symbolizing 'cool' American culture. This phenomenon reflects the complex interplay between fashion, politics, and cultural influence in Thailand during and after the Vietnam War era.

1 Chatuchak Market originated from a 1948 flea market in Sanam Luang, Bangkok. It relocated multiple times due to space issues and royal functions. In 1978, plans were made to move the market for Bangkok's bicentennial. It was established at its current Phahonyothin location in 1982 and officially opened in 1987 as Chatuchak Market.

The attractiveness of U.S. military uniforms has continued through the contemporary period and up to the present. Today, military clothing from around the world, not just from the U.S., continues to pour into Thailand as part of the supply of secondhand clothing originating from charity organizations and moving through transitional countries such as Malaysia, Cambodia, and Pakistan before reaching Thailand.² The admiration, study, and collection of U.S. Vietnam War military uniforms and insignias have taken on new forms as more information on this subject has become more readily available and accessible to consumers through the internet (e.g., through group blogs). More recently, Facebook has become the primary space for engaging in these consumptive activities. Consumers interested in U.S. military uniforms and insignias have begun to connect on Facebook's platform to share knowledge about materials from the Vietnam War and to exchange and trade goods (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A secondhand warehouse in Thailand where secondhand military clothes from Pakistan are waiting to be sorted and priced. (photo by Eakphol Karntreepech)

REARRANGING THE PAST: EXPLORING ASSEMBLAGE AS A COLLECTING METHOD

The study of U.S. military uniforms, their transformation, and meaning intersects with the material culture framework utilized in this research. By acknowledging the agency of objects and their influence on consumers, this study emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between individuals and vintage uniforms, highlighting their role in shaping identities and experiences.³ Drawing from anthro-

2 Hansen (2000) and Norris (2012) explore the global secondhand clothing trade, highlighting its complexity and the interplay between global and local dynamics. Their research, using material culture and global commodity chain perspectives, provides insights into globalization, inequality, and cultural exchange, while raising environmental and ethical questions.

3 The reciprocal relationship between individuals and objects is a central tenet of material culture studies, as discussed by scholars such as Miller (2005) and Tilley et al. (2006).

pologist Daniel Miller's (2005, pp. 1-4) concept of materiality, the dynamic role of objects in shaping social interactions and identities is underlined. Miller argues that objects play a pivotal role in identity formation and group affiliations, influencing consumption patterns and social norms.

While material culture studies offer appreciated insights into the meanings embedded in fashion artifacts, they may not fully capture the dynamic nature of fashion trends and practices. By examining fashion through the lens of material culture, this study investigates whether material culture approaches tend to fixate on the present fashion moment, disregarding its fluidity, impermanence, and complexities (Wilson, 1985). To address these limitations, the assemblage theory is employed as a complementary perspective to understand the complex interactions within the realm of fashion.

Assemblage theory challenges the traditional distinction between people and things, considering both as integral components of social assemblages, which recognize the active role of material objects in shaping actions. The key principles of assemblage theory are crucial for understanding the complex relationships between various elements in a system. The theory underscores the idea that these elements, whether people, objects, or ideas, come together to form assemblages that are more than the sum of their parts. In the context of fashion, assemblage theory provides a new perspective on how objects and their relationships with human and non-human actors contribute to the formation of social, cultural, and political realities. Scholars such as DeLanda (2006) and Bennett (2010) have further developed and applied this approach to the study of material culture. While assemblage theory is not extensively applied in fashion studies, it offers perceptions of the diverse elements and relationships within fashion phenomena.

This study combines material culture and assemblage theory to comprehensively understand how Thai collectors engage with U.S. military uniforms from the Vietnam War era. This integration allows focus on both the uniforms' materiality and the complex networks shaping their interpretation and valuation. This mode, exemplified by Woodward and Fisher (2014) and Dant (2006), emphasizes considering material properties and their interactions with human actors and social contexts. It is particularly suited to studying vintage clothing, recognizing multiple temporalities converging in collecting and wearing these garments (Jenss, 2015). Jenss (2015) highlights how vintage clothing references the past, is worn presently, and shapes future trends, enriching understanding of garments' new significance in different contexts. By integrating these approaches, this research demonstrates the potential for interdisciplinary studies in fashion and material culture, considering both symbolic and material dimensions of dress in understanding its social and cultural significance.

Thai collectors transform U.S. military uniforms by collecting, modifying, and wearing them. Considering the uniforms' agency, cultural contexts, and actors involved in their circulation, extends understanding of the interplay between fashion, material culture, and globalization. Applying assemblage theory illuminates how garments experience transformations in meaning, value, and application when appropriated in a distinct cultural setting.

Two collecting practices have emerged in the Thai arena. The 'as is' approach,

emphasizing originality and authenticity, aligns with material culture perspectives that objects embody cultural meanings and histories. The value placed on rare uniforms and efforts to trace their provenance validate the significance of material properties in shaping meaning for collectors. However, the 'redecorated' approach, involving modification and completion with added insignia, highlights the dynamic nature of these objects as they circulate through different contexts. This practice allies with assemblage theory, emphasizing the fluid nature of social phenomena. By reconfiguring uniform elements, Thai collectors actively create new meanings and identities emerging from interactions between human and non-human actors.

The redecoration process is guided by the rules and regulations of the U.S. Armed Forces during the Vietnam War era, which are translated and shared among Thai collectors on Facebook pages. This demonstrates how the material properties of the uniforms and insignia are entangled with broader social and cultural practices, as well as the role of digital platforms in facilitating the circulation and reinterpretation of these objects. This interaction exemplifies the dynamic and open-ended nature of assemblages, where complex interactions between human and non-human constituents create emergent phenomena. The integration of material culture and assemblage theory allows an understanding of how Thai collectors navigate the complex interplay between the original meanings and functions of U.S. military uniforms and their recontextualization within contemporary Thai society. This tactic emphasizes the importance of considering the broader contexts and networks in which these assemblages evolve and acquire new meanings (Figure 2).



Figure 2. A collector redecorates his tropical combat jacket with a reference picture of a U.S. Army serviceman from the 25th Infantry Division. (photos by Chatchawan Ruenloey)

Thai collectors redecorate U.S. military uniforms with insignia based on their interpretations of ideal Vietnam War-era units and personnel, sketching inspiration from photographs and films. The process allows collectors to construct and negotiate meanings and identities associated with these uniforms by selecting and arranging specific insignia, such as rank, unit, nametag, and awards. The act of redecorating uniforms can be seen as a form of creative expression and identity construction, as collectors imbue these objects with new meanings and values that reflect their interests and aspirations.

Redecorating uniforms can be understood as a form of assemblage, in which collectors combine various material elements to create new configurations of meaning and value. Each insignia contributes to the overall significance of the redecorated uniform, forming a complex network of associations. The popularity of certain U.S. military units, like the First Cavalry Division with its iconic horse's head design, highlights the role of cultural narratives and media representations in influencing the desirability of specific insignia. These narratives and representations serve as cultural resources that collectors draw upon in their assemblage practices, contributing to the formation of shared meanings and identities within the collecting community.

From an assemblage perspective, redecorating uniforms is a dynamic process where meanings and identities associated with vintage artifacts evolve through interactions with collectors and socio-cultural contexts. Such a non-representational approach highlights these objects' transformative potential and their impact on owners' experiences and identities, moving beyond a symbolic understanding of fashion and material culture. As advocated by Nigel Thrift (2007, p. 7) in *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*, this approach focuses on embodied, affective, and performative aspects of material culture, emphasizing how people interact with and experience fashion objects in everyday life, rather than solely on symbolic meanings.

Thai collectors' redecoration of U.S. military uniforms demonstrates the interplay between material culture and assemblage theory, revealing the complex dynamics of fashion and collecting. By treating uniforms as malleable objects, collectors create new meanings and identities emerging from interactions. This underscores the fluid nature of fashion and materials in a globalized world. Notably, this relationship can alter a society's collective memory, with war producing lasting influence through indirect means. The uniforms, initially symbolic of military identity, transform Thai collectors' hands, acquiring new identities and shaping collective narratives that diverge from their original context. This process echoes the enduring impact of conflict on societal psyche and cultural expressions, revealing the power of material objects in shaping collective memory.

THE SOCIAL LIVES AND BIOGRAPHIES OF THE VIETNAM WAR UNIFORMS

The social lives and biographies of Vietnam War uniforms offer insights into how these artifacts captivate Thai collectors. Drawing from Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986), these commodities acquire new meanings as they circulate through different contexts. As fluid entities, the uniforms and insignia undergo constant transformations, accumulating diverse biographies through technical, social, and cultural alterations.

Originally crafted for soldiers in wartime Vietnam, uniforms served as symbols within the military hierarchy. However, post-war, their social lives transformed as they dispersed worldwide. They transitioned into commodities through philanthropic channels, traversing borders and continents. Upon reaching Thailand, these garments were re-evaluated and made available to buyers. Rare, vintage, and fashionable pieces commanded high prices, reflecting their newfound status in local and international markets. This journey from military issue to collectible item illustrates the dynamic nature of material culture, aligning with the assemblage approach that emphasizes the contingent nature of social phenomena, including fashion and material culture.

The journey of these uniforms from military issue to prized collectibles can be understood through “consumer pastness,” a concept introduced by Schibik et al. (2022, p. 2). This concept suggests that consumers perceive products with higher pastness as scarcer, more desirable, and valuable. This perception becomes integral to the assemblage for Thai collectors, emerging from interactions between uniforms’ material properties, collectors’ knowledge and imagination, and cultural narratives about the Vietnam War era. Consumer pastness contributes to the uniforms’ aura and perceived authenticity, influencing how collectors engage with and value these objects.

When acquired, these uniforms undergo recommodification by vendors and re-singularization by collectors, acquiring distinct biographies and generating an aura of authenticity from their association with war participants. This aura is reinforced by their production period (1965-1975), lending unquestionable genuineness. These dates correspond to the Vietnam War period, and items manufactured then are regarded as authentic, having been produced during the conflict. They are highly sought after due to historical significance and direct war connection. This concept provides another dimension to understanding how uniforms accumulate diverse biographies and acquire new meanings as they circulate through different social contexts. It highlights the complex interplay between materiality, perception, and value in collecting practices.

As these objects circulate through commoditization and singularization, their biographies unfold, inviting new owners to connect with past lives. For Thai collectors, the betweenness of material and immaterial emerges from the imagined reality assigned by new owners. The uniforms and insignia allow them to conjure a war they did not experience but can now be imagined through various accounts and the objects’ fabric and patina. This process aligns with studies on material objects, memory, and imagination, offering insights into how people construct identities about the past. Scholars like Hirsch and Spitzer (2006) and Sturken (1997) highlight material objects’ importance in mediating imagined experiences and memories, particularly for traumatic or displaced pasts. These objects serve as tangible links, helping individuals and communities reconstruct, interpret, and engage with their histories.

The meanings associated with these materials facilitate conversations between collectors and their acquisitions, transcending fixed objectivity and incorporating them into cultural objects loosely related to specific times and spaces. Meaning emerges through sociality rather than classification efforts. This understanding of Vietnam War uniforms’ social lives align with the assemblage perspective. Such practice highlights their dynamic nature as they interact with collectors and the broader socio-cultural context. By tracing complex networks of associations and meanings, vintage military uniforms’ role shapes Thai collectors’ identities, experiences, and memories.

THE AURA AND TOUCH OF AUTHENTICITY

The concept of authenticity in fashion can be approached from two perspectives: one that emphasizes the inherent quality of objects and another that views it as socially constructed and context-dependent (Beverland, 2005; Gilmore & Pine, 2007). In the realm of vintage fashion, authenticity often serves as a form of cultural capital (Entwistle & Rocamora, 2006), with exercises like storytelling and curation shaping perceptions of genuineness. Materiality and sensory experiences also play a crucial role in constructing authenticity, invoking a sense of historical depth and connection to the past.

For Thai collectors of Vietnam-era U.S. military uniforms and insignia, authenticity is closely tied to historical narratives and the concept of aura, as explored by Walter Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin, 1936/2008, pp. 7-9). Objects deemed authentic due to their historical roots, connect collectors to real experiences and resist commodification, despite their mass-produced nature. Benjamin's notion of aura highlights how relics from past eras evoke a sense of marvel and infuse inanimate objects with social life and narrative. Korsmeyer (2019) emphasizes the importance of physical engagement with historical artifacts as a means of connecting with the past. She argues that touching authentic objects allows individuals to forge direct links to bygone times, generating genuine aesthetic encounters. Korsmeyer (2019, p. 28) stresses that for an object to authentically connect us to the past, it must be preserved in its original state.

However, this emphasis on maintaining authenticity through preservation may overlook complexities in reproductions or altered objects. In the case of Thai collectors redecorating U.S. military uniforms, the aura and authenticity of these objects become fragmented as they negotiate new narratives. By referencing U.S. servicemen from the Vietnam War era, collectors reshape the artifacts' aura, suggesting alternative forms of authenticity that diverge from strict adherence to original conditions.

This process highlights the fluidity of aura and authenticity, as collectors navigate between imagined narratives, recognizing that the authenticity of these uniforms emerges not solely from their inherent qualities or original state, but from dynamic interactions between the objects, collectors, and broader socio-cultural contexts in which they circulate. By exploring alternative pathways for engaging with the past and negotiating legitimacy through consumption practices, this section offers an understanding of how authenticity is constructed and experienced in vintage military collectibles. The act of redecorating uniforms, as practiced by Thai collectors, can be seen as a creative process that allows the production of new forms of aura and authenticity, challenging conventional notions of what constitutes a genuine historical artifact (Figure 3).

In this context, the social lives and biographies of Vietnam War uniforms, as discussed in the previous section, take on new significance. As these objects circulate through various stages of commoditization and singularization, their authenticity is continually negotiated and reconstructed, shaped by the imagined realities and narratives assigned to them by their new owners. The meanings and values associated with these uniforms and insignia emerge not only from their historical roots but also from the social interactions and cultural practices that surround them, blurring the lines between the material and the immaterial, the authentic and the imagined.



Figure 3. Insignias are embroidered onto tropical combat jackets by skilled seamsters using tools like tube glue, needles, and thread. Glue is applied to the back of badges to secure their position on the jackets before being sewn on. (photo by the author)

ASSEMBLING AUTHENTICITY THROUGH ‘TOUCHING THE PAST’

The practices of redecorating uniforms with authentic insignias extend the possibilities for these materials to attain a sense of aura – that sense of wonder and historical depth that Walter Benjamin described. Through the meticulous process of assembling uniforms according to wartime regulations, Thai collectors can ‘touch the past’ and forge tangible connections with the experiences of American soldiers in the Vietnam War.

For these collectors, a blank uniform cannot evoke the narratives and chronicles of the war. As Charlie explains in an interview conducted in May 2020: “A uniform operates as an empty body that must be decorated and filled with insignias to link to war accounts, completing memories that are conceptualized through the bodies of the uniforms.” By carefully curating and arranging insignia that denote rank, qualifications, and achievements, collectors can construct unique stories and understandings around each assembled uniform.

This practice stands in contrast to Western approaches that prioritize preserving original wartime attire in untouched conditions, as advocated by theorists like Carolyn Korsmeyer. Thai collectors instead choose to creatively intervene and modify the materials, reshaping the aura through their creativities and engagements with the objects’ materiality. As Tom attests in a May 2020 interview: “The uniforms are from the period. Soldiers wore these ... The insignias are also real because they were also on these uniforms. So, both elements are from the period and went into combat actions with these soldiers.”

The redecorating process is painstaking, often taking months or years. Matching insignia colors and conditions is crucial, as Charlie notes: “If insignias are not matched according to their shades, they will look off.” Negotiating scarcity requires expertise

and sometimes dismantling existing configurations - what collectors call “killing elephants for ivory,” a Thai idiom meaning to sacrifice something significant for a trifle. For Thai collectors, this laborious assembly produces an authenticity transcending the uniforms’ original context. The aura emerges through active engagement, as they ‘touch the past’ by handling and animating these relics with new meanings. This practice challenges rigid notions of originality and fixed historical truth. Authenticity lies not just in preserving untouched artifacts, but in the interplay between collectors’ involvement and the materials’ embedded experiences.

PRODUCING AURA THROUGH THE THEATER OF WAR

For Thai collectors of Vietnam War-era U.S. military uniforms and insignia, their annual gatherings organized by groups like the *Thailand Military Collection Association* are not just opportunities to buy, sell, and trade artifacts. These meticulously orchestrated events, such as the group’s 2020 meeting held over two days atop a dry mountaintop in Nakhon Ratchasima, allow participants to quite literally produce aura and re-touch the past through immersive, multi-sensory experiences (Figure 4).



Figure 4. A scene of the meeting of the “Thailand Military Collection Association” in February 2020. (photo by Eakphol Karntreepech)

The chosen location was carefully selected to evoke the ambiance of the Vietnam War, featuring replicas of war materials like U.S. Army jeeps, helicopter parts, and vintage flags. Attendees could also engage in photo shoots with BB guns resembling M-16s and AK-47s, adding to the transformative experience. These meetings, organized by the administrator of the Facebook page *Fit Merican Design*, provide a platform for collectors to learn and share insights on accurate uniform decoration according to U.S. Army regulations from the Vietnam War era (Figure 5).

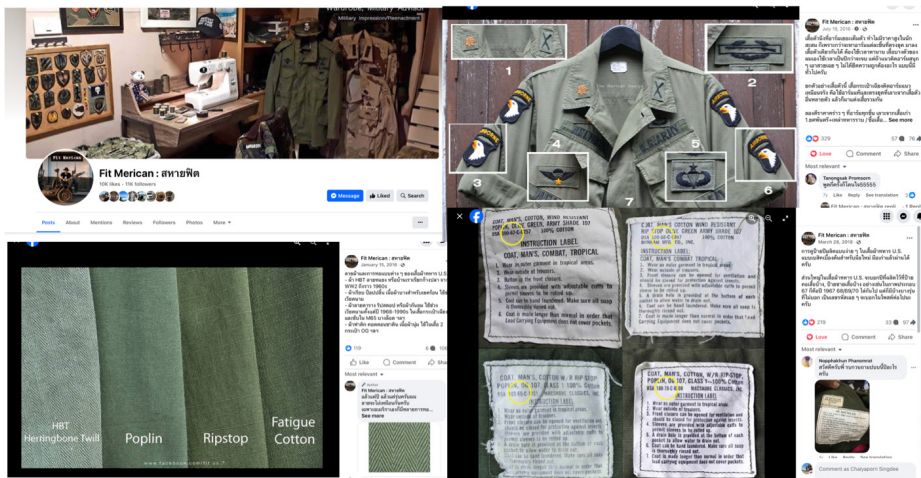


Figure 5. The image shows a screenshot from *Fit Merican Design*, a popular Thai Facebook page dedicated to vintage U.S. military clothing from the Vietnam War era. The post provides collectors with information on fabric types, production years, and proper decoration according to U.S. Army regulations. This page is a valuable resource for Thai enthusiasts of vintage American military apparel. (compilation by the author)

The settings are meticulously curated to recreate the battlefield ambiance – from the rugged mountain locations to the display of replicated war materials. Collectors adorn their beloved redecorated uniforms, the assembled insignia reflecting their painstaking efforts to accurately recreate the roles and experiences of American GIs according to military regulations of that era.

These living history events are theatrical performances where collectors reanimate fragmented war memories. Collectors creatively decorate uniforms to express knowledge, social standing, and imagined heroic personas. As one explains about his 2nd pattern tropical combat jacket: “If I want to be a super soldier, I can add Jungle Expert and Path Finder insignia or even the green combat leader stripe.” Unlike strict reenactments, there is romanticization in reconstructing war narratives. Uniforms become canvases, with insignia reflecting specific skills that reveal the collectors’ social capital. These gatherings offer immersive opportunities to inhabit reconstituted versions of the past through touch and embodied experiences like photoshoots with replica weapons. The theatrical staging melds sensory engagement with imagined storytelling, allowing collectors to materialize their own interpreted auras around the objects.

For Thai collectors, military artifacts’ aura and authenticity emerge through creative assemblage and world-building, not passive preservation. The aura is actively produced through physical and narrative engagements in transformative settings. ‘Theater of war’ events show how redecorated uniforms become palimpsests with overlapping meanings - past echoes refracted through contemporary curation and imagination. This staging sets the scene for understanding the outcomes of assembling authenticity. Redecorated uniforms and imaginative settings allow collectors like Sam and Ae to materialize personal identities, cultural meanings, and sociopolitical aspirations distinct from the artifacts’ original symbolism.

OUTCOMES OF ASSEMBLING AUTHENTICITY

Through the practice of touch and recreation, Thai collectors like Sam and Ae reconstruct memories of the Vietnam War, a conflict they did not directly experience, by forming intimate relationships with vintage war materials. For these collectors, engaging with U.S. military uniforms and insignia is not merely about nostalgia but also a means of fulfilling their present-day social, cultural, and economic needs.

Sam, a factory mechanic in his mid-50s, has been collecting Vietnam War-era U.S. military uniforms for over a decade. His favorite pieces come from the First Cavalry Division, a unit known for its heavy use of helicopters and high casualty rate. Sam is drawn to the sacrifices made by American soldiers in Vietnam, seeing in their uniforms a symbol of the democratic values they fought and died for (Figure 6). As he explains in an interview conducted in February 2020:

I rarely share my political perspective with people, especially among collectors, because it may jeopardize our friendships. As you know, the political conflict in Thailand is very contentious. I hope that one day Thailand will be free from the military junta and enjoy a real democracy like the United States, where young people can see their future. The uniform of the First Cavalry Division, who suffered the most from the war, reminds me of hope and democracy, which someday I might see.

For Sam, the First Cavalry Division uniform is a material embodiment of his aspirations for a more democratic Thailand, even if expressing such views openly could risk his social standing within the collecting community.

Ae, another collector from northeast Thailand, where American air bases were once located, has a different perspective. Ae's collection includes not just uniforms but also various pieces of U.S. military equipment, which he proudly displays in his home as symbols of American technical superiority and quality. In an interview conducted in February 2020, he states: "You see! All this stuff was used here in Thailand during the war when I was a young kid. Today, they are still fine, working as they were meant to be. This just shows how great American-made things are."

Ae's childhood memories of receiving gifts from American airmen and witnessing the might of U.S. air power have shaped his attachment to objects like the First Cavalry Division uniform. For him, these artifacts represent the technological advancement and moral righteousness of the American military: "The Americans would try their best to rescue soldiers even if they lost equipment in the attempt, unlike in the Thai Army, where gear can be more valuable than the lives of their men."

Through his collection, Ae connects with a vision of American greatness holding deep personal significance. Sam's and Ae's cases illustrate how Thai collectors imbue Vietnam War-era uniforms with new meanings departing from original military functions. For Sam, the First Cavalry Division uniform symbolizes democratic hopes, for Ae, American technological and moral superiority. Their experiences highlight the fluid nature of authenticity in vintage military collectibles. While seeking genuine connections with the past, their understandings are shaped by personal memories, cultural narratives, and political aspirations that may not align with historical realities.



Figure 6. A collection of insignias belonging to the 1st Cavalry Division, poised to be affixed onto a uniform. (photo by Eakphol Karntreepech)

The authenticity of their collections lies not in fidelity to objective facts but in materializing deeply felt, often inexpressible desires and identities. This process reveals complex interactions between material culture and personal meaning-making.

CONCLUSION

This study distinguishes itself from existing research on material culture and collectors by offering a perspective on how non-Western collectors engage with and reinterpret artifacts from a conflict they did not directly experience. Unlike previous studies that often focus on the preservation and interpretation of military artifacts in their original cultural context (e.g., Saunders & Cornish, 2009), this research examines how Thai collectors actively reshape the meanings and authenticity of Vietnam War-era U.S. military uniforms. Furthermore, while Scott (2015) explores how military museums create diverse representations of war through object display and interpretation, this study extends such considerations to individual collectors operating outside institutional contexts. It investigates how these collectors, influenced by their own cultural background and personal interests, construct new narratives and understandings around these artifacts, contributing to ongoing debates about the power of objects to create meaning and the complexities of representing war history across cultural boundaries.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) argued that we engage with history as both actors and narrators, challenging conventional understandings of history as mere recollections. He critiques Western scholarship that dismisses non-Western historical approaches, emphasizing that sociohistorical processes and narratives intersect to serve diverse objectives (Trouillot, 1995, pp. 6-10). The practices of Thai collectors redecorating U.S. military uniforms from the Vietnam War demonstrate this interplay. These collectors actively rearrange material artifacts to retell stories of the war through the

arrangement of insignia on authentic period uniforms. By acquiring, exchanging, displaying, and imaginatively engaging with these war materials, collectors transcend the uniforms' original militaristic materiality to construct new personal meanings and memories around an event they did not experience firsthand. In this process, the political symbolism originally attached to the insignia and uniforms becomes repurposed as social capital within the local collecting arena. The meanings ascribed to these vintage military artifacts extend beyond simplistic notions of subversion or subjectivity. The realities of these objects emerge through complex networks of relationships and embodied practices formed between collectors and materials.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of materiality and assemblage theory by demonstrating how Thai collectors actively reshape historical narratives and imbue artifacts with new meanings and forms of authenticity. Conceptualizing these uniforms and insignia as components of ever-shifting assemblages, the analysis reveals how meanings and auras emerge through complex relational networks rather than being inherent to objects themselves. This challenges Western notions of authenticity as merely preserving original artifact states. The research also contributes to the understanding of collective memory and its entanglement with material culture. Applying an assemblage approach, the study foregrounds how subjective experiences and collective memories are constituted through entangled human-nonhuman interactions.

The findings reveal how collectors from non-Western backgrounds can develop meaningful relationships with war artifacts from conflicts outside their immediate cultural experience. Future research could explore comparative studies of similar collecting practices in Vietnam and Indonesia, where Vietnam War uniforms are also consumed and collected, but with potentially different cultural contexts and historical relationships to the conflict. Examining these diverse contexts could help identify regional patterns and variations in the reinterpretation of Vietnam War artifacts, shedding light on how local histories, cultural values, and contemporary socio-economic factors shape collecting practices across Southeast Asia. Such research could also explore how these practices foster intercultural dialogue, impact local economies and global vintage markets, and raise ethical questions about the memorialization of conflict and respect for veterans in different cultural contexts.



REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A. (1986). *The social life of things commodities in a cultural perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (2008). *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*. Penguin. (Original work published 1936)
- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press.
- Beverland, M. (2005). Crafting brand authenticity: The case of luxury wines. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(5), 1003-1029.
- Dant, T. (2006). Material civilization: Things and society. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 57(2), 289-308.
- DeLanda, M. (2006). *A new philosophy of society: Assemblage theory and social complexity*. Continuum.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press.

Assembling Authenticity: The Afterlives of U.S. Army Uniforms in Thailand

- Entwistle, J., & Rocamora, A. (2006). The field of fashion materialized: A study of London Fashion Week. *Sociology*, 40(4), 735-751.
- Gilmore, J. H., & Pine, B. J. (2007). *Authenticity: What consumers really want*. Harvard Business Press.
- Hansen, K. T. (2000). *Salaula: The world of secondhand clothing and Zambia*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hirsch, M., & Spitzer, L. (Eds.). (2006). *Testimonial objects: Memory, gender, and transmission*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jenss, H. (2015). *Fashioning memory: Vintage style and youth culture*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Kopytoff, I. (1986). The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as process. In A. Appadurai (Ed.), *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective* (pp. 64-91). Cambridge University Press.
- Korsmeyer, C. (2019). *Things: In touch with the past*. Oxford University Press.
- Miller, D. (1987). *Material culture and mass consumption*. Blackwell.
- Miller, D. (2005). *Materiality*. Duke University Press.
- Myers-Moro, P. A. (1986). Song for life: Leftist Thai popular music in the 1970s. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 20(3), 93-114.
- Nguyen, V. (2016). *Nothing ever dies: Vietnam and the memory of war*. Harvard University Press.
- Norris, L. (2012). Trade and transformations of secondhand clothing: Introduction. *Textile*, 10(2), 128-143.
- Prown, J. D. (1982). Mind in matter: An introduction to material culture theory and method. *Winterthur Portfolio*, 17(1), 1-19.
- Saunders, N. J., & Cornish, P. (Eds.). (2009). *Contested objects: Material memories of the Great War*. Routledge.
- Schibik, A., Strutton, D., & Thompson, K. N. (2022). What makes a product vintage? Investigating relationships between “consumer pastness”, scarcity, and purchase intentions toward vintage products. *European Journal of Marketing*, 56(7), 1830-1855.
- Schwenkel, C. (2009). *The American war in contemporary Vietnam: Transnational remembrance and representation*. Indiana University Press.
- Scott, J. (2015). Objects and the representation of war in military museums. *Museum & Society*, 13(4), 489-502.
- Sturken, M. (1997). *Tangled memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, and the politics of remembering*. University of California Press.
- Thrift, N. (2007) *Non-Representational theory: Space/politics/affect*. Routledge.
- Tilley, C., Keane, W., Küchler, S., Rowlands, M., & Spyer, P. (Eds.). (2006). *Handbook of material culture*. Sage.
- Trouillot, M.-R. (1995). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Beacon Press.
- Weber, C. D. (2015). *Social memory and war narratives: Transmitted trauma among children of Vietnam war veterans*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wilson, E. (1985). *Adorned in dreams: Fashion and modernity*. Virago.
- Woodward, S., & Fisher, T. (2014). Fashioning through materials: Material culture, materiality and processes of materialization. *Culture Unbound*, 6(1), 7-22.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chaiyaporn Singdee is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Chiang Mai University. He holds a bachelor's degree in Asian and Asian American Studies from Stony Brook University, New York, and a master's degree in Southeast Asian Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research focuses on the relationships between people and materials, particularly the agency of vintage fashion in linking global and local contexts. His current work explores the interactions between vintage Western clothing and local consumers in Thailand.

► Contact: singdele@gmail.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research article was supported by The Thailand Research Fund, Royal Golden Jubilee (RGJ) Ph.D. Program, and the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT), PHD 0121/2561. Moreover, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Professor Dr. Pinkaew Laungaramsri, and the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Chiang Mai University for their endless support. Additionally, I extend my heartfelt thanks to Professor Dr. Katherine Bowie, Dr. Michael Culinane, and the Center of Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for their kind guidance and unforgettable friendship. Their contributions have been invaluable to this research.

DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.

