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Forever Home: Funeral, Burial and the Life After This Life in Hue, Vietnam

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Forever Home

Funeral, Burial and the Life After This Life in Hue, Vietnam



Molly Bennett
Independent Study Project
SIT Vietnam: Culture and Development
Fall 2009

Research Supporter: Duong Thi Hoang Oanh
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Abstract

Hue, Vietnam is home to some of the most elaborate funeral and burial practices in the country. These practices ground and reinforce a plethora of beliefs and customs surrounding ancestor veneration and the communion of spirits. This paper will explore the effects of modernization, increased household incomes, and lack of burial space due to urban growth on the process and corresponding spirituality of the funeral and burial. A series of structured and semi-structured personal interviews with interested citizens and religious leaders alike comprise the majority of the data. Ultimately, this paper will show that while traditional funerals and burials are still considered by most to be a deeply important spiritual rite that ties families and communities together, the loss of burial space will require need for continued adaptation and change in the future.

Acknowledgements

While conducting this research, I had an almost infantile dependence on my student contacts at Hue University. I owe them my undying gratitude for introducing me to interview subjects, serving as translators, transporting me to interviews, and performing the essential role of cultural interpreter. I would like to thank Long, Huy, Triant, Hieu, and especially Thu. I am extremely grateful to Thu's family as well as Hanh and the entire family of Nguyen Thi Thi for allowing me to join them during very emotional rituals. I would also like to thank Ms. Oanh for introducing me to Doan Van Thuyen and for serving as my ISP supporter despite her busy schedule. Finally, I cannot give enough thanks to Academic Director Co Thanh and program assistant Vy for their constant, unwavering support.

I. The City and the Countryside – Introduction

Leaving Hue, past the bustle of the city center and its outlying neighborhoods, one begins to see the towers of graves and mausoleums dotting the landscape. Throughout Vietnam, the homes of the dead are visible everywhere but the most densely populated urban areas. Alone or in small family groups, the small cement structures are found on raised mounds in the middle of rice paddies, spread across vast tracts of grazing land, and on vacant green hillsides. But the quiet passivity of the countryside mausoleums does not reflect the character of most of Vietnam today. In fact, Vietnam is presently experiencing a cacophonous explosion of growth in many areas. With nearly 87 million people, tiny Vietnam is the thirteenth most populous country in the world. Alongside the rapid increase in population density, the last two decades have also seen a significant augmentation of wealth. As people and their economic resources grow ever more numerous, cities and towns sprawl further and further into the countryside. Thus, communities throughout Vietnam are faced with the question of how the living and the dead can best share valuable space.

The issue of burial space goes far beyond the graves themselves. Tomb building is but one manifestation of the communion between those in this life and those in the afterlife. In a multiplicity of forms and expressions, an estimated ninety percent Vietnamese people practice ancestor veneration (Ngoc 2004: 951). For many, this means that the living and the dead maintain a close, reciprocal spiritual and material relationship. Perhaps at no time is the performance of rituals for ensuring such a relationship more important than at the time of death. Doan Van Thuyen, well-known and highly respected in Hue for counseling families in the proper procedure and timeline

of funerals and burials (also called a geomancer), described the importance of funeral and burial in this way: “In Vietnam, it is important to be born and it is important to die.

Maybe it is even more important to die. Just as you want to have a smooth delivery at birth, you want to have a peaceful rest at death.” Given the centrality of issues of burial and funeral in Vietnamese spiritual life, I wanted to explore the effects of various aspects of modernity on the practices and beliefs surrounding the passage from life into afterlife.

In an examination of burial in modernity, it might seem most logical to conduct research in one of Vietnam’s most quickly expanding population centers such as Ho Chi Minh City or, to a lesser extent, Hanoi. In both locations the loss of burial space is so dire that crematoriums have been built in some of the major public cemeteries. Despite these facts, I decided to focus my study on Hue, a small city in the central region of the country. Hue is home to just over 300,000 people, with a population of approximately one million in the entire province. In addition to being a more manageable site for such a short project duration, the central region in general and Hue in particular is reputedly home to some of the most elaborate funerals and sumptuous civilian tombs (Vu The Long 10 November 2009). Additionally, Hue has a much higher rate of religious participation than most of Vietnam. While only ten percent of people nationwide identify themselves as active participants in a particular religion, the figure is close to eighty percent in Hue (Thich Giac Quan 26 November 2009). The majority of people are Buddhists of the Mahayana sect, and the city has a long history of Buddhist scholarship (Thich Giac Quan 26 November 2009). There are also 68,000 practicing Catholics in the province (Le Thanh Hoang 27 November 2009). The issue of burial space may not be as severe in Hue

as it is in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, but the gigantic public cemetery on the outskirts of the city is filling quickly and the future is quite uncertain.

Through qualitative data obtained during three weeks of interviews, observations and casual interactions with spiritual leaders and interested citizens alike, this paper aims to illustrate a broad range of funeral and burial practices. With particular attention to the increase in incomes and loss of burial space, I explore the role of funeral and burial traditions and their corresponding beliefs in a rapidly changing society. Though this study is but a brief expedition into an incredibly complex and far-reaching topic, the expressed opinions and ideas of my informants begin to paint a picture of the spiritual and material relationships between the living and the dead, relationships which ties the present to the past and helps pave the road into the future.

II. Funereal Photographs – Methodology

In researching the range of practices and beliefs surrounding funerals and burials in Hue, I took a highly qualitative and opinion-based approach. Throughout the process of gathering data, I was much more interested in ethnographic stories than in figures and statistics. On my very first day in Hue, I was explaining my project to Thu, one of the volunteer students who agreed to help me with my project. She said she had a few pictures of her grandfather's funeral that summer that I might want to take a look at. Later, when we went to her home, she handed me a thick photo album. As it turned out, "a few pictures" meant a series of more than one hundred photographs documenting the entire seven-day funeral from the moments before her grandfather died through his burial and the decoration of the grave. Due to the universality of death and its centrality in Vietnamese society, I was often finding a wealth in information in places I did not expect

it throughout my research period. However, due to the unavoidable fact of the language barrier, it would have been woefully insufficient to rely on chance encounters alone.

In arranging structured and semi-structures, I relied on the invaluable social networks and connections of my student contacts. Through them, I was able to interview both interested citizens and more authoritative figures like religious leaders. With the help of community insiders, who also served as translators when necessary (nine of the seventeen formal interviews required translation help), I was able to develop a web of varied yet interconnected informants rather than simply slogging through a series of isolated interviews. Because of the introductions provided by my student contacts, it was easier to gain the trust of my interview subjects and interact fluidly and conversationally. The interviews were conducted in informal settings like coffee shops and people's homes. Additionally, I was able to talk to prominent spiritual and community leaders like monk and former professor of the Buddhist Institute of Vietnam, Thich Giac Quan, and the aforementioned geomancer, Doan Van Thuyen. Without introductions, these important men might not have felt compelled to accept an interview request from a stranger. Though I do attribute much of the success of my project to the support of working within insiders' networks, such a research plan was not without its drawbacks.

Working within existing networks may have limited the diversity of the participants in my study, thus skewing the data. The majority of my interview subjects were quite young. Only seven of the people with whom I had formal interviews were over fifty, and many participants were under thirty years of age. It would have been beneficial to speak to more people over fifty. In general, young people have a narrower

perspective on the change in burial practices over time and have had fewer firsthand experiences with deaths in the family.

Another obvious obstacle to doing research in a community where one does not know the local language is translation. Because translated conversations are necessarily mediated by the translator, it is more difficult to develop comfortable rapport and conversational flow. In the case of my project, it seems that translated interviews posed some particularly perplexing challenges. Not only are there many words relating to the afterlife and the communion of spirits that have no direct translation in English, there are also a wide range of concepts and beliefs that have no cross-cultural parallels. Disentangling the semantics of spirituality is no easy task, even for the most experienced translator. In this area, using non-professional translators had both advantages and disadvantages. The fact that, in most cases, the translator was already well acquainted with the interview subject, made it easier to discuss difficult and sometimes sensitive topics. However, the translators often lacked an extensive bilingual vocabulary for talking about funeral and burial customs. One word or short phrase from the interview subject often required several labored paragraphs of explanation. As a result, the translator served as a sort of cultural ambassador, mediating not only the words but also the concepts they implied. While this helped me to understand the nuance of the data, it also had a significant filtering effect.

In addition to formalized interviews, I was also able to observe firsthand the performance of several rituals. I attended the final day of the funeral of Nguyen Thi Thi, whose family allowed me to come and observe for the purposes of my research. I also accompanied Thu's family to the grave of her grandfather (Nguyen Ngoc Trung, the

same grandfather who died during the summer) on the occasion of giving thanks to the cemetery and making offerings of all the family members buried there. While these experiences were invaluable in contextualizing the processes I had heard described in my interviews, the funeral in particular was the most uncomfortable event in the research process. Ethnographic researchers should accept, embrace even, discomfort in the pursuit of cultural knowledge. However, I felt that my distracting presence at such a solemn affair may have also caused harmful discomfort on the part of the family members.

Through the process of researching funeral and burial in Hue, I found that the more I learned about beliefs, practices, and current trends, the more I was aware of the vastness of the subject, the dark corners that I would not have time to explore. After three weeks of gathering data, there are still countless stones left unturned and hundreds of questions left unasked and unanswered. Certain official information, like government documents and the opinions of policy makers, eluded me almost entirely. In the commemoration of death in Hue, there is a profuse variation of beliefs and practices that may vary from person to person, from household to household. Thus, this investigation is hardly a comprehensive or authoritative look at the way that people in Hue relate to death and the afterlife. The ethnographic stories in this work begin to paint a picture of something much deeper, wider, and more nuanced that can only be uncovered with further study.

III: Into the Forest – Untangling Religion, Spirituality, and Moral Philosophy

Leopold Cadiere, one of the first ethnologists to study religious life in Vietnam, wrote that religion in the country “gives the impression similar to that felt when one goes into the large forest of the Truong Son Cordillera with its big trunks, deep roots, leafy

vaults, entwined lianas, inextricable brambles...thick carpet of humus, abundant sap” (Ngoc 2004: 946). Cadiere goes on to describe an “endemic religion” of superstition and animism upon which imported religions are grafted. Certainly, the proliferation of beliefs and practices surrounding funeral and burial as well as their entangled origins aptly exemplify Cadiere’s forest metaphor. Like a forest, such beliefs are constantly growing and changing. Anthropologist Kristin Pelzer writes, “The veneration of the physical environment and of family, local, and national ancestors that is the primary spiritual practice for many Vietnamese has no scripture, no doctrine, no clergy” (Ngoc 2004: 951). Yet for the majority of the devout or even nominally Buddhist Hue residents I spoke to, “endemic” practices of ancestor worship were inextricably tied to their Buddhist faith. Truc, a devout Buddhist and passionate venerator of ancestors, said, “As Buddhists, we believe in the continuity of life in a new place. We believe that when a relative dies, a new life opens. That is why we put things on the grave, like rice seeds so that our relative can grow rice in the afterlife.” The Buddhist belief in afterlife, combined with older ideas about the ancestors and their role in the fortune of their living family, become a unified lesson in dutifulness to the family. Both monks I spoke to, Thich Giac Quan and Thich Quang Tu, stressed that a caring heart was above all the most important part of honoring the dead. Thich Giac Quan was particularly critical of the burning of votive papers, a practice that originated in China two millennia ago, as an over-emphasis on the material satisfaction of the deceased. He described this practice as “outside Buddhism”. Whether inside or outside Buddhism, whether endemic or imported, the host of ideas about luck, fortune, and the relationship between ancestors and their descendents, creates what Huu Ngoc calls a “sort of native religion for about ninety percent of Vietnamese, or

that non-Catholic section which is commonly referred to as '*luong dan*' (good people)" (2004: 951). Some of my interview subjects described the communion of spirits associated beliefs as part of a "national culture" or "traditional culture". It must be noted that, while Catholics do not officially practice any form of ancestor veneration, Fr. Joachim Le Thanh Hoang did describe some influences of "beautiful traditional customs" in Vietnamese Catholicism in Hue, such as the burning of incense at death day anniversaries.

Much has changed since Cadiere compared Vietnamese spiritual life to a thick forest in 1944. Religion, like everything else, is not static and can only be properly analyzed in the context of the larger society. In "Modernity and Re-enchantment in Post-revolutionary Vietnam", Philip Taylor examines the role of various spiritual practices in modern Vietnam.

Vietnam's burgeoning religious sphere challenges a number of predictions that have been made about the relevance of religion in the modern world. The religious efflorescence – occurring as it does in the context of the country's two decade-old experiment with market economics and re-integration within the global capitalist system – is at odds with predictions that religion will lose vitality with the ascendancy of modern forms of capitalist rationality. The immense diversity in religious idioms throughout the country belies the fear that such locally distinct identities will be swept away by a global monoculture. (Taylor 2007: 2)

Taylor goes on to argue that the widespread secularization of Western Europe should be viewed as the exception rather than the rule of economic development and societal spiritual movements. Indeed, Vietnam's proliferation of religious forms demonstrates that the growth of diversification of a nation's economy does not necessarily correspond to a casting off of old ways. However, in "Returning Home: Ancestor Veneration and the Nationalism of *Đổi Mới* Vietnam", Kate Jellema points out that practices that may appear

“traditional” or “archaic” take on vastly different meanings in the context of the society changing around them. In studying funeral and burial today, is important to look beyond the form of rituals and customs and investigate the function of such customs for people living in a rapidly changing world. The N-T Foundation (Study Centre on Child Psychology) conducted a survey to study ancestor worship in urban environments, asking whether it could help to preserve national identity and morality at the family and the level.

Through a number of rites, each individual is tied not only to the living members of a family line but also its ancestors...The tie linking members of the same lineage is essentially symbolic, contributing to the education and mental balance of children and adults. A child acquainted to the rites of ancestor worship early on receives a different socio-cultural formation. A woman widowed late in life might feel less lonely if during the first hundred days after her husband’s burial she puts a tray of food at lunch and dinner time, on the altar, lighting a few joss sticks. The presence of an ancestor’s altar in each house and the periodic acts of worship cause the spirits of the dead to remain present in the lives of the living and urge people to preserve the honor of the family. (Ngoc 2004: 956)

Indeed, the rites of “traditional culture” and the “endemic religion” have a vital role to play in a rapidly changing society.

As death is one of the few constants in life, it offers the ultimate moral vantage point for probing the sins and paradoxes of a given era. In the monumental 1987 documentary film *Chuyện Tử Tế* (How to Behave), the filmmakers lament the sad loss of societal cohesion in an era so ripe with empty nationalistic slogans. The film, which was banned for six months prior to its release, ends with a montage of scenes from a funeral procession and burial. The final meditation of the film urges viewers to take a careful look at the deeds of a life from the vantage point of one nearing the moment of death.

In the final count, be it a short or long life, kind or unkind, everyone receives from the Creator an equal right, that of returning to the earth. It has been said that death is the end. But much can happen after death or on the path to eternal peace.

Sometimes at funerals one hears regret, “What a pity! That person was so kind.” But sometimes you hear sarcasm. “Good riddance to that old opportunist!” It is indisputable that gravediggers know the most about death...It’s a hard job, in either sun or rain. It’s often seen as the bottom of the social scale but no one can avoid needing them. Neither you, nor me nor anyone else. So why do we give them so little consideration? Gravediggers entrust to the earth both great dignitaries and ordinary folk, people of great learning and illiterates. However, everyone returns to the earth in his own way, following his own path, and carrying his own bag of good and bad deeds. And let us add that all men of good heart wish for their fellow creatures the right to a decent and quiet burial for the consolation of those who remain behind. But what’s more important and gives more consolation is the kindness, the love, and the good deeds which are bequeathed by the dead to the living? Let us live in such a manner that when we die, we won’t have to carry with us a sadness bigger than our own grave.

Seen by millions, *Chuyện Tử Tế* was a powerful work in beginning a moral reckoning in Vietnam (Vu The Long 10 November 2009). The end of the film alludes, in moral rather than explicitly spiritual terms, of the unseen contract between the living and the dead.

While the ultimate message of *Chuyện Tử Tế* is to do good for the sake of humanity alone, the way the narrator speaks of good deeds *bequeathed* by the dead implies that the deceased leaves behind a sort of moral footprint, a spirit of goodness or badness that reaches beyond the grave. In examining the particularities of practice and meaning surrounding death and the afterlife, the moral values of a people can begin to become clear.

IV. Departure from This Life – Exploring the Process of Funeral and Burial

Doan Van Thuyen identified the three most important factors in sending a deceased person to a peaceful rest. “First, you must pay attention to when you put the body into the coffin. Then, there is the direction the coffin faces. Finally, there is the time to put the coffin in the ground.” He stressed the importance of these three factors, “For the sake of the children, the children *must* find the most suitable conditions.” In addition to these three considerations, most Hue families perform dozens symbolic rites

and rituals over the course of a funeral and burial in order to ensure the best transition into the afterlife possible. Almost without exception, the participants in my study spoke of the importance of such rituals for the future of both the dead *and* the living. In short, if the deceased finds happiness and peace in the afterlife, there will be good fortune for the whole living family. However, the ways to achieve happiness and good fortune are both complex and controversial. In describing the general process of the funeral, I draw heavily from my observations at the funeral of Nguyen Thi Thi, as well as the photo albums for the funerals of Nguyen Ngoc Trung and Le Van Khach (the father-in-law of Truc). All three of the deceased died within the last six months, were over eighty years of age at the time of their death, and came from relatively affluent Buddhist families. Once again, these three funerals do incorporate the entire range of funeral practices in Hue.

Doan Van Thuyen state that the length of the funeral was not important, so long as the date (as well as the hour) of death corresponded properly to the time of placing the body in the coffin and the time of burial. To determine the proper days and times to perform these actions, most families consult a geomancer or a monk. As Doan Van Thuyen explained it, this role is one of scholarship rather than supernatural talent. His love of learning the intricacies of the lunar calendar and the complex and ancient formulas on luck and good fortune inspired him to become a geomancer, and when I asked about the exact process for determining the best day to bury someone in relation to their death date, he laughed and said it would take weeks to explain. In the past, the day and time of death were usually beyond prediction or control. However, the wonders of modern medicine have given the dying and their families some agency in deciding the

best time to die. This is especially true of elderly people reaching the end of their battle with a long illness. Both Nguyen Ngoc Trung and Le Van Khach were being kept alive by artificial respiration at the very end of their lives. When it became clear that death was imminent, their families consulted monks in order to find the most appropriate date and time for death. In accordance with the monks' advice, the families had Nguyen Ngoc Trung and Le Van Khach taken off their respirators and kept alive long enough to be taken home (for dying in the home is preferable), where they could pass away peacefully at the correct date and time, surrounded by their family.

In Hue, funerals take place in the home and are typically multiple day affairs requiring huge monetary expenditures and the coordination of many elements. Nguyen Thi Thi's funeral lasted for five days and cost, in total, about five thousand U.S. dollars. Even poor families often spend as much as one thousand dollars, a huge sum of money (Hanh 25 November 2009). Banners, flowers, copious amounts of food, mourning clothes, etcetera all must be procured. If the family is Buddhist, monks must be invited to pray at the funeral as well. Family members living abroad or in other parts of the country must travel home. This is especially important for the direct descendants of the deceased. Today, most families choose to have the funeral managed by a funeral service company. According to the family's wishes, the company coordinates all the necessary elements of the funeral. In Truc's opinion, the growing popularity of funeral service companies was a great improvement to the process of organizing the funeral. "Now that the family does not have to do all the work, there is more time to focus and pray. In the past, everyone was frantic making banners and cooking food. Now there is time to reflect."

One of the first major events of the funeral is the placement of the body within the wooden casket. This usually takes place within six hours of death. The casket must be sealed tightly to prevent smells from escaping, particularly if the funeral is long and takes place during the hot summer. After the head monk administers prayers and the body is placed in the casket, the family dons the white mourning clothes. Each person's burial costume differs slightly according to gender, marital status, and familial relationship to the dead. The length of the tunic and the stitching on the trousers and the arms of the tunic, as well as the kind of headpiece all vary. The first son (oldest son of the deceased) wears a special headband made from twine. Most of the family wears white headbands, except for married women, who wear peaked white hoods. Throughout the funeral, while the coffin is set up in the front room of the house, the family prays. Friends, neighbors and acquaintances bearing offerings of fruit and incense also come to visit the family and pray with them during this period. Buddhist monks often administer the funereal prayers and chants.

According to Truc, the last day of the funeral, when the body is removed from the home and taken to the gravesite to be buried, is the most emotional. "We feel it very strongly, because this is the last time they will be in our home," she said. I attended the final day of Nguyen Thi Thi's funeral, which began at five-thirty in the morning. According to the proper protocol, the funeral procession should leave the home before the sun rises so as not to attract bad spirits (Doan Van Thuyen 26 November 2009). Before the body is removed, the family processes around the casket in a circle. Carrying the incense urn, the first son leads the procession. He is followed by the second son (or oldest daughter, if there is only one son), who carries the framed photograph of the

deceased. These two objects are very important, as they will represent the dead person on the family ancestor shrine after the funeral is over. After the family has circled the casket, the pallbearers lift it from the home and take it to the vehicle that will transport it to the gravesite. At Nguyen Thi Thi's funeral, as well the other two funerals I saw pictures of, there were more than twenty-five hired pallbearers. When I asked Truc why so many people were hired to do the task, she described a belief wherein a deceased person who does not want to leave the home will "hold on" to the house and make the coffin very heavy and difficult to move.

I am not so sure I believe in it, but some people say it happened at my father-in-law's funeral. They were taking him out, and I could hear some people yelling, "Please let go!" They were asking him to leave because the coffin had become so heavy. They were saying it was okay to go.

As the casket is moved out of the home and into the street, the pall bearers and family members throw votive money, papers, and small candies. Finally, the casket is placed in the vehicle, a brightly-decorated trailer, and the journey to the gravesite begins. At Nguyen Thi Thi's funeral, the procession involved nearly forty vehicles, including more than twenty cyclos bearing funereal wreaths. Cars and mini-buses transported the monks, musicians, family members, and pallbearers. Many more family members and well-wishers followed on motorbikes.

Nguyen Thi Thi was buried in the large public cemetery to the North of the city. When the funeral procession reached the gravesite, more prayers and chanting accompanied the lowering of the casket into the earth. The family threw fistfuls of soil and grains of rice on the casket. Near the grave, some of the pallbearers started a fire to burn blankets and incense. The blankets are offered to the dead to keep them warm in their first few days in the afterlife. After the casket is completely buried, the family laid

the funereal wreaths on the grave and made offerings of votive papers and glutinous rice. Finally, after five days of rites and mourning, Nguyen Thi Thi was left in her new home, the home she would live in forever.

It is customary that, three days after the funeral, the family returns to the grave for the “opening of the gates”, a rite wherein the dead is informed that they are in fact dead and can thus go to the afterlife. Additionally, there are celebrations to mark the forty-ninth and one hundred-first day anniversaries of the death. After that, the family typically visits the forever home on annual death day anniversaries and on the occasion of Tet, the lunar New Year. Some people like to visit the grave more often and attempt to make the trip out to the forever home whenever there is time. For example, Truc described the great peace she felt during weekly visits to the graves of her grandparents.

For many of the people I spoke to, carrying out the rites and the funeral was vitally important not only for helping the deceased transition smoothly into the afterlife, but also for the future good fortune of the family. Doan Van Thuyen was particularly adamant that following the proper funereal procedure gave families great peace of mind; the knowledge of having done everything possible for the dead person lessened the sting of loss. When I asked Thich Giac Quan what the spiritual role of the monks at the funeral was, he told me that while the monks helped administer prayers and give the family peace of mind, they can do very little to actually ensure a smooth passage into the afterlife.

The Buddhists will help pray and become a link to help soul to go to beautiful afterlife, but that practice is just one-sixth of the things that must be done. The dead will receive what they did when they're still alive. Whether the dead people go to the paradise or the hell depends on the way of living, honesty and humanity.

It is beyond the reach of this paper, or any other ethnographic work for that matter, to determine whether funeral rites indeed aid in sending a loved one safely to the afterlife. However, it appears from my exploration that the procedures of the funeral are among the most critical in the vast body of ancestor worship practices that tie families together and help people to hold to their roots amidst the whirlwind changes of modernization. Due to higher household incomes, more money is spent on funerals now than in the past (Hanh 25 November 2009). The meticulous digital documentation on funerals (photographs and videos) for later review by family members living overseas who cannot return home for the funeral signifies that there are modern adaptations to an essentially place-based ritual. The forever home especially, one of the focal points of place-based ancestor worship, stands to change and adapt a great deal in reaction to modernization and lack of burial space.

V. The Forever Home – Grave Relocation and Burial Versus Cremation

Tu, a university student I interviewed, described the importance of the grave of a deceased family member like this: “This life is temporary but the next life is permanent. The grave is the home you live in forever.” However, not all of the homes of the dead will stay in the same location for all eternity. To accommodate new construction projects and future urban growth, the Hue People’s Committee has mandated that graves within the city limits must be moved to the outskirts of Hue by 2015 (Linh 18 November 2009). The government offers compensation for the families who must move the graves, as well as a small burial plot in the huge public cemetery to the North of the city. Reburial is hardly a new concept in Vietnam. In *Wandering Through Vietnamese Culture*, Huu Ngoc describes a prevalent practice in Northern Vietnam, wherein “the dead are buried

first in a wooden coffin. The tomb is in earth and covered with grass. Three or four years later, when the decomposition is complete, the bones will be exhumed and transferred to a definitive place” (2004: 953). However, Doan Van Thuyen told me that reburial was not a popular practice in Hue. According to him, there are only two situations in which a family would want to relocate a grave. Firstly, if the family was too poor to build a proper grave at the time of the death, they would want procure enough money to rebury the body in a more appropriate forever home after three years. Secondly, a family that had had extraordinarily bad luck since the death of a family member would want to rebury them at a more suitable site. Now there is a third scenario: government-mandated tomb relocation.

Linh, a woman who works for the company that administers government-mandated grave relocation in Hue, said that many families were not only willing but also happy to relocate the tombs of their ancestors. She told me the story of one incident that occurred when she and some of her colleagues went to take the measurements of the last grave remaining on a particular site. It was a warm afternoon, and Linh had to walk up a steep hill to locate the grave, which was obstructed by vegetation and not easy to find. Linh sat down for a few minutes to catch her breath. When she had been sitting for only a moment, a man appeared. He was quite astonished to see her sitting there, and asked her why she was sitting on his brother’s grave. As it turned out, the grave Linh was looking for belonged to the man’s brother. The man had come that very day to see about moving the grave, for his brother had come to him in a dream and asked him to relocate the grave. The dead brother had said he was lonely now that all the other spirits had left the site. The brother, as well as Linh’s colleagues, interpreted the fact that Linh had sat

down on the grave by chance as evidence that the dead brother wanted very badly to be relocated. Half jokingly, Linh added that he must have been aware of the law and was eager to abide by it, even in death. Naturally, the relocation plan is not universally well received. As Truc pointed out, “If a grave was well-placed so the family enjoys good fortune, it would be disastrous to move the grave.” Cuong, a student at Hue University, likened the relocation of a tomb to forcefully driving someone out of their home. Despite these perspectives, I discovered little evidence of resistance to the relocation plan. It seems inevitable that grave relocation alone will not be sufficient to alleviate the issue of lack of burial space, and it is likely that more controversial solutions lie ahead. The only thing more impressive than the vastness of the public cemetery is the extent to which it has already been filled. Indeed, the price of burial plots in public and private cemeteries alike has skyrocketed as people rush to buy up available land for future tombs (Linh 18 November 2009). Although there is talk of building a crematorium in Hue, there are not yet any well-developed official plans to do so. While I did find some diversity in opinions on cremation, the majority of people I spoke to were quite opposed to such a serious deviation from traditional Hue burials.

On cremation, Truc said, “Personally, I could not accept the fact that my relative would be burned. Then all we have is some trash, just a bit of ash. When we go to the tomb, we know that the person is there. In our mind, the whole body is there.” I often heard burial versus cremation described in the language of “keeping” and “throwing away”. Nho, an elderly woman from the village of Ha Oc just outside Hue asked me why, in my country, we did not always keep the body. She wondered if we burned and threw away our dead family members because we simply did not care or because we did

not have any place to bury them. Tu said, “It is true that in Ho Chi Minh City they do not always keep the body. Now some people must burn instead.” For Tu as well as Truc, the loss of certain elements of “traditional culture” in Ho Chi Minh City was something to be avoided. Besides the growing prevalence of cremation, they also spoke about how packed work schedules and the overwhelming urge to achieve financial success had made the city’s residents less likely to spend time cultivating a good relationship with their ancestors. For Tu and Truc, the perceived decline in spiritual life in the Vietnam’s largest urban center served as a cautionary tale for Hue and the rest of the country. Truc also said she had hope that local government in Hue would plan and enforce cemetery laws that would help conserve space and dedicate new land for future burials.

Not everyone was quite so opposed to the idea of cremation. Thich Giac Quan stated that cremation not only adhered to practices in Buddhism’s birthplace of India, but was also better for society. “For the benefit of society, a bit of skeleton is nothing,” he said, adding that the living should take priority over the dead in terms occupying valuable space. Interestingly, Doan Van Thuyen also advocated cremation as the only practical solution to what he saw as the impending cemetery crisis. He also said that cremating the body instead of burying it did not necessarily detract from the laws of geomancy that guide the funeral and help to give a family good fortune. One young man, Huy, believed that cremation could actually enhance the practice of ancestor worship. “I think it is better that way. If they are burned, then I can always keep my relative close to me. I can worship them in my home.” Huy’s mother, Lam, agreed, saying that she would prefer to be able to stay in her home after her death. Though there is a broad range of opinions, it seems that the issue of burial versus cremation is quite close to people’s hearts. During

the current tomb relocation and in the implementation of whatever policy solutions lie in the future, government officials and community leaders need to proceed with the utmost sensitivity. To the greatest extent possible, the function of burial in the spiritual and emotional lives of the family must be maintained, even as the form of the practice succumbs to the constraints of modernity.

VI. Ghost Stories – Dutifulness, Luck, and Prosperity

Duong Van Mai Elliot begins the lengthy telling of her storied family history, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family*, with these words: “My family owes its good fortune to a mysterious man. What he did one night changed my ancestors’ destiny, leading them from poverty to social prominence” (1999: 3). She goes on to tell the story of Duc Thang, her ancestor of six generations before, and how the relocation of his grave in accordance with the predictions of a benevolent stranger, a geomancer, brought her family two centuries of good fortune in scholarly pursuits. The far-reaching effect of that single action serves to illustrate one of the key features of the relationship between the living and the dead as I observed it in Hue. In conversations about ancestor veneration, I was constantly hearing words like “dutiful”, “honor”, “luck”, and “fortune”. The ethnographic anecdotes I collected display a pattern. In the reciprocal relationship between the living and the dead, the living honor the dead and display their dutifulness through prayers and material offerings, and in return the dead watch over the good fortune of the family. When I asked Linh why it was important that people spend money, huge sums of money, on an elaborate funeral and a large tomb, she was adamant that these expenditures were necessary for the health of the family as well as their material well-being. Satisfied ancestors helped to bring good luck in business.

One couple, Nga and Hung, said, “We will have more luck in the future. The dead will support us in studying, in working, in health, in money.” However, the relationship is not as simple as dutifulness exchanged for fortune. When I suggested to Linh that ancestor expenditures were something like an investment, wherein the family spent money on a nice grave in order to receive high returns and business success in the future, she was very adamant that this was the wrong way to look at it. According to her, the main reason to spend money and time on the ancestors was always to show dutifulness, gratefulness, and respect. Any good fortune that befell the family as a result was purely a positive side effect, not the impetus for the expenditure in the first place. Essentially, it is the living who have a responsibility to the dead. The revered dead are not “obligated” to return the favors. When we went to visit her grandfather’s tomb, Thu showed me a Chinese character on the front of the tomb whose meaning she described as, “Do good and expect nothing in return”. This sentiment is not only an important idiom of how to be a moral person, but also a representation of the attitude families should have when they honor their ancestors.

On the relationship between the living and their ancestors, Huu Ngoc writes simply, “As for the dead, they are believed to live on. They can be benevolent or malevolent. In the latter case they have to be appeased” (2004: 951). In the complex equation of dutifulness, luck, and prosperity, there are many stories of benevolent and malevolent dead, their communication with the living, and what can be done to appease the bad and encourage the good. I heard many ghost stories of extremely malevolent spirits of the dead who attempted to entice living family members into the afterlife and bring about a cycle of bad luck and untimely deaths. Thu told me a famous story of her

friend Phuong, who suffered greatly after the violent death of her father. At the time of Phuong's father's death, Phuong's family was quite poor and the family could not procure enough money for a proper funeral. In this case, the proper funeral and burial procedures were incredibly important, for her father had died so young and in such a senseless manner that it was believed he would not go easily to a restful afterlife. Indeed, shortly after her father's funeral, Phuong began to experience powerful hallucinations in which her father appeared and asked her to come to the afterlife, where everything was fun and easy. Phuong was committed to a mental hospital, where she tried to commit suicide several times. Finally, she succeeded in drowning herself. Alongside the tragic story of Phuong, there are many stories of the benevolent dead helping their families to have the best fortune possible. Thu told me the story of her aunt, recently widowed, who was building a new home. A few days before the construction was to begin, the aunt's dead husband visited her in a dream and told her not to build the house with three stories as was planned, but to build only one story instead. He said it would be too difficult for him to visit the family in a three-floor home, where the ancestor shrine is kept on the third floor according to the custom. Thu's aunt heeded his advice, and built a one-story home. In the years since the construction of the home was completed, the family has enjoyed extraordinarily good fortune. Both daughters have received scholarships to study abroad, and the oldest daughter is now married and had a promising career and two young children in California.

In addition to more considerable measures of good fortune, I heard a number of stories about the peace of mind people felt when they received small indications that their deceased family members were enjoying a good afterlife. On the day we visited Nguyen

Ngoc Trung's grave, Thu told me she was quite happy because, "I think my grandfather is blessed. Every time we come to the cemetery, the weather is nice. Just a few days ago it rained, but now the weather is good. On the day they buried my grandfather, a storm was coming, but it did not start raining until they had finished." She added, "The monk told us that my grandfather still practices Buddhism in the afterlife." Similarly, Lam told me a story about her mother, who appeared to Lam in a dream shortly after her death. In the dream, the dead mother had her head shaved like a nun in pagoda. Lam interpreted the dream as evidence that her mother was practicing Buddhism in the afterlife and had gone to be with the Buddha forever, which was very comforting to Lam.

Regardless of how exactly people conceive of and enact the relationship between themselves and their ancestors, it seems that there is almost always some material component to the relationship. Both Kate Jellema and Huu Ngoc describe a recent re-invigoration in the practice of burning votive paper. Today people are spending more money on the dead than ever before. In Hue and its outlying areas there are some of the most extreme displays of ancestor worship and materialism.

VII. City of the Dead – Conspicuous Consumption for the Dead

Nearing the end of his life, Dr. Nguyen Khac Vien, wrote in a letter the way in which he wished his family to go about honoring his death. Invoking the sentiments of Doan Van Thuyen, he likens the process of death to the process of birth.

At my birth, a midwife (*ho sinh*, one who assists a birth) helped usher me into this world. At the time of my departure from it, I wish that some *ho tu* (people who assist in death) will go part of the way with me. The money and effort for an old man having reached the end of his journey are better reserved for poor and ill children. (Ngoc 2004: 940)

Nguyen Khac Vien's ideas that ancestor expenditures in his honor should be diverted to those in need are perhaps not so popular for many. In An Bang village outside Hue, the "City of the Dead" is home to some of the most sumptuous civilian mausoleums in Vietnam. When I went to go see the city of the dead, I was astounded by the sheer size and grandeur of the tombs as well as their great proliferation. For as far as the eye could see, the tall spires of these mansions for the dead sprawled out into the distance. I was told by residents of An Bang and neighboring villages that some of the most expensive tombs cost upwards of \$200,000 (US) to construct. The money for the tombs comes primarily from Vietnamese Overseas. In recent years, tomb-building in An Bang has become something of a competition. Nho, an old woman from neighboring Ha Oc village, said that some of the tombs had been destroyed and rebuilt three times. Seeing that their family's tomb was no longer the largest in the area, An Bang residents would ask their relatives overseas for more money in order to destroy the tomb and build an even bigger one in its place.

Many people in I spoke to in Hue were quite critical of the City of the Dead. Nga and Hung lamented that some of the money spent on tombs was not spent on building a larger, more suitable primary school for the village instead. They joked that if the children simply went to class in the tombs rather than the school building, there would be enough space for everyone. Truc said simply, "It demonstrates a lack of understanding. More money doesn't mean more respect." Nho defended the City of the Dead by describing the life histories of the people who now sent money for the tombs, saying, "After re-unification, people here were very poor and hungry. They believed they would die if they stayed. People left by the sea. It was very dangerous. For every ten people

who left, only five made it.” The Vietnamese Overseas who had left as “boat people” and were now quite successful were trying to provide for their ancestors in proportion to their gratitude for surviving and prospering. Nho also pointed out that the money for tombs came alongside large donations of monetary support for the poor people who still lived in An Bang and the neighboring villages. Nguyen, a university student from An Bang, argued that the aid money was only a pittance compared to the vast sums spent on the tombs. She did acknowledge that the tomb construction boom had provided some employment for local residents. However, the materials for the tombs as well as the most of the most highly-paid architects came from outside the village. Ultimately, she did not think that the tombs were as much about gratitude as about conspicuous consumption. “In my opinion, the other reason they build is to show they have a rich life. I have a wish that a little of that money was used to help poor children go to school,” she said.

The extreme case of the City of the Dead in An Bang village serves to illustrate that the popularity of extravagant burials is anything but declining, despite the fact that Vietnamese communities are spreading overseas. If anything, it seems that distance may have intensified the place-based rituals of ancestor veneration. Many of my interview subjects spoke of the deep longing their overseas family members felt for the homes of their ancestors. Tomb building can help to strengthen familial and national ties in time when families are growing increasingly diffuse. The controversial City of the Dead also exemplifies some of the new meanings being ascribed to ancestor veneration. As Vietnam re-integrates into the global capitalist system and consumer culture begins to take hold, it appears that constructing the forever home has become an opportunity to show off newfound wealth and prosperity for some families.

VIII. Adaptation, Change, and Continuity – Concluding Remarks

In my three weeks of exploring funeral and burial culture in Hue, I was continually impressed by the fervent passion with which people spoke about the importance of the passage into the afterlife and the depth of their relationship with deceased family members. With so many different opinions, there is no one unified direction or ideal plan for the future. This study is limited by translation issues, short duration, and somewhat limited diversity in interview subjects. However, it does appear that the multiplicity of practices and beliefs surrounding ancestors and the afterlife are holding strong in a changing world, whether in spite of or with the aid of modernization and growth. The process of the funeral, as well as the physical site of the tomb and the rituals that take place there after the death, can help tie families together and bring some relief at the passing of a loved one. Hue should serve as evidence that spirituality is in no way at odds with modernity, and policy makers must consider the importance of traditional beliefs and their modern meanings as they attempt to solve the impending crisis of space.

Doan Van Thuyen was not overly optimistic about the future of funeral and burial in Hue. “People will no longer want to spend the time or money to lay the dead to rest,” he said. For now, though, the practice of elaborate funerals and burials seems to play an essential role in understanding and coping with death. The future is as uncertain as ever, but there is hope that rituals and places of the dead in Hue will continue to adapt and change in accordance with people’s needs in the future.

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