

**Lives intimately connected: the living and the
dead in contemporary Central Việt Nam**

Marina Marouda

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed by myself and is the product of my own work.

Signed:

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Abstract

The thesis is a study of the importance of the dead in the making of kinship and the state in contemporary Vietnam. It focuses on the ritual practices surrounding death and the commemoration of the dead as enacted in Hue, the capital of imperial and colonial Viet Nam. The practices in question are undertaken by a multiplicity of actors, including families, lineages, descendants of the royal family and post-socialist state officials. The thesis aims at highlighting the centrality of the process of becoming an ancestor in the creation of kinship, and the problematisation of the often rigidly drawn distinction between kinship and state practices.

In post-socialist Viet Nam, the landscape of the dead is an overgrown one marked by a plethora of departed whose posthumous fate preoccupies the everyday lives of villagers, royals, and state agents. This plethora includes celebrated war heroes, benevolent dead kin, malevolent ghosts, and glorious kings of the past. The study aims to show how different categories of the dead are made and remade by ritual actions and/or neglect of the living. It highlights the instability, uncertainty, and ambiguity that characterize posthumous existence as much as the conditions of the living. The changing historical trajectories of the city of Hue and its inhabitants from imperial capital to post-socialist tourist market place via the horrors of the battlefield are underscored by the fact that categories of the dead exhibit fluid boundaries and transformable attributes in equal measure.

On a theoretical level, the study proposes a view of death as central to the formation of kinship. While descent theories emphasized birth, procreation and associated rights to inheritance, and alliance approaches placed due importance on marriage and exchange, the present study looks at kinship from the perspective of the relations between the living and the dead. Such multivalent, complex, and historically changing relations are essential in the articulation of a shared sense of intimacy punctuated as much by duties of commemoration as by exchanges of valuables and blessings that intertwine the everyday with the cosmological.

The study charts the creation of intimacy between the living and the dead on an increasing scale that expands outwards from family rituals centered on domestic altars to state mausoleums dedicated to national 'uncle' (Hồ Chí Minh) via lineage and village temples, local and provincial museums, and royal citadels and tombs. By drawing together all these different sites, the thesis departs in significant measure from recent studies of Vietnamese society and culture in which the distinction between kinship and the state have been overly stretched to make space for the concepts of hegemony and resistance. While noting tensions and disarticulations between kinship and state practices, the study highlights the historical and cultural embeddedness of state commemoration projects as well as the significant shifts in emphasis in family rituals that socialist and post-socialist modernity have brought about.

**To Thi, Bi and Bo,
my Vietnamese siblings**

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Introduction

Aims and intentions

The thesis is an ethnographic study of the ‘lives’ of the dead and their manifold relations with the living as enacted in contemporary central Việt Nam. It is based on fieldwork conducted in Huế, the former imperial capital. In Huế and generally in Việt Nam, the dead (newly and long departed) eat, drink and consume copious offerings proffered by the living, exist side by side with their surviving kin, and take a reciprocal interest in the latter’s welfare. This empirical manifestation of the presence and life of the dead becomes apparent in a series of ritual practices as well as in everyday contexts, whereby the living intimately engage with related and unrelated dead. Such practices are undertaken by a multiplicity of actors, including families, lineages, descendants of the royal family and state officials and in a series of contexts ranging from houses to ancestral halls, offices, business establishments and sidewalks. The thesis draws attention to the significance of these interactions in the creation of intimacy between the living and the dead and thus in the formation of kinship relations. Kinship is examined here as produced through the interactions between the living and the dead and thus, the formation of kinship is located in the articulation of the everyday with the cosmological.

Ancestor commemoration practices lie at the core not only of enactments of kinship at the local level but also are a central concern for the establishment and perpetuation of the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam. This is markedly manifested in state support for the cult of Hồ Chí Minh and his promotion as both an extraordinary ancestor and the founder of modern and independent Việt Nam. In the late socialist context, local authorities in Huế have become increasingly preoccupied with the development of a memorial complex dedicated to ‘uncle HỒ’, who lived and studied in the province during the early years of his life. The thesis aims to highlight the centrality of the process of becoming an ancestor in the creation of kinship, and to problematise the often rigidly drawn distinction between kinship and state practices.

Further, I ponder here over the relations of the local and the national through concentrating on the role of the dead.

The main questions of this study were formulated in the course of fieldwork. Fieldwork was conducted mainly in Huế, central Việt Nam from October 2004 to April 2006. What appeared to be most striking in the field was not only the overwhelming and vigorous presence of the dead but the multiplicity and diversity of such otherworldly entities. Huế in particular is a place frequented by a proliferation of dead who include celebrated revolutionary heroes, extraordinary ancestors such as glorious kings of the past and distinguished mandarins of the Huế court, as well as a plethora of ordinary dead of near or distant generations enshrined on lineage and domestic altars. The diversity of enshrined spirits, is enhanced by myriads of anonymous ghostly entities or, in local terms, 'lost souls' (*cô hồn*) who dying an unsettling and discomfiting death, amidst fighting and conflict, have been deprived of traceable identities and memorable connections to the living. The presence of such disadvantaged spirits is manifest all around Huế in purposely crafted shrines set up in the open air, in house and temple yards, in unbounded sidewalks as well as atop trees. Living and breathing among this multitude of dead gave rise to certain research questions. Why are the dead so pertinent and central in the lives of the living? How does one become a vigorous and efficacious spirit? What are the existential circumstances and attributes of such spirits? Which are the particular and historical circumstances through which such spirits come to be propitiated as intimate kin, elevated as illustrious forebears or else abandoned and neglected? These are some of the key questions that guided fieldwork and that the thesis aims to address.

The multitude of other worldly entities points to their multivalent relations with this-worldly beings. Posterity and the providence of the dead is contingent on intimate connections and interrelations with living kin or the lack of such. The ones who befall an 'unfortunate' or 'unfulfilling' death in circumstances unknown to their kin or simply without descendants are in peril of becoming unsettled 'lost souls', disconnected from kin and familiar milieux. Yet what ultimately defines 'lost souls' and their misfortune is not the *ad hoc* circumstances of death, as commonly suggested. A set of studies suggest that Việt Nam's 'wandering souls' are the product of a violent

untimely or unpropitious death (see for example Kwon 2006, 2008). But in local terms what defines ‘lost souls’ is not merely the ill-fated circumstances of one’s death but rather the acute effects of such a death: the disengagement and lack of connections with kin and intimates. Dying in unfamiliar milieux, in unknown circumstances, severs the deceased’s identity and thus their traceable connections with living kin. Without kin to enable their safe passage and sustain their well-being in posterity, ‘lost souls’ are starved of material and emotional support, condemned to wander aimlessly in quest of the means to livelihood, relief and deliverance. Moreover, not all unfortunate deaths generate ill-fated souls. A road accident or the drowning of an unborn fetus, do not always signify the emergence of a ghostly entity but rather the arduous emergence of a distressed ancestral soul. Such events in turn, prompt the concerted efforts of a wide range of kin, intimate and distant, paternal and maternal, living and departed, all endeavoring to avert the suffering of the newly deceased and the danger of the latter becoming a detached soul. If exceptional rituals for the deliverance of distressed souls are not carried out by surviving kin then forebears may join the hordes of anguished ‘lost souls’. Further, forebears can slip into the depths of neglect and turn into ghostly entities as unfilial descendants can become uncaring or alienated towards dead kin or simply fail to produce a next generation of descendants. Such twists and turns in the providence of dead kin point to the uncertainty that characterizes posthumous existence, as well to the transformable potential of the dead; their existence impartibly linked with that of their living counterparts.

Most importantly, the multitude of ancestral spirits and their multivalent relations with living kin point to an emergent and developing ancestorhood. Efficacious and active as they are ancestral spirits change, develop and evolve through time and with the passage of generations. This evolving posterity is impartibly linked to the procreation, proliferation and life cycle of the living. The birth or marriage of offspring can enhance or alter the existence and status of forerunners, whereby parents (*cha mē*) can emerge as grandparents (*óng bà*) and further transform into great grandparents (*ký*), and primordial ancestors of descent groupings propped up in the order of ancestral seniority. As Astuti (2000:101) suggests, ‘if we are to understand how people come to be related to one another, we cannot restrict our analysis to any

one moment in time'. In her study of the Vezo of Madagascar, Astuti points to an 'intimate connection between the changing nature of the person and the particular perspective on human relatedness'. She shows that among the Vezo kinship reckonings change during life and most importantly at the point of death whereby one shifts from a bilateral perspective into a unilateral one. Her study demonstrates that cognatic kindreds and unilineal descent groups are not 'fixed in time and place' but are rather part of a 'transformative process' (2000:91). In Việt Nam this transformation is not effected by means of an eventual 'act of closure', i.e., death and the ensuing definitive transformation into an 'ancestor-like' figure (ibid.). Rather the dead grow from intimate and genealogically proximate kin into originators of descent groupings and apical lineage figures in the course of generations. In Huế, domestic altars do not enshrine indistinct categories of ancestors (*tổ tiên*), but rather intimate kin such as fathers (*cha*), mothers (*mẹ*), grandfathers (*ông*), grandmothers (*bà*) as well as spouses, daughters-in-law, parents-in-law and collaterals such as unmarried aunts, who are all *người thân* or 'near and dear'. The relational cycles of forebears and progeny involve not only lineal kin and agnates and the transformative process, whereby bilateral relations are transposed into unilateral connections, is neither instantaneous nor unequivocal.

Furthermore, bilateral connections with kin persist beyond death. Lower order altars enshrine ancestral couples rather than male forbears and thus often entail the participation of 'both sides' of kin, the maternal and the paternal. Conversely, it is in higher order altars and halls that male forebears are enshrined as originators of a descent grouping or lineage. In rituals locals often engage with dead kin with whom they are lineally or nonlinearly related. Such encompassing relational cycles suggest a broader and more inclusive reckoning of kinship and relatedness, punctuated as much by duties of propitiation as by exchange of valuables and blessings. This reckoning in the context of Việt Nam suggest a new reading of the so called 'two sides of kinship', one that is not predicated upon an emphasis on either cognatic or unilateral reckonings of kinship and their co-existence but rather hinges on the symbiosis of two ontologically different sides of kin, the living and the dead. The thesis draws attention

to the relations between living and dead kin and proposes a view of death as central and instrumental in the formation of kinship.

Death and anthropological writing

The anthropological interest in death and mortuary practices is long standing, instigated with the groundbreaking work of Hertz (1907) at the turn of the previous century and rejuvenated since the 1980s with the publication of two highly influential volumes (Metcalf and Huntington 1979; Bloch & Parry 1982). Hertz draws on Durkheim's (1952) influential analysis of the social aspects of suicide, which invites a sociological interest in death. Similarly, in his seminal study on the 'collective representations of death' Hertz stresses that death is not an instantaneous or 'merely a physical event' (1960:76). Focusing on the secondary treatment and re-interment of the corpse, Hertz points to death as a long transformative process involving disintegration and synthesis and marked by an 'intermediary state' (ibid. 82). Funerals are a transition that begins with the separation of the deceased from life and ends with their incorporation into the world of the dead. Hertz notes the parallels between funerals, rites of birth and marriage, pointing out that every life cycle ritual implies a transformation and 'passage from one group to another: an exclusion i.e. death and new integration, i.e., rebirth' (Hertz 1960:81). Hertz drew mainly on mortuary rites of the Malayo-Polynesian-speaking world, yet his analytical insights have been taken as a point of departure for scores of subsequent studies of death, including the above-mentioned volumes.

The interplay of 'antagonistic forces' of death and birth have been picked up by both Metcalf and Huntington (1979) and Bloch and Parry (1982), both volumes pointing to the symbolism of fecundity and rebirth as integral to mortuary practices and pivotal in the understanding of death. Yet while Metcalf and Huntington (1979) retrace Hertz's analytical insights in diverse ethnographic contexts, pointing to the

cultural diversity and conceptual vitality of mortuary rites whereby sexuality and fertility emerge as dominant symbolisms, Bloch and Parry (1982) offer a new analytical framework within which to understand death and mortuary practices. This analytical framework focuses on the rejuvenating potential of death and the efficacy of mortuary rites in the reproduction and regeneration of social and cosmic realms. In their seminal introduction, Bloch and Parry bring together data from Melanesia, China, India, and Madagascar and beyond pointing not only to the ethnographic diversity of mortuary rites but also to their analytical complexity. This complexity entails the intersection of death with a series of other life-cycle related issues, such as birth, sexuality and biological reproduction as well as gender representations, marriage and exchange. In this context, both life and death pivot on the conjunction or disjunction of the same a set of opposing elements, such as bone and flesh, male and female, descent and affinity, fertility and sexuality. Bloch and Parry take up on Hertz's central symbolic themes, most notably the contrast between 'flesh and bone' - that may be regarded as typical of Southeast Asian cultures – proposing that the symbolism of mortuary rites construes biological reproduction as inimical to the regeneration of social order.

Bloch and Parry are preoccupied with death as pivotal in the 'relationship between the biological individual and social collectivity' (1982:5). More particularly Bloch (1988) is interested in what dies and what survives with death, and thus the interrelation between death and ideas about the person. He points out that death brings out the constitutive elements of the person and spells out their separation; an observation that has spawned an interest in the relation between death and personhood (see for example Tsintjilionis 1993, 1997). This observation hinges on the palpability of the putrefying corpse, and the perceived separation of flesh and bones, in turn associated with male and female parts of the body or else 'soft' decaying and 'hard' enduring parts. Yet this separation does not spell destruction or annihilation but instead renewal and regeneration. For Bloch, death spells the annihilation of the 'individualistic' or threatening aspects of the person and the prevalence of the 'holistic' or social aspects and hence the reproduction of social order, often equated with ancestral and lineage order in his work (1988). The individualistic aspect of the

person is identified in the flesh, in turn associated with the mother and biological reproduction, and the holistic aspect associated with the bones, the father and the patrilineage as a social collectivity. As the perishable soft parts of the person decay so do the ties with the mother and matrilineal relatives while the hard bones and thus, the ties with agnates endure beyond the disintegrative influence of death. In death and through mortuary rites the person is freed from the tensions entailed in affinal affairs as well as relations based on exchange and joins their ancestors integrated into an 'ideal order' of immortals.

Focusing on the regenerative potential of death and the implications of mortuary rituals for the revitalization and reproduction of social order, Bloch remains true to the teachings of his declared mentor, Hertz, construing death as ultimately social. Like Hertz Bloch focuses on the mediation between 'self' and 'society' as being of 'signal importance' in the understanding of both death and rituals (see Bell 1992: 23). Yet Bloch moves the analysis further showing how mortuary rites create, rejuvenate and transform social relations rather than merely reflecting or reaffirming them - as the Durkheimian model suggests. His analysis hinges on the processual aspect of death and its understanding as a 'journey' (see Bloch 1988). However, the emphasis is less on the transitory or transformative effects of this process and more on the efficacy and the legitimizing influence of mortuary rituals. In other words, death as a process and the transformative aspect of mortuary treatment are central in the analysis, nonetheless, this process is highly structured and decidedly determining, while contingencies, intermittencies, disruptions and ambiguities remain largely unaccounted for. Furthermore, although death is presented as one of many transitions experienced through life it is understood as the ultimate transition, punctuated by the passage of the deceased to the world of the dead and their incorporation to an 'eternal order'. Hence, ancestorhood is understood as a somehow 'fixed eternal condition' (Metcalf and Huntington 1990:111).

Bloch's work has furthered the study of death, his analytical insights taken up by a multitude of subsequent studies undertaken in diverse ethnographic contexts ranging from India and China, to Melanesia and Amazonia (Watson 1982; Parry 1985; Foster 1990; Conklin 1995; Lohmann 2005). More particularly in China, where funerals and

the ancestral cultic practices have come to be construed as 'paradigmatic' of Chinese 'culture' (Watson 1988a), the significance of death rites for the constitution of social relations has been extensively explored. Watson's influential analysis (1982, 1988b) is concerned with the structure and efficacy of Chinese funerals. Engaging with the 'flesh and bones' opposition, his analysis focuses on the polluting influence of the decaying corpse and its ceremonial expulsion from the community. The need to manage 'death pollution' is a central concern in funerals, and the task is undertaken by both close kin -more particularly women - and ritual specialists, all proportionately 'absorbing' the dangerous 'airs' emanating from the decaying corpse. On another plane, Ruby Watson (1988) is more concerned with the 'politics' and maneuvering involved in death rituals. Taking up the transformative potential of death related rites, she stresses how Chinese 'grave rites' change, alter, resolve or deny social relations and constitute part of a process whereby new groups, new orders and power arrangements are created (ibid. 204). Ruby Watson suggests that ancestral cultic practices focusing on graves are involved in the 'give and take of local politics' and form an arena where the living compete over power and status (ibid). Adopting Tambiah's (1968) 'creative understanding' of ritual practices, she accounts for the asymmetries and conflict entailed in death-related practices. Nonetheless, defining death rites as a battleground for the living, her analysis construes the dead as 'passive agents' in a 'ritual game', whereby the latter are manipulated by the former for the purposes of achieving political ends (ibid. 227).

The significance of mortuary practices for the regeneration and transformation of social relations and more particularly relations among kin, resonates further afield in studies undertaken in India, Amazonia and Melanesia. Such studies examine death as an 'attempt to overcome mortality... converting death into life by means of constituting and reconstituting persons and social relations' (Foster 1990:431). In India, Parry (1985) examines mortuary rites as a process of purification of the deceased likened to a process of 'digestion' and distillation whereby living kin consume the deceased's impure waste and sins by way of enabling his transcendence. This distillation enables the 'recycling' of the departed as an ancestor, a 'source of progeny and sustenance' (ibid. 627). Further afield in Amazonia, Conklin (1995)

examines a case of literally eating the deceased by way of facilitating his transition to the other world. Conklin stresses the significance of funerals and necrophagy as the primary obligation of affines, in turn, defined as the ones 'who eat' (the corpse), as opposed to those who 'do not eat', i.e., consanguines. Conklin focuses here on the idiom of exchange and affinity, as opposed to descent and co-substantiality.¹ Similarly Foster (1990) writing on Melanesia focuses on the idiom of exchange and examines the significance of mortuary feasting and food exchange for the constitution of transcendent collective entities, in this case matrilineages. Focusing on the symbolic association between death, sexuality and fertility, Lohman (2005: 191) looks into mortuary rituals as 'exhibiting recurrent associations between death as stark encounter with destruction and separation, and, its apparent opposite, regeneration and association'. Again here the focus is the decaying corpse whereby the putrefying remains are associated with 'death's assault on social order and continuity' and bones as associated with 'social permanence' (ibid. 192).

In all this writing about death and mortuary practices, the observable materiality of the deceased, i.e., the corpse and its meaningful signification are fundamental to the analysis. The emphasis is on the treatment of the corpse and physical remains of the deceased, be it through coffering and expulsion (Watson 1982, 1988b), refinement and purification (Parry 1985), metaphorical (Bloch 1985) or literal consumption (Conklin 1995). Such treatment effects the ritual transformation of the deceased and reforms their relations with surviving kin. However, this resolute emphasis on the corpse hints at a sociological understanding of death whereby biological death takes precedence. In other words, it introduces an assumed universality of physical death and the relativity of the social, which is in turn construed as emotional responses to and social implications of this factual death. In some cases this is more explicitly pronounced, as the task at hand is to understand 'how people cope with physical death' (Cederroth 1988:9). In this context, the momentous eventuality and the irreducibility of physical death remain uncontested. Bloch has offered a keen critique of the 'punctual view' of

¹Bloch (1985) has examined the significance of sharing food in the formation of kinship and the makings of co-substantials drawing parallels between modes of eating and modes of being and relating.

death, whereby one is either dead or alive, explaining how this view is associated with certain ideas about the person as a unique bounded individual (1988: 26).

Examining mortuary practices in Tana Toraja, Indonesia, Tsintjilonis (2000, 2007) challenges the assumed universality of both death and the physiology of the human body. Tsintjilonis' work demonstrates that 'death is not a natural process of extinction' as 'no one can die outside or without ritual' (2000:5). In Toraja, the 'process of death starts with a particular kind of 'feverish illness', which may last for a long time and 'one is not seen as dead until the first sacrifice of the mortuary rites has taken place' (ibid). In this context, mortuary sacrifices are fundamental in the process of death and intimately linked with the body of the deceased. Such sacrifices meticulously constitute the bodily signs of the deceased and thus a different form of substantive embodiment. Drawing attention to the sacrificial articulation of the deceased's body, Tsintjilonis points not only to 'different forms of substantive embodiment' but also to different ways of dying (ibid, 2). On another plane, Battaglia (1990), writing on Papua New Guinea, expounds the reconstitution of the body of the deceased in mortuary rites through food and objects of wealth, which are assembled and later distributed by mortuary actors. The substitute corpse(s) are composed in turn of female and male products and 'come into being in and through the marks of gender in dramatic exchanges of masculine and feminine wealth' (ibid. 8). As Battaglia notes, this gift-based body is not only the object where relationships are inscribed but also the 'site of the transforming of such relations' (ibid, 13). Like Tsintjilonis (2000), Battaglia's perceptive analysis points to the constitution of the body of the deceased through rituals, rather than rituals dealing with a given and *de facto* corpse and mediating its social implications. Nonetheless, unlike Tsintjilonis her study is still concerned with the re-constitution of a corporal body, whose materiality is re-instated through tangible objects of craft and wealth.

Following such insights, I take death and mortuary rites as a starting point, a generative process that spells the nascence of an entity and emergence into other worldly realms. As Holt suggests (2007:327), discussing the 'Buddhist dead' in Sri Lanka, 'those who pass through death's threshold continue on a journey through this-worldly or other-worldly realms'. Looking beyond funerals and mortuary practices,

the thesis examines subsequent practices relating to the dead and ancestor propitiating rituals. It subsequently demonstrates the significance of all these practices for the life and existence of other-worldly entities as well as for ancestorhood. Looking beyond mortuary rites and their efficacy, I take here a more inclusive view of death rites and am mainly concerned with what happens to the dead after they have reached the ‘land of the ancestors’ or other-worldly realms. Funerary practices are examined here not as an eventual transition or irreversible transformation but as part of a larger process of *becoming*; a signal moment in the existential trajectory of an effectual and affective entity whose existence is impartibly related with the life and existence of their living kin. In Việt Nam as elsewhere in Southeast Asia and beyond, funerals mark the gradual transformation of the deceased from a dangerous potent spectre attached to its earthly form into a benevolent and efficacious spirit that takes an interest in the well-being of his living kin. However, this transformation is not conclusive or eternal and the becoming of ancestral spirits is continuous and open-ended. This becoming is further punctuated by means of a series of practices relating to the dead, such as periodic propitiation rites and ancestral anniversaries.

Funerary practices in Việt Nam

Funerary practices in Việt Nam do not focus on the body of the deceased (*thân xác*) or its degeneration, but rather on the emerging entity and its due development into an efficacious spirit responsive to the prayers of its living descendants (*linh hồn*). More particularly in Huế, funerals are not primarily concerned with the body as ‘flesh and bones’ but rather with the deceased’s life-spirits (*via*) and spiritual core, the soul (*hồn*). As Tsintjilonis remarks mortuary rites ‘do not deal with the destruction of life but with its articulated fissure’ further explicating that their ‘explicit purpose is to facilitate the return of each element to its original form’ (2000:5). ‘A successful funeral necessitates the effective separation of the various life elements and their return to the appropriate cosmic domains, most of the rites deal with the fate of the

shadow, its transition to the other world and beyond' (ibid.). Similarly in Huế, funerals are concerned with facilitating the return of *via* to their original earthly form by means of keeping them attached to the coffin and burying them with it later, and guiding the bewildered *hồn* to heavenly realms and auspicious netherworlds. Funerary rites are not centered on the treatment and coffering of the corpse but rather on the provisional altar set up for the mystified soul of the newly deceased (*bàn thờ linh*). The treatment and placement of the corpse fall into the more 'private' and the modest part of mortuary practices, whereby close kin attend to all sorts of planning of the funeral and making practical arrangements such as buying the coffin, notifying relatives and acquaintances and hiring ritual specialists. According to locals, funerals resume soon after such arrangements have been made and more particularly with the ritual distribution and donning of the mourning garb by close kin, followed by a well-attended wake.

Here I take a broader view of funerary rituals that extends beyond mortuary treatment and the ceremonial expulsion of the corpse. A number of ethnographic studies of death and funerary practices in China (Watson et al 1988; Oxfeld 2004) and subsequently in Việt Nam (Malarney 1998, 2002; Kleinen 1999) have focused primarily on the ceremonial disposal of the deceased and on what Watson (1988a:15) calls 'pre-expulsion rites'. Such studies posit a clear distinction between pre- and post-expulsion practices and point to the ceremonial expulsion of the corpse as a cut-off point thus delimiting the analysis of funerary practices into issues of disposal. Yet as Sutton (2007: 134) suggests for Chinese funerals, this is not always in agreement with *emic* perceptions, which in turn draw no such distinctions and consider the 'whole process as a unit'. In Huế, local practices and understandings do not signify a distinction between pre-expulsion and post-expulsion rites but rather point to a continuum. Funerary rites and concerns stretch far beyond the burial and include the completion of the first and second death anniversaries, known as 'small' and 'big clearance'. These occasions are concerned with the transformation of the deceased into a largely benevolent ancestral spirit and their subsequent transference to the main ancestral altar. More particularly, burials are followed by a series of practices relating to the newly deceased, most notably the rites marking the completion of the seven 'sevens' (*tuần*) cycle that mark the gradual transition of the bewildered soul to the

nether realm. At the end of this cycle, the ritual feast of the 50th day (*nam mười ngày*) is organized to mark the passage of the deceased and thus the end of mourning for distant kin. Following this, different categories of kin shed their mourning burden and garb on subsequent ritual occasions, such as the ‘small clearance’ organized on the first year anniversary. This process culminates in the ceremonial burning of the chief mourner’s garb on the event of the ‘big clearance’ (second year anniversary) that in turn, marks the end of all mourning.

The appreciation of first and second year anniversaries as integral parts of funerary practices further challenges fragmented understandings of death rites and the professed distinction between ‘funerals’ and ‘ancestral cultic practices’. A number of studies in China (Ahern 1973; Hsu 1971; Freedman 1958; Watson et al 1988; Watson 1985) as well as in Việt Nam (Kleinen 1999; Malarney 2002; Jellema 2007) have dealt with ‘funerals’ and propitiating practices relating to departed kin, most commonly coined as ‘ancestor worship’, as disparate and unrelated domains. In the context, the ‘ancestral cult’ has been explained mainly in terms of continuity, unity and ‘given’ genealogical connections or else with changing historical conditions, the active living and their strategic pursuits. Thus, ancestors have been understood as a somehow ‘fixed’ category and in effect ancestorhood has been explained as an eternal and unchanging condition.

The ‘small and big’ clearances are duly succeeded by ancestor anniversaries held annually for each forbear placed on the ancestral altar. Further, enshrined ancestral spirits are tended twice every lunar month as well as periodically on important occasions marking the lunar calendar. The constancy of propitiation and the unremitting anniversaries for proverbial ancestral spirits do not point to the fixity of ancestors or eternalness of ancestorhood, but rather to the uncertainty and ambiguity pertinent to post-death existence. This uncertainty about what happens to kin in posterity and how their fates turn out prompts the need for constant propitiation and engagement with the dead in the context of periodic rituals. The words of a senior Buddhist nun - assigned with the care of the departed members of an eminent lineage branch - are most elucidating here. ‘We care for them and organize rituals because we do not really know what happens to them’. My discussion accounts for the

contingencies, ambiguities and intermittences entailed in posterity and the changeable conditions of their existence. Unlike earlier mentioned studies that focus on a seemingly 'cyclical' and alternating mode of eternal reproduction, I stress here the transformative potential of the ancestral figures, whose existence is marked as much by uncertainties and variation as that of their living counterparts.

The changing fates and transformable potential of ancestors in Việt Nam have largely remained unaccounted for. Recent studies on Việt Nam have extensively discussed the transformable potential of ghostly entities (Kwon, 2006; 2007; 2008), ambiguous dead (Malarney 2003) and dubious deities (Taylor 2004a). Kwon has examined the transformable and relational potential of the 'ghosts of war' (2008) and their changing fates in the context of a liberalizing political economy (2007). In this context, 'ghosts' and 'ancestors' are construed as 'categorical opposite(s)', the former associated with mobility, vitality and agency while the latter associated with 'fixity', hierarchy and 'given' genealogical connections' (2008:7). Kwon eloquently points to the transformable and relational potential of ghostly entities and shows how they are currently incorporated into familial and local contexts. The study's invaluable contribution rests with accounting for the significance of war in the formation of memory and kinship. However, the changing fates of the ancestors and changes in genealogical formations as a result of war and its disrupting influence remain largely unaccounted for.

Historical circumstances and forceful events affect and shape the lives of both dead and living, ghostly entities and proverbial ancestors. This is even more pronounced in Việt Nam, where successive wars, prolonged conflict and deprivations have generated masses of untimely deaths. Multitudes of souls have entered the nether realms in inauspicious circumstances, dying in battle, rounded up in massacres or succumbing to hardships. Recent studies on Việt Nam ubiquitously point to resurgence in ritual activity and intensification of practices relating to spirits in the post-war era (Ho-Tai 2001; Leshkowits 2008; Malarney 2003a; Taylor 2008). Such studies highlight this development as unprecedented and intimately associated with shifts in political economy, the advent of a post-socialist era and the perceived 'liberalization' of the religious realm. My own study, examines the proliferation of

ritual practices pertaining to the dead not only as symptomatic of shifting contexts but rather as intense efforts to establish and elicit connections between the living and the dead and create relations. Without losing sight of economic and political developments the thesis places these practices within the context of local cosmologies and kinship reckonings that include other worldly entities. Rather than focusing on spirited reforms and elusive transitions, the thesis concentrates on the changing fates of the dead and their multifarious relations with the living. I propose that the intensity and frequency of ancestor-related practices do not only point to economic changes and uncertain transitions but also highlight uncertainties and ambiguities that are pertinent to post-death existence. This uncertainty is as salient to Vietnamese cosmological and ritual concerns as the care for the dead.

Furthermore, ancestor anniversaries and propitiating rituals relating to departed kin have been closely associated with commemoration and remembrance, and more specifically with the memory of the living. Ancestor anniversaries and communal rites for apical ancestors have been largely understood in this context and further linked with the desires, aspirations and strategic pursuits of the living. Lambek (1996:235) proposes a different understanding of memory as not simply 'instrumental' or 'intellectual' but rather as a 'moral practice'. In his study on history and memory in Madagascar, Lambek (2002), proposes that historical consciousness is formed in a dialectical way and through the practice of spirit possession. Examining spirits as 'vehicles for memory', he suggests that memory is 'active' much like spirits and acts of spirit possession are (1996: 241). It is more an 'act (of remembering) rather than an object; a function of social relations that is activated '*between* people' rather than '*within* the mind' (ibid, 239). Engaging with this approach on memory I examine here ancestral commemoration practices as ongoing engagements between the living and the dead. I propose that ancestor anniversaries and ancestral propitiation rites do not merely seek to restore the memory of the dead among the living but rather seek to engage dead kin as present and active participants. The dead are invited to engage in riveting feasts, indulge in the passions of life and merrily engage with their living counterparts as they did while still alive. Ancestor commemoration rituals seek to

evoke the dead as effectual and affective entities, who remember, engage with and act favorably towards their kin.

In Huế and largely in Việt Nam, spirit-related rituals are organized as meticulously arranged feasts involving an abundance of food and votive offerings. The assiduous sustenance of dead kin is integral part of ancestral practices whereby flows of food, favors and blessings are continuously moving between this world and the other. Offerings of delectable dishes do not only purport to beguile and engage the dead with this world but further to convey and instantiate the heartfelt emotions and care of the living towards their departed kin. Food gifts are tokens of affection and intimacy that is extended to family members, neighbors and co-villagers in everyday as well as in ritual contexts. Food gifts were repeatedly extended to my person by friends and hosts, as a token of fondness and care. In ancestor anniversaries copious consumables, offered by obsequious bodies with uttered words of affection and respect, perceptibly display the sincere and deeply felt emotions of the living towards their departed kin and thus instantiate emotional connections. The overwhelming materiality of rituals resonates with both living and dead participants evoking them as affective entities and seeks to effect communication between ontologically disparate but emotionally connected entities. By eating and drinking and indulging in the passions of life the dead engage with this world, remember and reconstitute their connections with the living. On the other hand, the living focusing on heartfelt emotions for departed kin and prayerful acts of offering rise above the concerns of this world and the everyday. Hence, ancestral rituals create a 'chronotope' (Bakhtin 1981), a particular locus in space and time whereby dead and living kin can come together in communion, bridging the gap between this world and the other, between *âm* and *ương* on the basis of creating a sense of shared intimacy.

Place, history and writing

Huế and its rural and semi-urban environs formed the main field site for this study. The former imperial capital (1802-1945) of the unified country and hub of colonial Annam - today central Việt Nam - Huế occupies a key place in the history of the central region and the country at large. Formerly part of the flourishing Austronesian kingdom of Champa, Huế emerged in the Vietnamese annals in the 14th century after being conquered by the Austro-Asiatic Việt.² Descending from the North the expanding kingdom of Đại Việt pushed the Cham populations southwards, gradually annexing their territories along the south central coast and eventually spelled the end of the flourishing maritime kingdom. Later Huế became the bastion of the Nguyễn Lords (1687-1802), who ruled over the southern part of the Đại Việt kingdom, while their rival faction the Trịnh Lords ruled over the northern territories.³ In 1802, the descendants of the Nguyễn Lords ascended the throne and reigned over the unified country with Huế as the capital. During the first years of Nguyễn reign, the emperors concentrated their efforts on consolidating the newly conquered southern territories and building a formidable citadel, namely *Đại Nội* (great enclosure). With the advent of the French (1858) the illustrious emperors were turned into nominal sovereigns, their influence delimited to colonial Annam and circumscribed by the walls of the once imperial citadel.⁴ The anti-colonial struggle and rising tide of revolution further pushed the monarchs to the fringes of the new polity. The last emperor, Bảo Đại,

² Settled along the central coast, the Cham had flourished as a maritime kingdom, opening trade routes across the Indonesian and the Malay archipelagos. After the 11th century, they were subjected to relentless pressure from the expanding Đại Việt and were gradually forced to retreat southwards until they finally disappeared in 1832 (see Po Dharma 2001). Today, remaining Cham populations are settled in the plateau of the central highlands, alongside Austro-Asiatic ethnic groups, in Bình Thuận and Ninh Thuận provinces as well as in Hồ Chí Minh City (see Taylor 2006).

³ Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the Đại Việt kingdom was divided into two spheres of influence. *Đàng Trong* or 'inner part', comprising of the southern territories was ruled by the Nguyễn faction, while *Đàng Ngoài* or 'outer part', which in turn comprised the northern territories and was ruled by the Trịnh Lords.

⁴ Coming amidst resurgent peasant insurrections and turbulence across the territory, the French attack on the central port of *Đà Nẵng* in 1858 is considered by many scholars as the beginning of colonial rule (see Nguyễn 1995:128). The ensuing assault on the port of *Thuận An*, outside Huế, and the capture of the citadel is considered the defining battle that confirmed French rule over the whole of the country's territory.

abdicated in August 1945, in favor of a nationalist coalition government signifying the emergence of a newly founded Republic.

In the course of the southward expanding revolution both antecedents and descendants of the royal line came under fire. Royal halls, temples and tombs were defiled and destroyed and pertinent ancestral practices were banned or disrupted. The former capital and its imperial heritage were assailed more than once in recent history, including 1945 and again in 1975. These dates marked the start and the end of the Indochina wars, as well as major shifts in state and power structures. As a result, during this period many of the royal line fled Huế, moving to the safe haven of Sài Gòn – the capital of the southern Republic – while later with re-unification many fled the country. The former imperial citadel was not only central in the context of the imperial polity but retained its prominence and significance long after the fall of the dynasty and the end of the Indochina wars. During the course of the second Indochina war, Huế and its imperial citadel became the site of fierce battles. Situated near the 17th parallel that divided North and South, and cutting across the Hồ Chí Minh trail, the province was of strategic significance to both sides. The city was at the heart of the conflict during the Tet offensive which culminated in the ‘battle for Huế. Launched by northern Vietnamese forces in 1968, the *Tết* offensive involved a series of coordinated attacks across the territory of the southern Republic. The principal target of these attacks was the former imperial city. During the fierce and long ‘battle for Huế, the city’s urban settings became combat fields, as the opposing forces were stationed on opposite sides within the imperial enclosure. Cutting across the city, in front of barracks of the citadel, the Perfume River (*sông Hương*), is said to have been overwhelmed with fallen soldiers and lifeless bodies.

Today the remains of the majestic *Dại Nội* still dominate the city’s scenic topography, situated at the heart of the urban landscape. Ravaged and neglected in the course of recent conflicts, the citadel and majestic royal tomb complexes are currently preserved and restored as ‘world heritage sites’. Currently the citadel and the royal relics are at the heart of the city’s regeneration, promoted as one of its landmarks and main visiting attraction. As a popular tourist attraction the royal monument complex sustains a booming tourist industry and thus the economy of the province at large, now

heavily dependant on tourism and foreign remittances. Within this context of restoration former kings, previously expelled from palaces and temples are being reinstated in their former realm as the extraordinary ancestors of a formidable line. The previously disbanded council of the royal line has recently been reformed and descendants have been increasingly engaged in restoring memorial tablets and altars for former kings, and organizing rituals in dedicated temples in the citadel and royal tombs. Most notably, descendants hold annual ancestor anniversaries for past formidable kings. In this context, former royal structures are being constituted as part of the national and international heritage as well as sacred ancestral sites where potent forebears reside.

While the front walls of the citadel welcome crowds of foreign and domestic visitors and pilgrims and encase the altars of formidable ancestral spirits, the rear perimeter of the enclosure has been turned into a pilgrimage site for a different league of spirits. The outer side of the rear walls is host to scores of outdoor shrines dedicated to the errant spirits of unfortunate and unidentified dead, who perished amidst war and conflict. Such shrines are tended by locals who live or trade in the vicinity, such as shopkeepers, petty sellers and residents in nearby neighborhoods. These interested parties, whose welfare and prosperity depend not only on munificent ancestral spirits but also on the influence of unrelated and unknown spirits, hold annual and periodic rituals for the propitiation of unfortunate dead. These rituals acknowledge an array of unfortunate dead, including combatants and civilians, men, women and children, locals as well as foreigners who came from distant lands and died here. Moreover, they encompass the unfortunate dead generated in various turbulent moments in earlier as well as in recent history. Thus they not only include the unfortunate dead generated during the harrowing 'battle for Hué' (1968) but also those who fell during the French attack on the capital (1885).

The establishment, ruins and restoration of this unique structure encapsulate not only the imperial past but multiple strands of earlier and more recent history, local as well as national, all stippled with moments of imperial glory, intense conflicts and convoluted events. This compelling and eventful past is inscribed not only on the city's landmarks and its surrounding landscape but further afield in rural and semi-

urban localities and through an array of local practices. Village temples and ancestral halls scattered along the city's periphery span together family, local and national histories. Such practices pertain not only to providential forbears and the intimate dead but further to unrelated souls of ill-fated dead. Moreover, ritual practices pertinent to ghostly entities acknowledge and appease not only those who fell amidst war and historic conflicts but also the vast populations of those who previously inhabited this land and were forcefully expelled by the advancing Viet forces, namely the Cham. As noted earlier, the Cham were evicted from their native land, their homesteads and livelihoods wrecked by the advancing Viet forces, as they marched southwards and settled into the conquered territories. In a series of village and neighborhood rituals pertinent to ill-fated souls, the Cham become relevant counted among the crowds of disparate ghostly entities commanding acknowledgement and appeasement (see chapter 3).

Despite this compelling and vigorous past, which is continually constituted and re-constituted in current practices and local discourses, Huế and the central region in general have been largely disregarded in the context of ethnographic studies. Recent studies carried out in the post war and late socialist contexts have largely focused in the northern and southern regions of the country. Since the early 1990s with the opening of the country to the non-socialist world and its engagement with global markets, Việt Nam has invited a great deal of scholarly interest, not least among anthropologists who alongside economists, historians and political scientists have studied shifts in political economy and their impact on 'social and cultural life'.⁵ In this context, scholars tend to bisect Việt Nam dividing it into North and South, and focusing on the far northern and southern regions. However, as Choi (2004:10) remarks this bisection does not seem adequate when it comes to understanding this culturally diverse country.⁶ Keen to identify changes and transformations

⁵ See for example Brook (1997), Duiker (1995), Fford (1996), Chan et al (1999), Kerkvliet (1995), Harvie (1997).

⁶ A series of divisions have historically applied in the case of Việt Nam, whether with regards to spheres of influence or colonial administrative units, which were made to correspond to deep seated differences in culture and traditions. In the colonial context, the country was divided administratively into three parts or states (*ky*), *Bac Ky*, *Trung Ky* and *Nam ky*, which corresponded to the trisection into Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina. The war in Việt Nam brought about bisection into North and South (see Keith Taylor 1998).

anthropological studies have been mainly undertaken in the Northern and Southern parts of the country, in major urban centres and their satellite rural localities (Luong 1992; Malarney 1993; 2002; Kleinen 1999; Endres 2001; Taylor 2001). More particularly, ethnographic studies have focused on the two major urban centres of the country, namely Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City (former Sài Gòn), which have historically formed the political and economic hubs of the country respectively. The central region and the numerous provinces that cover the long distance between the Red and Mekong deltas have been overwhelmingly neglected.

This particular focus can be attributed to a variety of reasons, not least to current circumstances on the ground and more particularly the various limitations and formal restrictions applying to foreign researchers (I discuss this issue in more detail below). As various studies denote foreign researchers encounter a number of problems and limitations involving granting of official permissions, circumscribed access and availability of archives (Bousquet 2002; Luong 2006; Malarney 2002; Taylor 1999). Moreover, as state and international programmes for educations and research are mostly based in Ha Noi, they tend to favor research projects in Northern Việt Nam (Bousquet 2002: 4). Yet most importantly, this particular focus reflects historical developments that have conditioned anthropological research as well the ensuing analytical constraints in conceptualizing and understanding Việt Nam.

The Northern and Southern regions developed as major political and economic hubs under French colonial rule. Sitting upon fertile deltas – of the Red River in the North and Mekong River in the South – *Tonkin* and *Cochinchina* were the two regions where the French concentrated their economic interests and development efforts investing heavily in infrastructure. In this context Hà Nội was built up as the administrative centre for the whole Indochinese Union while Sai Gon with its well-built port was developed into a trade and entrepreneurial hub. In this context, *Annam* (central region), the seat of the outlandish monarchy and a region towered over by mountainous formations was dismissed by the French as a less ‘fertile’ and ‘civilized’ region left to interested missionaries and adventurers to explore (see de Corbigny 1999). French envoys and explorers have been as much fascinated by the architectural beauty and artistry of the citadel as they have been repelled by the ‘bizarre’ customs of

the Sinicised monarchy and superstitious practices of ordinary locals. Hence few lingered around the imperial capital and even fewer took to studying mystifying Annam. Most notable among these few was Leopold Cadière, the distinguished pastor and leading member of the apostolic mission in Annam that lived most of his life and died in colonial Việt Nam. In his numerous publications Cadière has not only extolled the unique architectural style and 'arts of Huế (1919) but also took a keen interest in understanding the local cosmology, spirit cults and popular religion (1957). Although he published articles about the northern land of Tonkin, most of his observations were based in Annam. Cadière advocated the uniqueness of Annamese artistry and traditions as distinct from those of Tonkin and Cochinchina and therefore like many of his contemporaries has contributed to trisecting representations of the country. Such representations constituted the administrative division of Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina as corresponding to geographically and culturally disparate domains.

Earlier studies on Việt Nam were conducted mainly by French or French-trained Vietnamese scholars (Dumoutier 1904; Giran 1912; Gourou 1936; Le Van Dinh 1934; Nguyễn Văn Huyền 1944). Working within the 'boundaries of the colonial bureaucracy', as Bousquet puts it, these scholars often engaged in research that furthered such interests (2002:2). French studies of the early twentieth century have contributed to self-definitions of the Vietnamese exploring and devising their past, origins and traditions. Such definitions were constituted by looking into the temporal and spatial margins of the colonial realm. What attracted French scholarly interest was not as much the origins and civilization of the Việt but instead the distinctive history and traditions of populations surviving in the periphery of the Việt realm. They focused their attention on the origins and traditions of Cham populations as well as of a diversity of ethnic groups inhabiting in the highland regions.⁷ Earnest interest in uncovering and preserving Cham relics has paved the way for the establishment of French scholarly institutions and more particularly the highly influential and still active *Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* (see Guillon 2001:8). On another plane, the study of highland ethnic groups - collectively identified by the French as *montagnards*

⁷ In French accounts as well as in contemporary Vietnamese studies the Cham are largely described as a Hindu-influenced civilization. However, their later history points to the Islamisation of the kingdom and remaining Cham populations in Việt Nam today are largely Muslim (see Taylor 2006).

- offered a rare glimpse into perceived ‘autochthonous’ populations and highland groups were often identified as ‘Proto-Indochinese’ (Condominas 1957a). Like the conservation of Cham antiquities, safeguarding the traditions and self-determination of the *montagnards* or *mois* – from *mọi* in Vietnamese which means ‘savage’ - have been pivotal for the colonial project.

Considered as highly ‘homogenous’ and ‘geographically confined’, highland groups presented an ideal case study for French ethnologists. A series of relevant studies were pursued in the highlands of the country throughout the height of colonial rule, particularly with in the central highland plateaux (Condominas 1957; Huard 1938; Humann 1892; Maitre 1909; Monfleur 1931; Ner 1942). Among this plethora of studies, Condominas’ (1957) eloquent and extensive study of the Mnong Gar stands out in the ethnography of the region. His painstaking ethnography offers a fine description of the yearly agricultural cycle of the ‘men of the forest’ accorded to their land clearing activities. Further Condominas (1965) has taken a dedicated interest in the declining fates of the *mois* in the context of the ongoing Indochina conflicts. The effects of the conflict and the history of their involvement in the war have subsequently attracted further anthropological interest, which persisted despite the growing problems in accessing the central plateaux during the ongoing war and their eventual closure to foreigners after 1975 (Hickey 1982a, 1982b, Salemlink 2001). The end of colonial rule and resuming hostilities in the course of the second Indochina war marked a shift in scholarly interests and pursuits as American trained researchers were added to the scholarly cohorts. Scholarly interests shifted from remote highland plateaux to southern villages, which were of strategic importance for the ongoing conflict (Hickey 1964).

With the end of the Indochina wars foreign scholarly interest withdrew from the country along with the defeated forces.⁸ Returning to a post-war and late socialist country, the new generations of researchers have mainly focused on the former colonial hubs, namely North and South, sustaining a delimited focus on the opposite ends of this geographically elongated territory. More particularly, the bulk of

⁸ Bousquet (2002:4) maintains that there were still French scholars working in the country during as well as soon after the end of the war in 1975.

contemporary studies have mainly focused in the new capital Hà Nội and its surrounding rural localities, while few have taken an interest in the southern Hồ Chí Minh City. In some ways, this has been a story of two cities, with the former understood as the mainstay of the socialist influence and the ‘cradle of Vietnamese civilization’ and the latter largely associated with economic dynamism and rapid social change. The regions and localities lying between or beyond these two notional edges have been misrecognised and disregarded. This hydrocephalic focus not only fails the diversity and significance of different localities in contemporary Việt Nam but further fails to dispel thorny divisions between ‘North’ and ‘South’ that dominated the cold-war era. Moreover, the bulk of these studies have seen these northern and southern localities as ideal settings for exploring the dynamic nature of contemporary Vietnamese society as one could get a glimpse at once of both rapid changes in the context of urban settings and long standing traditions, fragments of which could be still traced in local practices.

Expanding the charts of anthropological interest, Kwon (2006; 2007; 2008) draws attention to different localities within the wider central region.⁹ More particularly, his study (2006) is concerned with two different villages Ha My and My Lai, the former near Đà Nẵng and the latter in the neighboring south central province of Quảng Ngãi. The two villages are examined as the site of infamous civilian massacres involving Korean and American forces, which took place in 1968 and the masses of untimely dead they have generated.¹⁰ Looking into current commemorating practices the study shows how such unfortunate dead are re-instated in the familial and local context, remembered as kin, neighbors and co-villagers. Kwon (2007; 2008) further explores the changing landscape of kinship and memory in contemporary Việt Nam, pointing to the transformable and relational potential of ghostly entities. In this context, shifts in the economy of memory are impartibly linked with recent shifts in political economy whereby the liberalization of political economy brings about the gradual emancipation of ghosts and their rising significance in local pantheons. Bringing together history

⁹ In the context of earlier studies Trullinger’s study ‘Village at war’ (1997) is also another exception in terms of regional focus. It examines the impact of the ongoing war in a village in Quảng Bình province (north of Hue), which formed the so called ‘Demilitarized zone’.

¹⁰ The massacre at My Lai has been well-reported in the US media during the war and has subsequently been examined in the context of historical and strategic studies.

and cosmology Kwon's studies eloquently point to the historicity of ghosts as well as to the transformations in the realm of kinship and memory. However, the analysis remains bound to a war-centered perspective, which has come to dominate perceptions and descriptions of the country and its history. Furthermore, like previously mentioned recent studies it proposes a reading and understanding of Việt Nam whereby the specific war is construed as the most defining moment in the Vietnamese past while current reforms and the promise of a liberal future they carry determine the present.

The present study acknowledges the significance of the past as well as of recent developments for the understanding of current practices, as the above mentioned studies propose. Yet it takes a more inclusive view of the past as consisting of multiple strands and subsequently as having multifarious relations with the present. It does so by means of focusing on an array of dead and their multivalent and changing relations with the living. In this context, the dead are not examined merely or primarily as politically or economically motivated entities, whose existence and influence are determined on the basis of changing policies and political economies. Rather I examine the dead as highly efficacious as well as affective and emotive entities, prompted into action mainly by their need to form and sustain meaningful relations with living kin. As shown above, Huế's sacred landscape is not only marked by 'ghosts of war' but rather inhabited by many strands of history, traceable in a diversity of structures, local practices and otherworldly presences. These strands of history are observable all around Huế in a diversity of sacred structures and enshrined spirits whereby former royals and courtiers - emerging as munificent ancestral figures and potent spirits to whom descendants and non-descendants alike appeal for blessings - errant sprits and revolutionary heroes, all compete for prominence in the province's sacred landscape.

This co-existence and close interrelation of diverse presences is even more apparent in the village of Luống Nghi, which I chose as my main field site. In Luống Nghi shrines for Cham divinities, imposing ancestral halls built in distinctive royal style dedicated to tutelary ancestral spirits decreed by the Nguyễn monarchy and altars dedicated to Hồ Chí Minh are found side by side. Such diverse shrines are drawn together not only by their physical proximity but also through everyday journeys and

rituals that interweave the local past, the distinctive royal legacy of the region and the country's revolutionary reforms.

Context and conditions of fieldwork

Lưỡng Nghi, which can be translated as 'heaven and earth', is of course a pseudonym but a most appropriate one for a locality, where this-worldly and other-worldly realms are intimately connected. *Lưỡng Nghi*, is an 'olden' (*cũ*) Hàn-Việt term that more broadly signifies the complementary significance of bipolar elements in the formation of cosmos and their harmonious coexistence, whether it is heaven and earth or *âm* and *đương*, which in turn stand for lunar and solar, this world and the other, the realm of the living and the realm of the dead.¹¹ The village of Lưỡng Nghi, is situated about 7 kilometers to the east of Huế, along the way to a small fishing port from where many joined the boat exodus after the 'spring victory' in April 1975. The road from Huế to the village spans the remains of noble lineage halls and former princely estates, many of which in turn are currently turned into prominent ancestral halls. The village itself stands out for its distinctive communal temples and ancestral halls built in *nhà rường* style, an architectural design distinctive of the Nguyễn monarchy and today celebrated as the 'traditional' style of Huế. Most prominent among them, the village communal temple (*đình*) and the adjoined communal temple of the seven local lineages (*nhà thờ bảy họ*), were the founders of the village are enshrined. Situated next to the prospering market that serves the commune and on the north bank of the rivulet that runs through it, the two temples dominate the administrative and sacred core of the village. Regularly and widely attended in periodic rituals, *nhà thờ bảy họ* is according to locals a communal ancestral hall which is unique in magnitude and concentration of lines within the province, second only to the corresponding royal temple within the citadel, in turn dedicated to the long line of Nguyễn kings. As villagers stress, *nhà thờ bảy họ*

¹¹ Hàn-Việt is the Vietnamese transliteration of old Chinese. Under Nguyễn rule it was the official script in which all documents were written, mastered and developed by knowledgeable mandarins, court officials and Confucian trained scholars.

is modeled upon the temple of kings' with a similar structural design consisting of interconnected chambers divided by imposing kingpost pillars (*ruồng*) and furnishings consisting of red lacquered and golden gilded high altars (*am thờ*) fit for sovereigns. According to local accounts the establishment of this communal hall dates back to the establishment of the village itself and thus it stands for the unity and unanimity among villagers.

In recent years, the village has also come to be known for the distinctive memorial complex of Hồ Chí Minh, situated further along the rivulet with a corresponding dedicated hall (see chapter 7). This memorial complex in the village as well as the corresponding monuments in Huế, are part of a nation-wide project that encouraged the development of memorial sites out of the places where 'uncle Hồ' lived and taught or 'held longingly in his memory'. According to the official celebrated biography 'uncle Hồ' spent the early years of his childhood and youth in the village and Huế. In Huế and the village young Hồ lived with his family, studied and took part in popular protests against the colonial administration. In this hagiography Huế and the village are presented as places that nurtured his fervent patriotism and fine revolutionary spirit of an extraordinary hero. This monumentalizing project celebrating the life and personae of Hồ Chí Minh was launched soon after 'reunification' (1975) in localities throughout the former 'Southern Republic', and more particularly in towns and cities of that were of strategic importance in the context of the defeated Republic, such as Sài Gòn (later renamed Hồ Chí Minh City) and the central city of Đà Nẵng. In Huế, the former seat of the French influenced monarchy and later mainstay of the American-led forces, the development of the memorial complex was of pivotal significance and has been an integral part of the process of setting up the new local administration. The presence of Hồ Chí Minh was crucial especially in a locality like Lương Nghi, a 'village with no martyrs' as the young constable who was responsible for my safety and welfare during my stay in the village, often remarked. Today this complex lists a number of sites around the village as Hồ Chí Minh related monuments, most notably the 'house of uncle Hồ' where he lived as a child with his father, small shrines (*am*), as well as the village temple (*đình*). In the recently resumed grand village sacrifice (*Lễ Thu Tế*), all local tutelary spirits decreed and awarded by

succeeding Nguyễn rulers, are gathered from all corners of the village to the *đình* to be collectively and suitably propitiated. In this context, villagers pay tribute to Hồ Chí Minh as *nhân thần* a benevolent and munificent spirit of human origins. Albeit derived from a different era and decreed by a dissimilar administration, uncle Hồ is separately honored in his dedicated hall.

The village and lineage founders are portrayed and propitiated by locals as distinguished ‘mandarins’ decreed by successive courts, in recognition of their meritorious feats that contributed to the establishment, defense and growth of the locality. According to local annals, the village was founded circa 1471 which current chronicles mark as the date of definitive victory over the Cham and the annexation of the area to the Đại Việt kingdom.¹² In the years following military victory, the advancing Việt concentrated their efforts in consolidating the gained territories by means of ‘establishing colonies of soldiers turned farmers whose task was to make them viable and defend them against attacks for repossession’ (Po Dharma 2001: 20). The local apical ancestors are also said to have descended from the ‘north’ along with the southward advancing Viet forces. The first local lineage (Nguyễn) traces its origins from the north central province of *Thành Hoá* - which is also the native province of the royal Nguyễn clan – while subordinate lineages trace their origins from obscure localities in the far north.

The founders are marked as the most important local benefactors, holding merit for ‘clearing wastelands’ (*khai khan*), ‘opening new lands’ (*khai canh*) and setting up viable settlements. Such valiant courtiers or ‘generals’, were rewarded for their meritorious feats in consolidating new territories, with prestigious titles, office and land, bestowed in life or posthumously by successive dynasties. Nguyễn kings further contributed to the growth of the village by adding more fertile plots of land (in local annals). Under the reign of Nguyễn Lords the village prospered as a rice producing area with a flourishing local market, which served several neighboring settlements.

¹² Locals annals that were made available to me consisted of a printed booklet co-authored by eminent elders and circulated among members of the seven local lineages. This booklet marks the order in which the seven lineage founders arrived in the locality and lists their posthumous titles awarded by successive Nguyễn kings. Another booklet was composed as part of a formal application for the certificate of ‘Cultural village’ (*làng văn hoá*), required by the provincial authorities for all villages in the region (see Huang Uong lang van hoa 1999). The outcome of the application is still pending.

During this era, it expanded further east of the *Phu Xuân* – the bastion of the Lords that later under the Emperors was built into a citadel (*Đại Nội*) - and became the core part of a homonymous canton (*tông*) counting several communes (see Trần et al 2001:96).¹³ Under the reign of Nguyễn kings it developed further as a farming and commercial hub and the village communal temples were built as eminent structures. According to local accounts, in the early years of Nguyễn reign, the two local communal temples standing at the time as feeble thatched roof formations were reconstructed in their present form, as robust ironwood structures with dragon bedecked tile roofs. The most illustrious of Nguyễn emperors, Minh Mang, conquered and consolidated the southernmost edges of the country, devising a new administrative structure to unite the far-reaching domain. Implemented in 1835, this new administrative structure integrated the village into the district where it still belongs today. This long standing arrangement was only briefly interrupted in the course of the socialist reforms (1981-1989), with *Lưỡng Nghi* and other rural and semi-urban localities around Huế being administratively integrated into the city.¹⁴

The ‘American war’ - as it is officially known in Việt Nam - and the ensuing reunification of the country brought fundamental changes in Huế and the village. As mentioned above, the province was of strategic significance to both sides and the city harbored hostilities throughout the war, which culminated in the battle over Huế. In this context, many villagers joined in the fighting as combatants or aides. Following the defeat of the southern republic, socialist modernity expanded southward seeking to radically reform the political economy and alter the sacred landscape of the province. Setting out to eradicate ‘feudal’ and ‘backward’ institutions, the revolutionary administration desecrated communal temples (*đình*), which were the formal seat of village councils, divested the councils of their acreage and powers and abolished the ‘village’ grade in the administrative structure. A new administrative structure was devised with People’s Committees operating at the level of commune (*xã*), district

¹³ Within this context the major administrative units were village (*làng*), canton (*tông*) and province (*tỉnh*). The revolutionary state changed the administrative division, dismantling the village and its ‘feudal’ councils of elders and instead established People’s committees at the level of communes (*xa*).

¹⁴ This was during the formation of *Bình Trị Thiên* province, a short-lived enlarged administrative unit (1977-1989) formed by the new government that grouped together the three provinces lying south of the 17th parallel: *Quảng Bình*, *Quảng Trị* and *Thừa Thiên*.

(*huyện*) and province (*tỉnh*). In this context, Lưỡng Nghi became the core of the wider commune that included several villages, with a new People's Committee built at the heart of the village, behind the village *đình*. The former village head, an eminent descendant of the local Nguyễn lineage, was placed on the committee as vice-president. Although small shrines and temples around the village, dedicated to neighborhood and hamlet guardian spirits were razed to the ground, the *đình* and communal lineage hall were spared major damage. Nonetheless, in the long run communal temples and ancestral halls suffered from neglect as they remained largely closed and deserted. Today, in the village as well as all around Huế, such halls are being painstakingly restored while new ones crop up in remaining ancestral plots.

In the context of socialist reform, villages and land-owning descent groups were divested of their immovable assets. Yet despite the expropriation of all lands, ancestral structures, houses and small residential plots bequeathed by forebears have been exempted from requisition. Forming a 'grey area' in the charts of the Vietnamese property market, these ancestral plots and the particulars of their tenure still baffle foreign legal experts and property consultants. Currently, ancestral houses and halls are the only remaining immovable assets in Huế, in which descent groupings invest heavily. In Lưỡng Nghi, small garden plots circumscribing ancestral halls - and in some cases newly erected tombs in neighboring villages - are used or rented out by members of the descent grouping, who use them to grow vegetables and flowers destined for family consumption or the market. Further collectivization at all levels of the economy was implemented here as in the north, yet as Kerkvliet suggests (1995) this arrangement was short lived. Kerkvliet suggests that in localities that previously were in the Southern Republic, the unwillingness of locals to commit to the cooperative scheme and subsequent fall in production rates forced cooperatives to contract out farming and work to individual families.¹⁵ The renovation policies (*đổi mới*) introduced in 1986 sanctified the importance of the family as a fundamental

¹⁵ For the process of collectivization in northern Vietnam see Woodside (1970).

economic unit, and brought about the dismantling of local cooperatives paving the way for further developments towards a multi-component economy.¹⁶

In Lương Nghi former cooperatives still play a part in rice farming today, renting out land and heavy equipment and regulating irrigation in paddy fields. Today, the fertile paddies of the commune are mainly farmed and exploited by families as well as by industrial farmers who acquire short term use rights over small plots. Stretching around the village in all directions these paddies are only interrupted by small garden plots set up on their fringes where maize, sweet potatoes and vegetables grow while scattered old graves are often found amidst this sea of rice seedlings. With a heavy concentration of fertile land, the district remains today the rice basket of the province contributing the largest portion of rice production according to recent provincial statistics.¹⁷ The commune leads in paddy yield with two crops a year as well in livestock farming primarily of pigs and secondly buffaloes while individual households raise ducks. Today prospering young ‘farmers’, who can afford generous contributions towards communal rituals are increasingly assigned as ceremonial lineage heads, annually elected by lineage representatives.

The opening of the country to the non-socialist world and increasing engagement with global flows have had further far-reaching affects, altering the landscape of the village, city and overall province. Since the early 1990s when *đổi mới* started to take effect in the province, a booming tourist industry has developed in Huế as increasing flows of visitors were reaching the gates of the former imperial city. This booming industry is centered on the royal monument complex, which was formally proclaimed as a ‘world heritage site’ in 1993. Since then, a plethora of private and state owned hotels, restaurants, shops and travel bureaus have been established around the city catering for the crowds of foreign and domestic visitors. In official statistics, most businesses around the province are today classified as household owned (provincial

¹⁶ □ *đổi mới* or ‘renovation’ refers to the set of economic policies introduced in 1986 that signaled a shift from ‘centrally planned’ to a ‘multi-component’ economy and the country’s increasing engagement with global markets (see Fforde 1996, Harvie 1997, Morley 1997). See also Luong (1993, 1998) and Malarney (1998) who explain the effects of these policies on family and ritual practices.

¹⁷ According to recently published statistics (2005), the district has the highest paddy yield in the province with 26,454 tons out of total 133,716 in 2003. Moreover, since 1995 the paddy yield in the district and its overall contribution to the provincial basket has increased steadily and from 33.9 ha in 1995 to 44.5 in 2003.

census published 2005).¹⁸ In the village, which historically had a mix of farmers, teachers and professionals, locals are increasingly becoming involved in the trade and tourism industry. Former farmers and teachers are now trading in the city or local market or earn a living as self-employed bus drivers and petty entrepreneurs. Further, members of younger generations - many of them doing business and language degrees in Hué University - prosper in the city as tourist operators, while English-speaking former soldiers thrive as tourist guides, leading tours to the citadel and royal tombs, as well as further afield to former military stations and underground tunnels.

The development of Hué into a tourist hub has brought about a rapid growth in city and province populations in the last decade. This growth is partly due to increasing waves of migrants from neighboring provinces like Quảng Trị and Quảng Bình to the north of Hué. The stagnant economy and lack of development prospects in these two provinces have spawned flows of hopefuls, who come to Hué to set up small hotels and businesses or work as self-pronounced tourist guides taking foreigners for a ride around Hué's landmarks in their Honda motorbikes. These small businesses and hotels further attract young people from the province's rural areas who travel daily to the city to work. Thus, economic growth and internal migration have both contributed to a substantial increase in population in the past decade.¹⁹ From a wartime population of 140,000 (see Willbanks 2007:43) that effectively counted Hué as the third largest city within the Southern Republic – after Sài Gòn and Đà Nẵng – the city population has risen to 316,798 in recent times.²⁰ Such developments have led to the recent recognition and formal upgrading of Hué as a first grade urban centre (2005), which was marked with celebrations in the citadel. Today, Hué is counted as the fourth largest city in the country.

¹⁸ According to the same census, the number of entrepreneurial households has almost doubled since 1995 – with most households involved in trade – while overall privately owned businesses have doubled since 1999. Running small hotels, shops, restaurants and travel bureaus, these family enterprises have so far driven the development of the tourist industry in the province over the past few years. Nonetheless, these small scale enterprises still represent a small portion in the industry while state owned and joint ventures dominate medium and larger scale business.

¹⁹ During fieldwork I did not have access to further censuses, vital statistics or any other formal document and thus it is difficult to draw comprehensive and well-informed comparisons here. These fragments of information were kindly provided by the provincial foreign office.

²⁰ Current figures are taken from a 2003 census published by the provincial authorities in 2005. According to this census the overall province population exceeds the one million (1,105,494).

Despite the growth in urban populations, current censuses classify the bulk of the province population as ‘rural’ (*nong thôn*) (760,542). Yet in the case of Huế, the distinction between urban and rural areas and populations are not clear-cut or apparent. Many semi-urban localities, lying to the east of Huế were previously villages with their own paddy fields and village communal temple (*đình*). Such is the case of *Vi Dã*, which was previously a rural retreat for regents and nobles, while today it forms a semi-urban locality in the outskirts of the city. After reunification, *Vi Dã* was administratively integrated into the city, while the requisitioned lands have been cut into small residential plots. Today, *Vi Dã* is densely populated, its narrow back roads packed with newly-built houses, while its prospering market on the main road to the sea is increasing in scale and importance. Furthermore, the ill-defined boundaries between urban and rural areas are further blurred as urban development is assiduously pushing the city’s residential and commercial boundaries, encompassing former rural and semi-urban localities into the urban environment. In this context, new developments cropping up in the outskirts of the city are gradually encroaching into the rural landscape surrounding *Lưỡng Nghi*. In a new road junction nearby, linking the area to the north outskirts of Huế, new luxurious blocks of flats as well as commercial developments are currently being built. Most importantly, rural and urban areas are drawn together through the incessant movement of people and their extending social networks.

Throughout the course of my fieldwork in Huế as well as during my short stay in Hồ Chí Minh City, I followed friends, hosts and villagers in their daily journeys between the urban and rural localities. Many villagers travel daily to the city’s commercial hub to attend to business, to work or study at the city’s university. Moreover, many have children or kin who live and work in Huế and exchange regular visits. Conversely, many city dwellers return to their villages where family altars and lineage halls are situated to participate in important family occasions. The professional and relational networks of my interlocutors ranged far beyond the province. Many locals fled to Sài Gòn during the war and today they divide their time between the two cities, keeping business and family connections on both sides. Such is the case of the granddaughter of a former regent in the Huế court, who lives with her family in Hồ

Chi Minh City and tends to her grandfather and ancestral affairs in Huế while maintaining business establishments in both places. Many others have siblings, aunts and uncles who have long established a livelihood in HCMC or Đà Nẵng return to the province for ancestor anniversaries and family rituals. Others keep two households and descendants from separate wives in different provinces, such as a former village head. Moreover, the relational networks of locals extend further afield, beyond the borders of the country, as many have children and relatives living abroad, mainly in the United States and France. Many members of the former elite as well as ordinary locals fled there during the Indochina wars.²¹ Over the past decade, the government has made considerable efforts to conciliate and establish viable relations with prospering overseas communities, whose contributions are vital for the economy and development of the native country.²² These transnational networks of relatives are sustained by means of regular visits by overseas relatives as well as reciprocal exchanges and close cooperation between kin for the restoration and construction of elaborate tombs and ancestral halls, dedicated to common ancestors.

During my fieldwork it proved easier to trace and follow connections between village and city, between local, national and transnational, than to draw distinctions between them. The proximity and multifarious connections between Huế and the village subsequently dictated fieldwork research. Like other locals, I engaged in frequent trips back and forth between the city and the village covering the short distance on my bicycle almost daily. Interviews and observations that inform this thesis were collected by means of establishing connections and relations in an array of urban, semi-urban and rural localities as well as in an array of contexts, such as local and city pagodas, noble and ordinary houses, royal temples or village and lineage halls, provincial offices and national museums. Furthermore, throughout my fieldwork I stayed in urban centres like Hồ Chí Minh City and Huế as well as in rural localities. During my stay in Huế, formal procedures and the quest for an appropriate field site led me to take up lodging in a series of different places, moving gradually from city

²¹ Many of the families I encountered had relatives in the U.S., most of them left in 1975, with the end of the war or as late as 1991 with the re-settlement program for remaining military members.

²² In 2005, during a formal visit to the States, the Vietnamese Prime minister, has paid a visit and formally appealed to the Vietnamese community in California for the first time.

family-owned hotels and semi-urban inns owned by descendants of the royal elite to a family house in *Lưỡng Nghi*, where I eventually settled.

It was my long term stay in a small local community near *Huế* that allowed me to trace and follow far-reaching networks and connections. My stay in a family house in the village gave me a firm grounding in the intimate environment of a house and a local community. This allowed me to partake in everyday life in the locality, giving me privileged access to family and local activities and networks. Sharing daily life with a family and locals in a close-knit community was a rare experience, not least due to the generosity and bounteousness of my foster family and locals. Living with local families in rural communities has been largely denied to foreigners until now, let alone to foreign researchers. As many anthropologists who have conducted ethnographic research in rural and urban communities in North (Malarney 2002; Luong 2006) or South *Việt Nam* (Taylor 1999) have remarked, their access to these communities was restricted and controlled by national and local authorities. In his state of the field essay, Luong remarks that in the past two decades, ‘anthropological studies in Vietnam have been circumscribed heavily because of direct or indirect surveillance... and fieldwork restrictions’ (2006:372). As a result, research has often been restricted to ‘community visits from larger towns or cities to informants’ villages’ (ibid.). This is confirmed by Malarney (2002) in his ethnography of a Northern Vietnamese village in the vicinity of *Hà Nội*, where he notes that government officials did not allow him to live in the village and thus field research consisted of almost daily trips to the commune. Further, Taylor (1999) explains in a relevant article, that choosing *Hồ Chí Minh City* as his field site was largely determined by the restrictions applying to foreign researchers, and more particularly to official objections to his staying outside urban centres.

In my case, research permission came with clearly stated restrictions: I was allowed to stay only within the city’s boundaries, in a location known and accessible to my Vietnamese sponsors and would have no access to historical records and registers of any kind. Officials and academic mentors as well as locals in general were rather baffled at the thought that a foreigner would tolerate, let alone wish to live in a rural environment, often described by city dwellers as ‘crude’, ‘unhygienic’ and

'hazardous'. To my relief initial resistance and worries about my wellbeing gave way to yielding and considerable concessions and I was eventually allowed to stay in Luông Nghi under the auspices of provincial officials, university offices and the local police. Throughout my fieldwork in Huế, my well being and safety were a central concern for academic sponsors and local officials alike. Throughout my stay in the province, I was required to visit university offices regularly and report on the progress of my research. Furthermore, my request to stay in the village had to be approved by the local police, while granting permission for my stay earned me an unlikely guardian.

Living in the village enabled me to form casual relations and follow the pace of everyday life in the locality, and allowed me to attend celebrations and important rituals marked in the local almanac. More importantly, living in a family house and taking a place in the household as a foster 'older sister' gave me a rare glimpse into familial practices, as I came to participate in common everyday meals, daily journeys to the local market, visits to neighbours as well as special preparations for ancestral rituals and family occasions. My hosts were a family of five consisting of two teachers, working in a local school, an elder and younger daughter and a youngest born son. My family formed a somewhat unusual case in the locality, which added to my understandings of local kinship practices. In a locality of largely patrilocally-based families, my foster family lived in the house established and bequeathed by the 'maternal grandparents', i.e., the wife's parents. My foster father came from a large family of five brothers and three sisters, located in a neighboring village. My family had no patrilineal connections in the village, yet it was well respected in the locality and retained close relations with matrilineal kin, some of them living in the locality, others in different cities or abroad. My perceived status as a member of a local family, which however had no claims or active participation in village affairs, allowed me to establish connections with members of other lineages and kin groupings, without restrictions or attachments to particular local descent groupings.

Participating in family and domestic life was pivotal for my research and allowed a different outlook on kinship practices and ancestral affairs. In her ethnography of a Malay fishing community Carsten (1997) has pointed to the significance of houses and

everyday interactions for the formation of kinship and relatedness. Such relations among household members in everyday contexts have been largely disregarded in the context of societies like China and Việt Nam, where patrilineal reckonings of kinship historically take precedence. As Stafford remarks (2000:37) ‘family life and the affairs of the hearth’ have generally been disregarded or even ‘*excluded from kinship*’ in the case of China. In this context, relations between agnates and ancestral affairs that serve them, have been the main focus of kinship studies. Kinship has been understood as descent-based and grounded on a separation between familial and ancestral affairs. In Việt Nam, houses are the abode of multigenerational kin groupings, whereby living and dead kin co-habit as intimates. Ancestral altars are a central part of the Vietnamese house, forming its spatial and notional sacred core. Centrally placed at the core of the house, ancestors take part in every event and change of the household. Thus relations between the living and the dead are central not only for the formation of descent groupings and establishing connections among agnates, but also for the creation of kinship and intimacy in the context of the house. Conversely, Vietnamese houses are not only the abodes of families, formed through marriage and thus bilateral kin groupings but also form sub-units of a descent grouping.

Structure and effect

This thesis charts the relations between the living and the dead in a series of contexts and on an increasing scale that expands outwards from family rituals centered on domestic altars to state mausoleums dedicated to ‘uncle Hồ’, via lineage and village temples, local museums, and royal citadels and tombs. This outwards movement does not mark a distinction between local and national or kinship and state practices. Rather it signifies a series of interlocking contexts whereby the local, regional and national become intertwined by means of ritual and everyday practices. On another plane, this outwards movement traces the changing fates and existential trajectories of related dead and forebears. Such changing trajectories point to a shifting and evolving

ancestors. Moving from domestic and lower order altars, sheltering intimate kin, to lineage and village shrines dedicated to primordial ancestors, reveals a developing existential trajectory, by means of which related kin advance in ancestral seniority in the course of generations. The thesis examines ancestors not as ‘fixed’ in hierarchies and ‘given’ genealogies but rather in terms of an ever-changing and evolving ancestorhood.

Chapter 1 examines Vietnamese houses as the physical and relational framework within which ancestors and progeny co-habit as intimates. It looks at houses as both lived and living spaces of multi-generational kin groups, as well as structures of remembering, enlivened by the munificent presence of family ancestors. The chapter focuses on the centrality of ancestral altars and their cult around which the house is unified as a grouping. In this context, altars enshrine not only agnates and their spouses but a multitude of departed kin such as siblings, parents-in-law and unmarried aunts. The chapter points to the house as the context where consanguines and affines are integrated at the cosmological level as venerated forebears. This bilateral making of domestic altars and interplay between conflicting principles, namely alliance and descent, is further explored in chapter 5, which is concerned with the shift from domestic to higher order altars and the existential trajectory of ancestorhood. Further, the chapter examines gardens and outside space as integral parts of the house complex. Gardens, yards and balconies, are invested with a series of outdoor altars dedicated to ambiguously related dead, such as siblings who died in infancy, as well as to unrelated errant spirits. Related dead who died in infancy or ‘unmarried’ in local terms are thus enshrined at the edge of the house complex as opposed to mothers, fathers and forebears, who form the sacred and innermost core of the house. Hence, the house shelters and includes both reproductive and non-reproductive members, and thus, both the conditions of its unity and continuity as well as the possibility of its annihilation.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the making of ancestral spirits and the process of becoming a revered forebear. Examining funerary practices, it focuses on death not as cessation or disruption but rather as the initiation of a process by which the deceased is ritually transformed from a potent spirit and bewildered soul (*âm hồn*) into an efficacious spirit (*linh hồn*), attached and responsive to the prayers of living

counterparts. This transformation pivots on the concept of *linh*, which signifies the power, influence or efficacy of a spirit. Funerary practices and the propitiation of the newly deceased seek to effect their smooth transition into other worldly realms as well as their transformation into unfathomably divine and highly responsive spirits or *linh ung*. This transformation entails a gradual process and stretches beyond the disposal of the corpse and the so called 'pre-expulsion rites'. Thus it involves a series of rites performed after burial, which seek to guide and support the bewildered spirit in its journey and integration to other realms. These practices also seek to sustain a sense of intimacy and emotional connections between the deceased and surviving kin by means of everyday shared meals and ritual displays of active support.

Without due rituals held by descendants, the deceased is in danger of becoming a ghostly entity. Chapter 3 examines the possibility of becoming a 'lost soul' deprived of traceable connections to living kin and the predicaments of such unfortunate dead. Here, I focus on local ideas about ghostly entities and their precarious existence as well as an array of practices that seek to appease distressed souls and even release them from suffering. Such ideas and practices uncover a multiplicity of lost souls, which include not only victims of war or violent death but also a series of untimely dead such as children, unborn fetuses and maiden aunts. I examine not only the historicity of such entities and their relevance in the Vietnamese present but also the existential implications of being a Vietnamese ghost. Ancestors and lost souls are not examined here as opposing categories. Rather the focus is on the danger of becoming a 'lost soul' as a constant peril and possibility. In the Vietnamese cosmological landscape, ancestors can become ghostly entities and equally lost souls can be recovered from the depths of forgetfulness into the realms of ancestry. The transformable potential and the providence of the dead depend on the relations with living kin or lack of them. Hence, the well-being and providence of the dead depends on their relational potential as well as the merit and support produced by living counterparts.

The danger of becoming a lost soul is constant and thus prompts the need for periodic rituals and propitiation. Chapter 4 examines anniversaries held annually for each individual ancestor sheltered on the house altar. In the context of such rituals,

ancestral spirits are tended through food and offerings and thus transactions of food, prayers and blessing form an integral part of the relations between living and dead kin. Organized as sumptuous and enthralling feasts anniversaries seek to engage related dead by means of appealing to both their worldly and corporeal as well as incorporeal aspects. By displaying the heartfelt emotions of the living in an atmosphere of convivial commensality they seek to engage the dead as active participants, to elicit and reveal emotional connections between dead and living kin. In other words, anniversaries seek to induce the dead as both effectual and affective entities, whose existence is impartibly linked with that of their living counterparts. Bringing together substances and cosmology in the analysis of kinship, the chapter examines commensality and communion among living and dead kin.

Unlike intimate dead dwelling on house and low order altars, forebears of more distant generations enshrined in higher order halls, most commonly have ‘collective anniversaries’ (*ngày chapel*). Chapter 5 examines the collective propitiation of ancestral souls in dedicated halls. In this context, descent groupings also perform rituals, known as *hiệp kỳ*, which seek to propitiate the souls of forbears whose identities and dates of death have been forgotten. While in the context of houses, ancestral altars shelter only intimately known forebears of near generations, ancestral halls also enshrine ancestral souls whose connections with living kin are indistinct. Furthermore, domestic and low order altars enshrine conjugal couples rather than exclusively male forbears and thus rituals in this context often involve the participation of both sides of kin. In higher order descent groupings and halls conjugal couples are replaced with a pair of father and son, who are identified as originators of a lineage or sub-lineage. These differences between low and higher order altars point to an evolving ancestorhood whereby a deceased relatives are gradually transformed from intimate kin to lineally traced ancestors. The movement from domestic to higher order halls and differences in scale bring about changes in relations between dead and living kin. In the former context, relations with dead kin are traced bilaterally while in the latter ritual engagement precludes multilateral connections. Yet higher order halls are encompassing in another way. Their scale and capacity allows them to reach out and include forgotten and ambiguous forerunners, who thus form an integral part of

populous and active lineage and sub-lineage groups. Thus, ancestors whose identities are fragmentary as a result of ominous death or mislaid genealogies come to form an integral part of genealogical formations and the commemorative process.

Chapter 6 examines a particular set of dead who have been both exalted and neglected in the course of recent history. The chapter examines the fluctuations in the posthumous fates of a specific set of dead who are unique to Huế, the former Nguyễn kings. Previously forming the core of the polity, they have been marginalized by the rising tide of the revolution and eventually banned from public commemoration. Pushed to the fringes of the socialist polity, the former kings are now being gallantly re-instated in former stately contexts, where they are propitiated as extraordinary ancestors. The national and international recognition of the former royal citadel and tombs as heritage sites has facilitated their return into both public and family domains. Today, the former kings are reinstated in memory as extraordinary dead who have a rightful place in both domestic shrines of former stately houses and dedicated temples within the former citadel. In commemoration rituals former kings are construed as both forbears of a particular lineage and sovereign clan as well as part of a national ancestry.

The last chapter (ch.7) focuses on another extraordinary ancestor, namely Hồ Chí Minh. The chapter examines the state-promoted cult of Hồ Chí Minh that constitutes him as a definitive revolutionary hero and outstanding statesman as well as congenial national ‘uncle’. After his death in 1969 and especially after the introduction of *đổi mới* reforms (1986), the revolutionary state instigated a process of making memorials out of the places where Hồ Chí Minh has lived, worked and struggled for the nation, projecting his biography onto the country’s landscape. Focusing on the memorial project as unfolding in Huế and the village of Lưỡng Nghi, I explore some of the complexities, ambiguities and incongruities involved in this memorial project. Formerly an imperial capital and later stronghold of the American led forces the province is currently celebrated as the place where uncle Hồ lived during the early years of his life. The potency of the village as an imaginary landscape of Hồ Chí Minh’s youth rests with what is commonly now referred to as the ‘house of uncle Hồ’. The chapter is primarily concerned with the locals’ muted responses to this state

sponsored narrative, elicited in relation to the transformation of a commoner's house into a national shrine and the development of a memorial complex within the village sacred core. Locals' responses rather than simply falling into the over-used category of resistance practices, rest on strategic silences and avoidances, the theoretical value of which hinges on their indeterminacy and ambiguity.

Chapter 1

Housing spirits: dwellings, domestic altars and the limits of kinship

'The Vietnamese house is above all a family house and a house for the cult (of the ancestors)'

Nguyễn Văn Huyền (1990[1944]:160)

The house as a ritual community

Throughout my stay in Việt Nam, in daily encounters and casual contacts, I would face a persistent, albeit rhetorical question: don't you miss home (*nhớ nhà*); when are you bound to return (*về nhà*)? Pointing to my perceived state of 'being away from home' (*xa nhà*), the question, posed by friends and informants, reflected one of their inmost anxieties regardless of age, gender and background, whether in the urban context of southern Hồ Chí Minh City or in rural settings of central Việt Nam.¹ In Vietnamese, the word *nhà* (house) is endowed with an array of meanings. It refers to an inhabited structure, a dwelling, one's home; it also denotes a group of people 'living together under the same roof', the family (Nguyễn 1990: 20). In Huế, locals use the words *gia* (family) and *nhà* (house) interchangeably referring to a family or a spatially bounded kin group as *nhà*.² On another plane, *nhà* signifies a sovereign descent group or ruling dynasty, established by means of long traceable genealogies as in *nhà Nguyễn* or a sovereign individual as in *nhà vua* (king). *Nhà* is also extended to one's native place, referring to a village, town or country of origin.³ As Trankell suggests (2003: 149), the 'house' covers a multitude of relationships on a number of levels from the family house and the descent group, to the locality, nation and state.

Since Lévi Strauss (1979; 1983; 1991) introduced the notion of 'house societies', and drew attention to the 'house' as not merely a dwelling,

¹ According to a survey conducted by Hồ Chí Minh City Open University being away from one's home and close kin is the greatest anxiety among young students, exceeding even worries about future prospects and career. See *Dân Tộc & Thời Đại* 72, 21-23 (2004).

² *Gia*, as in *gia đình*, which means family.

³ See also *Từ Điển Việt-Anh* (1996), a Vietnamese-English dictionary compiled by the National Centre of Social Sciences and Humanities.

anthropologists have focused on the house as an analytical concept in a variety of ethnographic contexts (Bourdieu 1973; Bachnik 1983; Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995; Cunningham 1973; Sparkes & Howell 2003; Vom Bruck 2000; Yanagisako 1979). In particular, island Southeast Asia has provided a fertile field in which to explore the various dimensions of the Austronesian house as an idea, a structure as well as a kinship grouping and a ritual entity (Carsten 1995a, 1997; Errington 1987; Fox 1993; Nas 1998; Schrauwers 2004; Waterson 1990). In her study of Malay kinship, Carsten (1997) points to the significance of the house in making kin in a context where bilateral reckonings of kinship are predominant. Focusing on the hearth as the symbolic and actual core of the house, she shows how relatedness is created through 'everyday acts of feeding and living together' in the house (Carsten 2000:18).

The present paper examines the makings and significance of houses in a Vietnamese context where the principles of descent and patriliney have historically taken precedence in the formation and analysis of kinship. In this context, the house is an enduring locus in space and time, passed down to descending generations, where living and dead kin co-habit as intimates. As noted by the eminent local scholar Nguyễn (1995:155) houses are 'solid and permanent structures that last'. The Vietnamese house is the physical and relational framework within which one is conceived, born, exists and dies, and which one remains attached to after death inhabiting it as a venerated ancestor. Prominently placed on domestic altars, family ancestors 'take part in every event and change in the household' (Trankell 2003: 137), whereby they are continuously incorporated as father, mother and grandparents. This chapter examines houses as a lived and living space of multi-generational kin groups as well as structures of remembering, enlivened by the munificent presence of family ancestors. It thus focuses on the centrality of ancestral altars and the pertinent cult around which the house is unified as a grouping and thus examines houses as 'worship communities' (Errington 1987:406).

Taking the ancestral cult – objectified in domestic shrines - as a focal point in the formation of houses and kinship relations, does not imply an atemporal perspective, whereby patrilineal patterns persist over time but rather engages with shifting conditions. In the context of a vigorous socialist transformation that has removed land from owning descent groups, ancestral houses and residential land -

which have escaped requisition - have attained a new significance as sacrosanct ancestral property. The advent of 'renovation' policies (*dổi mới*) in the late 1980s and the ensuing economic and ritual resurgence have contributed to the renewal of houses, ancestral altars and pertinent practices as sacred bequests passed down to descending generations. The chapter focuses on origin or ancestral houses to which the very word *nhà* pertains. *Nhà* are structures which have been erected and inhabited by forebears, who thence become the founding couple of the house, inhabiting it as the most senior generation of the domestic kin group. Locals clearly distinguished between origin (*nhà*) and non-origin houses (*nhà riêng*). *Nhà riêng*, which can be translated as 'private' or 'independent' house, is the dwelling of a newly formed family - a married couple with their young children - erected on privately acquired land and thus not as part of ancestral property. Devoid of the presence and the merits of ancestral spirits such houses are incomplete yet bound to be redeemed in the coming generation, when the children grow into maturity through marriage and the founding couple become the revered ancestors of the house. In his discussion of the Zafimaniry house in Madagascar, Bloch (1995:78) points to the life-cycle of houses, which develop with time and the passage of generations, growing from flimsy and permeable structures into sturdy and 'holy' structures imbued with ancestral blessings. Similarly, in Việt Nam houses grow and change through marriage, and more particularly through the passing of antecedent generations. In Huế, the establishment of a house (*nhà*) is predicated upon the passing of the founding generation and the establishment of a domestic altar for their due placement. In time and as the generational span of houses grows, domestic units grow both physically and conceptually. A *nhà* or house becomes *nhà thờ* or a 'house of worship' and thus effectively an ancestral hall dedicated to past generations. In this case, the original structure of the house becomes the exclusive abode of revered forebears while living descendants move out to newly built quarters, in turn adjoined to the original house.

'Ba gian': the house as a tripartite structure

Across the Vietnamese landscape, houses vary in appearance, style and structural form, subject to local conditions and regional particularities. For locals these variations are not merely suggestive of vernacular architecture but indicative of fundamental differences in tradition, values and ways of conduct (*phong tục*) between North and South, Huế and other localities in central Việt Nam. Locals take great pride in the distinctive structural design of Huế houses and temples, developed during the Nguyễn rule. In this context, there were three kinds of houses: thatched cottages (*túp lều tranh*), wooden houses with red tiles (*ngôi nhà đồ tươi*) and the imposing houses of the ruling elite (*nhà rường*), roofed with *âm* and *duong* tiles.⁴ Made of enduring ironwood, *nhà rường* or 'kingpost houses', were the exclusive abode of royals and mandarins of the Nguyễn court.⁵ Their predominant feature is a set of sizeable pillars tied to an elaborate truss of beams supporting an imposing and impressively adorned tile roof. The number of pillars as well as the subsequent size of the roof are demonstrative of the stature, rank or level of office of the proprietor and thus of the favours bestowed by the king. Running across the width of the rectangular edifice, this set of pillars divides domestic space into distinct spans: three, five or seven spans or compartments according to the stature and ranking of the owner. The middle compartment is dedicated solely to the worship of the proprietor's forbears. Developed and glorified under the reign of the Nguyễn dynasty, the structural design of *nhà rường* is today celebrated as the 'traditional' local architecture, painstakingly preserved by the descendants of distinguished ancestors, in a plethora of ancestral houses around Huế.

Today, the presence of *nhà rường* is observable all around the city of Huế, in the vicinity of the former royal citadel, where the mandarin and royal elite were concentrated, as well as in rural and semi-urban localities. In the village of Lữơng Nghi, the physical and conceptual landscape is marked by several *nhà rường* structures, most prominent among them the village communal temple (*đình*) and

⁴ The *âm dương* couplet permeates Vietnamese cosmology, the former standing for the other world, lunar, female and the latter for this world, solar, male.

⁵ As Nguyễn Văn Huyền (1944: 157), notes, state law forbade 'ordinary people' to build and inhabit such houses. 'Solid edifices with certain decorative motifs were reserved for princes and mandarins' and the area for building a house was also delimiting and subject to ranking.

the adjoined temple of the seven founding clans (*nhà thờ bảy họ*), the latter modelled after the temple of the Nguyễn kings. These temples mark the village sacred and administrative core, which is further dominated by the ancestral houses (*nhà*) and ancestral temples (*nhà thờ*) of the members of the first local lineage. According to locals, these ancestral houses and their adjacent halls were built ‘before the revolution’ (1975) and thus they are considered to be ‘old houses’ (*nhà cũ*) as opposed to new dwellings, erected ‘after the revolution’, in turn distinguished as ‘new houses’ (*nhà mới*). These new houses, which are also *nhà riêng* or non-origin houses, are today cropping up all around the village, built on land that was previously communal land belonging to village and eminent descent groups, which was requisitioned by the state after 1975.

In Lữong Nghi, both ‘new’ and ‘old’ houses are based on the fundamental principles of *nhà rường* structures, which dictate the division of domestic space into three main parts. To my informants, the quintessential house of Huế consists of ‘three compartments and two lean-tos’ (*ba gian hai mái*). The house is perceived as a tripartite structure consisting of three main parts (*ba gian* or *ba căn*), namely ‘middle’, ‘left’ and ‘right’ (*giữa, phải, trái*). In this hierarchical division, the middle span comprises the innermost part of the house, the structure’s sacred inner core, which is solely reserved for ‘worshipping purposes’ (*cho cúng*). Local perceptions of hierarchy and order are based on concentric conceptions of space whereby the centre is the highest and supreme point, while distance and proximity to that centre designate rank and position. This is the appropriate place for the most senior generations of the house, the site of the shrine dedicated to the by and large ‘benevolent ancestral spirits who are expected to guard the welfare and lives of their subordinate descendants’ (Hobart 1978:14). As my interlocutors across rural and urban contexts, often explained, ‘a house has three compartments; the middle part is for the ancestral altar’. This division of domestic space is marked even in *nhà riêng* where an ancestral altar is yet to be established. In this case, the perceived ‘middle span’, is kept unoccupied, often screened by means of a fabric curtain, used to store ritual paraphernalia or furnished with a Buddhist altar in anticipation of the coming generation.

The appointment of a consecrated centre creates sides, namely 'left' and 'right' (*bên trai, bên phải*), which are associated with subordinate ranks of living descendants. 'Left' and 'right' are the result of appointing a sovereign centre, and thus sides are reckoned always from the perspective of the assigned mid point. *Left* indicates precedence while subordinate ranks are associated with *right*. The often induced Sino-Vietnamese couplet *tả hữu* (left-right) was used in monarchic times to denote the near sides of a king or high ranking mandarins - the midpoints of state power - while today it is employed to denote differences based on gender, age and rank in ritual and domestic arrangements. In the house, the 'left' side is associated with men, while women belong to the 'right' side of the domestic terrain (*nam tả nữ hữu*). Pillars or wooden partitions often flanking the ancestral altar designate the 'left' and 'right' span in the main hall of the house, creating separate wings. Such wings can serve as separate living and sleeping quarters for male and female members of the household, whereby the male head or adult heir are accommodated in the left wing while women and subordinate members to the right. In domestic rituals, only guests of higher status are accommodate in the inner part of the house in the vicinity of the altar; elderly men and the male host are situated to the 'left' of the altar and elderly women to the 'right', whereas mothers with young children - often including the female host - and unmarried guests eat in the courtyard. Women are placed on the right side of the altar as formal guests in rituals or as departed kin. In funerals, the coffined body of female kin is placed to the right of the ancestral altar, where subsequently her tablet is placed on the family shrine, most commonly to the 'right' of her husband. The middle part is solely dedicated to departed house members, furnished only with altars and in some cases a table used only in ritual occasions, where the dead kin are invited to partake. Living kin only infiltrate the middle span in prostrating or lowered bodies in ritual contexts, while in everyday contexts they restrict themselves in using the right and left spans in the main hall.

But how is left and right designated and from what perspective? According to locals *left* and *right* sides are always assigned from the perspective of an appointed centre. In temples and sacred structures left and right parts are designated from the perspective of the venerated spirits and therefore from inside looking outwards. Locals point to different orientations that signify two different perspectives with

regards to sacrosanct structures: *nhìn vào* and *nhìn ra* or ‘looking inwards’ and ‘looking outwards’ respectively. In the house, where ancestors and living progeny co-habit as intimates, left and right are constantly shifting between these two perspectives. In the middle part, left and right are often designated from the perspective of its most senior occupants, the enshrined ancestors, while beyond the line of the altar the two sides are often designated from ‘looking inwards’ as you enter and thus from perspective of the living. Hence, *left* and *right* are not intrinsic qualities of bodies and space but rather relative points, reckoned from a constantly changing mid point and by means of a shifting perspective. Subject to context and the relation between conversing sides the mid point can be an ancestor, a senior living descendant or a family head. Materialised in altar sides and spans of the house, left and right are constantly shifting, reassigned, alternating, marking the presence and relevance of the dead as well as their coexistence with living kin in the context of the house.

Encased in the inner realm of the house, the ancestral altar forms the sacred core around which the domestic space and group are organised, designating inner and outer parts of the house, core and periphery. More particularly, the ancestral altar designates the main body part of the house or literally the ‘main house’ (*nhà chính*), which is clearly separated from auxiliary and peripheral parts of the house, namely the ‘secondary house’ (*nhà phụ*) and the ‘cooking area’ (*nhà bếp*). Depending on the context as well as on the ‘economic circumstances of each family’, as informants often stress, the main body part of the house is the area under the main ridgepole or the whole area under the roof. The roof and the ridgepole – the midpoint in an intricate system of beams, rafters and truss that forms the centrepiece of the roof - are the most important structural elements in houses, impartibly linked with the male founder and the group of agnates.

The placement of the ridgepole (*đòn dông*), is the most significant stage in the making of a dwelling (*động thổ*), marked by the ritual sacrifice of a rooster, whose legs are then used to prognosticate the destiny of the house.⁶ The ritual placing of the principal beam (*thượng lương*) must take place at a propitious moment determined by the cyclical signs under which the male proprietor is born. The birth

⁶ The blood of rooster is believed to repel demonic influences and is sprinkled on the building site before construction resumes.

date of the founder and thus his destiny influences all aspects and stages in the construction of a house, and consequently the providence of the house and those inhabiting it. The principal and most valued structural feature of the house, the ridgepole, is the first piece to be outlined during construction and delineated with the house construction itself.⁷ Before any construction work commences, the male proprietor conducts a ‘wood cutting ceremony’ (*lễ phat mộc*), whereby the chief craftsman makes a cut on the piece of wood destined to form the ridgepole. After construction is completed, a red banner is hung on the ridge where propitious meanings or names of protective genies (*khuong thai cong*) are inscribed in *chữ Hán* (Han-Viet script).

The ridgepole is the apex of the roof and thus the highest point of the house under which the ancestral altar is set. The roof and the ridgepole are closely associated with the agnates of the house group. Locals overtly associate the roof of a house with its male head, as in the old proverb ‘the father is like a roof that shelters and protects the family’. Likewise, ‘children without a father are like a house without a roof’, exposed to the elements of nature and calamities of life. Family heads are also identified as the ‘pillar of the house’ (*người trụ cột*), which effectively supports the roof. Pillars and the ridgepole are discernible and well pronounced features that define the main body of the house or ‘main house’. The altar is set under the ridgepole, designating the middle compartment of the ‘main house’.

This area is closely associated with agnates of the house grouping. The main hall is the area where the male head deals with family affairs, rests, or entertains guests, while it becomes the focus of the house on ritual occasions such as weddings, birth rites, funerals, annual death anniversaries and periodic worship, where ancestral spirits are invited to join and partake. At the house of my foster family, this was a well attended room, with a table on the *left* of the altar, where father dealt with his paperwork overload in the late afternoons, and a platform bed on the *right*, where he relished an afternoon nap or watched the evening news, or the children watched TV. Platform beds are a common addition to the right of the altar, which serve as casual sleeping areas for agnates or sitting areas for all family members.

⁷ For the ritual hoisting of the ridgepole in Hue see Bui (2006). For parallel rituals in Chinese houses see Knapp (1999).

This is the most elaborately adorned part of the house, furnished with impressive hardwood table sets for accommodating distinguished guests and elaborately adorned with backdrop hangings and prints of calligraphic couplets in Han Việt. Main halls are invested with ornate features and family memorabilia like family photos and pictures of family members living abroad, honorific titles bestowed by former kings to distinguished forefathers, or more contemporary ones like ‘cultured family certificates’ awarded by local authorities or awards of excellence in schooling and education. Another universal addition here is vertical scrolls of papyrus or fabric, hanging on the pillars flanking the ancestral altar, inscribed in Han Việt calligraphy with auspicious meanings for longevity and well being or hard wood planks with sophisticated Sino-Vietnamese couplets. Fancy electronic equipment such as TV sets, stereos and computers are displayed here. The main hall is a multi-purpose room which male adult or other members of the house group use for rest, entertainment and for receiving guests. Dark and entrenched with the presence of both living and dead agnates this part of the house is however not frequented by children without the company of an adult or older sibling as it arouses awe and fear in them.

Auxiliary parts of the house, namely the ‘secondary house’ and the ‘cooking area’, are subordinate divisions that accommodate everyday activities and mundane functions of the family, such as sleeping, eating, storing and preparing food. These parts are situated separately, to the ‘right’ or the ‘back’ of the house respectively, away from its sacred core that takes up the ‘left’ and ‘front’ part of the house. Although adjoined, main and secondary houses are clearly separated through a series of physical markers like walls, doors and steps, which mediate transition from one space to the other. The secondary house is roofed separately through a prolongation of the principal roof that in turn, shelters the main house. Further, the secondary house is considered to sit ‘lower’ than the main hall, which in turn is situated on the ‘highest’ plane of the house plot. Difference in elevation marks order and ranking in domestic space. In ‘old’ houses, built on one storey this is marked by means of a single step that facilitates passage from the main to the secondary house. In newly constructed houses, now built in two storeys the difference in levels is more pronounced as the ancestral altar is placed in the upper part of the house, while the descendants’ living quarters and the kitchen are situated on the ground floor.



Secondary houses are less elaborately adorned yet more airy and bright, furnished with a casual dining table and platform beds. Platform beds are multipurpose furniture, used as much as bedstead for sleeping and resting as for sitting. During daytime, sofa-beds in the secondary house are used by young siblings to study, rest or play games. This is also the place where female kin of younger and older generations, rest and deal with their share of domestic affairs; the place where mothers sit with young daughters to talk or work, children retreat for a rest and snacking, caressed by grandmothers and female kin and where women liaise with sisters, daughters in-law and close kin or sit chewing betel.

Formerly, the exclusive domain of women and children, permeated with female qualities, today the secondary house is a casual living area for all household members, where everyday communal meals are taken and sleeping arrangements are made. As Luong (1989; 1993) has observed, developments in political economy, such as the socialist modernity, with its advocacy of gender equality, and the recent economic resurgence have brought about significant changes in gender relations, and the formation of domestic units as well as a shift from male-oriented to bilateral aspects of kinship. Today, the distinction between main and secondary parts, centre and periphery, remain fundamental for domestic arrangements yet it has acquired an added meaning and new emphasis. As ancestral houses are currently feverishly renovated and amplified, new sections are added to the original body of the house erected by the revered founders. Crafted by their living descendants, and attentively adjoined to the *right* of the original structure, these sizeable new sections are thence designated as the 'secondary house'. These secondary houses are used as areas of familial intimacy appropriate but not exclusive to women. Subsequently original structures become the main hall of the house dedicated to anterior generations. Benefiting from economic revitalisation and the passage of generations, ancestral houses are currently growing into visibly composite structures whereby the 'main house' is dutifully returned as inhabiting space to ancestors while their living progeny are associated with derivative parts of the house.

Centering on the hearth, kitchens or literally the 'cooking house' (*nhà bếp*), remain an exclusively female domain. The 'cooking house' most commonly consists of a small outbuilding lurking at the 'back' of the house complex as opposed to the main and secondary houses which take up the front part of the

house plot. The physical and conceptual distance between the main hall and the kitchen is mediated by the secondary house that falls between the hearth and the ancestral shrine. While main houses, delineated with the ridgepole and the ancestral shrine, face a putative and auspicious 'southern orientation' (*huớng nam*), kitchen and hearths are said to be sitting 'north' (*huớng bắc*). 'South' is the most favourable reading in the cosmic compass that belongs to the fertile *duong* principle, which stands for yang, male, solar, while 'North' belongs to the negative principle of *am*, which in turn stands for yin, female and lunar. Kitchens are semi-open air areas external to the rest of the house and further separated from the secondary house by means of a door that is securely locked at night. They are often served by a separate rear entrance that the female host or other female kin and neighbours use to go in and out the house while men only use the main entrance.

This back door often overlooks a rear garden, where women tend small vegetable plots and trees, their produce used for family consumption while their surplus is channelled to the local market to feed the family's growing need for cash. The most common trees in house gardens are bananas which form the basic fruit offering to ancestral and domestic spirits. Kitchens are also the place where domestic pets are accommodated, such as cats, which prey on mice, rats and other intruders that might infest the house. Pigsties are also situated at the back of the house near the kitchen, where poultry is also reared by female members of households. The rear patch is also the place where family waste is disposed of and processed, burned on the spot by female housekeepers. Toilets and bathrooms are also habitually situated in the rear part of the house, consisting of a separate small outbuilding or integrated in the house edifice, next to the kitchen. Associated with mundane functions, kitchens are considered tainted and impure parts of the house. The compelling habit of removing one's footwear when entering houses or sacrosanct structures is a fundamental sign of respect marking the transition to a sacred place, a place of worship, that is omitted in kitchens. One enters the house through the main hall. Even when not required, especially in *nhà rường* where original plain cement floors are preserved, the mere act of inquiring after the host before entering is a welcomed sign of politeness and good manners. On entering a kitchen, no one is expected to remove their footwear or, in the improbable event that a child steps barefoot into the kitchen, as my ten-year old foster brother once

did, feet have to be thoroughly cleansed by an older female kin before one is allowed back into the house.

Associated with impurity and ignoble human functions, cooking houses are pushed to the very rear edge of the house complex. Hence they are not penetrated by male presence, even in the case of the hearth protective spirit, whose altar is instead set in the secondary house. As both male and female informants stressed, there is ‘no kitchen without an altar of the hearth genie’ (*ông Táo*).⁸ However, the all-important protective spirit of the hearth that looks over the family is not placed in the immediate area around the hearth, often exposed to the elements but is instead sheltered by the walls of the secondary house. Nonetheless, the hearth is also an indispensable part of the house associated with ‘warmth’ and affectionate feelings among house members. The hearth is the only fireside in the house and having fireplaces in other parts of the house seemed inconceivable to my informants. In Huế, the hearth is the explicit locus of warmth and affectionate familial feelings (*am cung*) emanating from the ‘heat of the hearth’ as well as the source of satiation and profusion (*no đũa*).⁹ In ancestral houses, the original hearth, often remains idle as new walled cooking areas are constructed alongside the old ones and daily meals are most commonly cooked on kerosene or gas stoves, while electric rice cookers are the norm. Even so, original hearths are not dismantled and are occasionally used for the preparation of special local dishes, on ritual occasions or when a house member falls ill. In her insightful analysis Carsten (1997), points to the significance of cooking as well as sharing of food and substances in creating relatedness and the formation of domestic units. In Việt Nam, kitchens and hearths as vital parts of the house are the place where food is cooked and prepared to nurture all house members, both living and dead as well as domestic spirits. The food cooked on the hearth is both the vital gift to living kin, reverently placed on the family table everyday, as well as the essential gift to the ancestors placed on the high table of the altar on ritual occasions. Preparing and offering food is a central part of ancestral practices by means of which living and dead kin are drawn

⁸ The hearth spirit is a three-composite figure consisting of one female and two male constituents or else ‘two husbands and a wife’, yet they are collectively referred to with the male referent *ông*. The story of the genie speaks of matrimonial union and its frailty, as well as its indissoluble nature. It speaks about the threat of disharmony that leads to the parting of spouses and their redemptive reunion in tragic death.

⁹ See Carsten’s ethnography (1997), with the same title.

together in commensality. As this is an issue of pivotal importance I return to it in chapter 4.

Ritual and everyday practices

Ancestral shrines are the focus of domestic rituals which are enacted on an annual, periodic and semi-monthly basis. More particularly, ancestral spirits are tended on a number of occasions marked on the lunar calendar, most notably the Lunar New Year (*Tết Nguyên Đán*) as well as on a number of subsequent occasions marked on the lunar calendar as *tết* or ‘festive occasions’, such as the day dedicated to the founder of traditional herbal medicine. On the Lunar New Year - a seminal event marked in houses, ancestral halls and village temples - ancestral spirits are invited ‘back home’ (*về nhà*), to join living kin and actively partake in propitious inaugurals of the new annual cycle. The ancestral altar also becomes the focus of life cycle rituals such as birth rites, weddings where past generations of kin are called upon to bestow their favours and sanctify bonds. On the completion of their first month, newborn babies are ceremonially brought before the ancestral altar for the first time, by means of which they are introduced to attending kin, both living and dead. Betrothals and weddings also take place before ancestral altars, where the bride and groom solemnly pay their respects to forebears of both families. Moreover, ancestral spirits are summoned in the context of all-important ancestor anniversaries, held annually for each individual ancestor installed on the domestic shrine. In this case, ancestral spirits are again evoked to partake in sumptuous feasts and engage in commensality with their living kin.

Aside from formal ceremonies, practices centering on domestic shrines are a daily occurrence and integral part of everyday life. More particularly, ancestral altars as well as all subsequent altars in the house are tended semi-monthly, on the waning and waxing phases of the moon, the 1st (*mồng một*) and the 15th (*rằm*) of the lunar month respectively. In this case, domestic spirits are not given cooked foodstuffs but instead basic offerings, which consist of incense, water, fresh fruit and flowers. This occasion is marked by locals as casual contact with the spirits rather than formal worship. They clearly distinguish between ‘formal worship’

(*cúng*), that involves the ceremonious offering of food and votive goods, as well as the apposite engagement of a large group of worshippers, and the informal everyday act of ‘burning incense’ (*thắp hương*).

In houses, the abode of intimate familial relations, offering incense to departed kin and protective deities is not just undertaken on semi-monthly occasions but is a daily occurrence. Most importantly, incense is burned daily in houses on a number of instances. Readily available on top of or inside altar chests, incense is burned to mark casual encounters with departed kin and forebears. In visiting the house of kin, locals would often light a bunch of incense to offer to departed relatives, as a way of politely greeting both dead and living hosts. Similarly, on her visit to her paternal grandparents’ house, my foster sister would light incense for her deceased grandfather while chatting to her elderly grandmother. Similarly, locals would offer incense to spouses, fathers and mothers, before removing a piece of fruit or candy from the altar to offer to a visiting kin or guests such as myself. Moreover, in many houses around the village, incense is burned on the ancestral altar daily at dusk, before the family sits to dinner. Dusk is the time frame that signifies the conclusion of the *duong* phase of the daily cycle, which belongs to the solar element and this world, and the dawn of the *am*, that is the lunar phase that belongs to the netherworld. Effectively, this is a time frame when active ethereal creatures emerge from passivity and take over the land, as invisible but active populace. This act is most commonly undertaken by adult male kin but is by no means restricted to them, as in their absence, wives or young daughters might undertake the task. Hence, in houses, engagement with departed kin does not take place only periodically and in specifically assigned ritual occasions, but is a daily occurrence through which living and dead house members are drawn together as intimates.

Domestic as well as communal rituals are timed by the lunar calendar (*âm lịch*), which according to my informants is ‘intelligible to all past and present generations’ and thus to both the living and the dead. The lunar calendar chronicles the annual cycle of houses, descent groupings and local communities, as well as the agricultural cycle. Sanctified by the Nguyen dynasty, the Vietnamese lunar calendar – which corresponds to the Chinese calendar – was formerly the state almanac that delineated all contexts and levels of social engagement from houses to citadel. Today, it co-exists with the solar calendar (*duong lịch*) – introduced with French colonialism and later embraced by socialist modernity – on

the basis of which the more secularised state almanac is now drawn.¹⁰ Except for those in older generations, who were well tuned to lunar calendric arrangements, my informants moved with relative ease between the two calendars, between the lunar phases that defined worshipping practices in the house, lineage and community and the solar calendar that dictated conduct outside the kin group, in businesses, universities and administrative agencies.

Even more strikingly, all moved confidently between the solar and the lunar phases of the day, between *duong* and *âm*, this world and the other, denoting the co-existence of the living and the dead. Within the house opposing principles are transformed into a putative unity, as kinship reckonings and practices knit together an array of different cosmic elements such as *âm* and *duong*, this world and the nether world and disparate actors namely, the dead and the living. In the house, mothers, fathers and progenitors continue to exist as such in posterity, enduring as ‘people of alike body’ (*người thân*), beyond the disintegrating influence of the grave. Ancestors live as much as their living descendants but frequent another world. The house is the locus where genealogically near kin cohabit, tied together in spatially and temporally bounded units. Temporal and spatial divisions, according to which houses are organised, mark the difference between antecedent and present generations, living and dead kin while at the same time enable their communion by means of assigning prescribed points in space and time where the two sides can meet and engage with each other.

Domestic altars and the unity of the house

The space in and around the house is marked by a series of altars and shrines dedicated to deities, genies, bodhisattvas as well as related and unrelated human spirits, among which the ancestral altar is the centrepiece. The diversity of shrines in domestic space signifies the syncretism of religious practices in Việt Nam, whereby Daoist, Buddhist, Confucianist influences - summarised by locals as the

¹⁰ Until recently the state monopolised the printing of annual calendars, which gave priority to solar dates, whilst including lunar ones. In 2005, as demand grew beyond the state printing houses capacities, the administration decided to allow private companies to issue calendars, albeit under state control.

‘three Teachings of Việt Nam’ – as well as spirit propitiation practices co-exist within a spatially bounded unit. Divinities and divinised human spirits, placed in separate shrines in different parts of the house, are prayed to for health, wealth and happiness and ensure long life and well being. Most prominent among such protective and munificent spirits are the revered forebears, encased in the inner sacred core of the house.

Most commonly, an ancestral altar or literally ‘worshipping table’ (*bán thờ*), consists of a series of adjoined tables, placed one behind the other, the last table leaning against the back wall of the ‘middle’ compartment. Very rarely, it takes the form of a wooden shelf set high up against a back wall in the main living area. This is the case in small urban and suburban dwellings or flats, most commonly inhabited by families of newcomers, who have joined the recent migrating flow from neighbouring less economically dynamic provinces. Most commonly in Huế, ancestral altars come in the shape of voluminous hardwood chests elaborately adorned with mother of pearl carvings in their most opulent form. The carvings portray idyllic landscapes of mountains, trees, water pools and benevolent forest animals like deer, grazing in the tranquillity of the scenery. Such representations accompany the dead in funerals and thereafter, as visual articulations of blessings and wishes for a serene and blissful existence in posterity. Hardwood chests are of considerable stature reaching to the upper torso of an adult’s body and consequently dictate a standing disposition for those who care for it or stand against it.

On this high table, iconic representations of the ancestors are placed in the form of ancestral tablets and portraits as well as ritual paraphernalia, all arranged in a prescribed order. Visual representations of ancestors in the form of photos or painted portraits are not among the indispensable contents of an altar and formerly were only available in elite houses, yet in the past few years they have become most popular. Currently most domestic altars display photographic portraits of recent generations, such as parents and grandparents. Taking advantage of new computing technologies (*Photoshop*), descendants retouch old photos to improve and enhance the image (*hình*) of ancestors in all-auspicious portraits. Ancestral images are enlarged, enriched with vivid colours, dressed up in formal gear of past times and set against auspicious settings flanked by virtual ancestral altars and hardwood table sets regardless of their earlier background and social standing.

Likewise, fathers and grandfathers, appear as eminent figures clad in ‘traditional’ tunic (*áo*) and turban, the clothing of respectable citizens during monarchic times, which is today worn in ancestral rituals by their male descendants.¹¹ On the other hand, mothers and female kin, embodying both pre-socialist and socialist modernities, are favoured in urbane western-styled outfits complete with matching jewellery.

Positioned among these critical elements are other essential ritual items such as incense burners, wax or electric candles, flower vases, wine or water cups and porcelain fruit bowls. Censers are the indispensable and most sacred objects set on altars and shrines of all kinds, to which spirit or souls become attached, through regular offerings of incense. Upon their death each departed house member, acquires a censer (*bát nhàn*) on the family altar, to which their souls become attached through daily offerings of incense and periodic offerings of food. When old censers are replaced by new lustrous porcelain censers, the former are not discarded randomly but instead deposited on sacred sites like the foot of a banyan tree or open-air shrines, which errant spirits frequent. In the house, every ancestor has an individual censer while in ancestral halls, in turn dedicated to more distant generations of forbears, ancestral spirits are attached to collective censers (*bát nhàn chung*) grouped according to genealogical rank and relational status (see chapter 5). Domestic altars shelter ancestral figures of near generations whose identity (name, age and date of death) as well as kinship connections to the living are well known and traceable, while ancestral halls accommodate not only a multitude of antecedent generations, many of whom may have no known name and identity. The burning of fragrant incense is the fundamental act of calling upon spirits, be it of human or heavenly origins. Essential supplies such as bundles of incense sticks, votive money (*tiền vàng bạc*) and clothes, as well as cigarettes and alcohol for ethereal or corporeal guests are also stored within the altar chest itself.

Behind chests or the high table of altars a wooden elongated table is vertically attached, where all cooked offerings are placed for funerary rites, ancestor anniversaries, and other important ritual occasions. For these purposes, ancestral altars have elongated wooden stalls in the shape of dinner tables, attached behind the elaborate chests, which in turn only form the front part of the shrine. On rituals,

¹¹ These tunics are the ones worn by mandarins and scholars during the Nguyễn rule (1802-1945).

all domestic spirits receive offerings, the range and amount of which depends and denotes differences in nature, rank and status as well as their connections to the group of living worshippers. Ancestral spirits receive the full range of foodstuff and their more generous portions of food cooked with care in the hearth, as well as an array of material goods, such as votive clothing, currency and assets. Subordinate shrines for unrelated or errant spirits, shelter in separate outdoor shrines and receive lesser portions of foodstuff and goods, in the form of makeshift ‘hand out trays’ (*mâm thi thực*). On the other hand, spirits of heavenly origins, such as Buddhist deities, who are not bound to worldly needs and desires, do not receive ‘food’ – most importantly cooked rice - but only flowers, fruits, candies and sweet delicacies as an act of reverence and acknowledgement.

Buddhist shrines are most common in houses around Huế, which was historically a stronghold of Buddhism, favoured by the Nguyễn court. Shrines dedicated to Buddha as well as various bodhisattvas, are most common in houses, among them the ‘merciful’ *Quân Thế Âm*, who is a the ‘female form of Buddha’s essence’, according to locals and hence highly responsive to the sufferings and prayers of the living. Such shrines, which often take the shape of voluminous hardwood chests - comparable in make to the family altars - are placed in front of the ancestral spirits in order to guide and protect them. Buddhist divinities are enlightened and supreme beings, whose guidance and support in afterlife are essential for the welfare of dead kin as much as the material and emotional support proffered on the part of living kin. Buddhist shrines in houses are more relevant to dead kin rather than their living descendants, and are often set up as part of the latter’s care and concern towards the former. Buddhism is impartibly linked with the welfare and fate of humans in posterity and thus Buddhist monks and nuns are indispensable in relevant practices, the former officiating funerary rituals while the former often assigned with the care of errant or displaced ancestral souls such as children and exiled sovereigns. More so, Buddhist altars appear in most houses around Huế even in non-devout ones or explicitly ‘irreligious’ such as that of the young ‘constable’ who was shadowing me. In few cases, a shrine dedicated to Heaven and Earth, the supreme Taoist entities shield the ancestral altar instead.¹²

¹² In the case of Christian households – mostly Catholic in Hue - a shrine with a statue of Mary dominates the main hall of the house while the ancestral shrine is set up behind it or on the wall. In the context of colonial Annam, Hue was the base of apostolic vicariates and the city’s imposing

Ancestors are placed on altars in a prescribed order, according to hierarchies based on gender, age and generation. Accordingly, male ancestors dwell on the 'left' side of altars as opposed to female that sit to the 'right'. Women incorporated to their husband's families and descent groups are accordingly placed on altars alongside their spouse and his patrilineal kin. Ancestors are arranged on altars in genealogical order, with the founding couple of the house group forming the appointed sovereign centre that determines the placement of all other venerated kin members. As the most senior generation in the house and on the altar, the founding couple occupies the physically and conceptually highest point on the altar, while subordinate ranks of descendants are placed on subsequent levels. According to locals, ancestral altars, are dedicated to the paternal side (*họ nội*), the 'spear side' of the house as opposed to the 'distaff side', the maternal (*họ ngoại*), and thus enshrine the values and precepts of the long-established 'patrilineal system', as fervent advocates of the ancestral cult often stressed. However, in practice, ancestral altars stretch their capacity to accommodate a multitude of departed kin to whom the living kin trace intimate connections. Siblings, aunts and in-laws, who might be childless (*không có con*) and thus have 'no one to care for them', are incorporated in lineally envisioned shrines, whereby nephews, uncles and sons-in-law undertake the responsibility of their worship. Such adjustments often result into a notionally impossible 'one altar with two sides, whereby maternal and paternal relatives, cohabit in the same spatially bounded unit.

A telling case - which is anything but infrequent - is that of an eminent village elder, *ông Tiêu*.¹³ The third child out of seven and youngest male sibling, *ông Tiêu* had two older brothers, both perished in the recent war. The ancestral altar at his house, gathered not only three incongruent generations of ancestors but also reconciled two undoubtedly disparate 'sides' (*bên*): the paternal or literally 'inner side' (*bên nội*) and the maternal or 'external side' (*bên ngoại*). Being the only

cathedrals and catholic missions today attest to the Christian influence. Great concentrations of catholic households in the area are found around the city's cathedrals. In the village of Luong Nghi, small churches in neighbouring communities have fallen into disrepair but according to locals from other villages they are still operating.

¹³ Here as well as throughout the thesis I use Vietnamese personal pronouns before names, which my informants use when addressing others. These pronouns, use kinship terms and clearly denote the relation between addressor and addressee. *Ông* here means 'grandfather' and is more generally used as a deferential address to strangers of senior age. The female equivalent is *bà* (grandmother). For an examination of forms of address and kinship terminology see Luong (1989).

surviving son, *ông* Tiêu undertook the responsibility for the cult and care of his deceased parents, the endogenous or in-house side that occupied the central part of the altar. The front part of the altar, sitting 'lower', was dedicated to one of his older brothers, while the back, on the 'highest level' (*cáo nhật*), hosted the parents of his wife. *Ông* Tiêu - who appeared in our discussions as a fervent advocate of the values and significance of the 'patrilineal system' - explained that the parents of his wife were worshipped here because they had 'no son to care for them', and thus, the responsibility for their care had to be undertaken by their son-in-law. His brother also didn't belong here, but as his only son 'lived far away' disregarding his filial responsibilities, *ông* Tiêu also had to care for him. In several other ancestral shrines around the village, older and younger brothers, who perished in the wars or 'unmarried aunts' (*bà cô*) and sisters, who died 'without husband' (*không có chồng*) and thus offspring, are accommodated on the ancestral altar alongside parents and agnates.

The penetration of male-oriented shrines by siblings, aunts and affines speaks of transformative movements and adaptive developments in the realm of kinship. As mentioned earlier, Luong (1989; 1993) has addressed the synthetic and dynamic nature of Vietnamese kinship by pointing to a move from 'patrilineal to bilateral reckonings as a result of shifting political economies. As Luong notes the characterisation of kinship in either of these terms fails to do justice to the 'complexity of the native system' (1989: 754). Further, Kwon (2006; 2008), examines how the recent war and current changes in political economy have brought about transformations in the realm of memory and kinship. The encompassing dimension of domestic altars can be partly explained with reference to recent historical developments and past conflicts, whereby sons and rightful heirs have perished or fled overseas or ancestors have died 'in the streets' (Kwon 2006). Nonetheless, the coexistence of lineal and non-lineal kin on the same altar is not merely incidental but rather an idiom of local kinship. Perhaps, such encompassing practices can be better understood with reference to the difference between 'official' and 'practical' kinship, as suggested by Bourdieu (1972). Pointing to the difference between formal and practical enactments, Bourdieu reveals the complexities involved in the formation of kinship, manifest in the intricate articulation of the two rather than their distinction. The makings of altars

in practice and their adjustment to household particularities do not fail their import and meaning but instead reinstate their significance and centrality in household formation. Dissonances and adjustments in the making of altars reinstate their significance as the all-encompassing core of the house and the making of houses as kin groupings.

As explained earlier, incense is burned on ancestral altars every day at the fall of dusk, an interim time frame that signifies commotion among otherworldly influences. In the village, people engage in this daily act of lighting incense to all altars in and around the house, encircling the house in haze of fragrant smoke, and drawing together both indoor and outdoor altars.¹⁴ Following a prescribed order, such liturgical rounds demarcate the ranking order and significance of each altar, while at the same time marking domestic space as a sacrosanct unity, encompassing the different sides of the house. Further, these daily acts of burning incense, emotively mark the unity of the house as a kin group, as evident in the following case.

Like other male heads in houses around the village, *Cuong*, a retired teacher, reverently engaged in his own daily rounds, whereby moving physically from one corner of the domestic complex to the other, he drew together the two distinct sides of the house as a kin group: the paternal and the maternal. Residing at the house of the 'maternal side' (*họ ngoai*), in a locale of patrilocally based families, *Cuong's* family presents an odd case; nonetheless, it highlights the meaning and significance of such everyday practices. Every evening *Cuong* lit an exactly numbered bunch of incense sticks, offered the first piece to Buddha the purest and highest spirit in the house, and then to other subordinate human spirits on the ancestral altar in a prescribed order: the maternal grandfather, grandmother and their daughter-in-law. Then, with the smouldering incense at hand and the smoke marking a visible trail, he moved out of the main house dedicated to its founders – in that case the 'maternal grandparents' (*ong ba ngoai*) – and into an adjacent building in the same plot. Recently erected by *Cuong* and his wife (2004), this new two storey building was another self-sufficient house, with a purposely made altar room, dedicated to his father, the 'paternal grandfather' of the family. This altar

¹⁴ In Vietnamese *huong*, literally scent, perfume, fragrance is synonymous with incense, the fundamental item of worship which produces a fragrant smoke, and thus constitutes the medium of communication with the other world. Accordingly, venerated souls of righteous dead – most notably Buddhist monks – are referred to as *huong hỏn*.

was only a ‘secondary altar’ (*bàn thờ phụ*), as the ‘main altar’ had been established in his paternal house, which his eldest brother had inherited. According to local understandings ‘secondary altars’ are rather inconsequential when it comes to engaging ancestral spirits. The ancestral cult is carried out in the physical space where the ancestors have lived and their souls continue to inhabit in posterity. So called ‘secondary altars’ are odd – yet not infrequent – as they are placed in separate domestic settings that are unfamiliar to the ancestral souls, and thus these altars and the practices centred on them are of little significance and effect. Nonetheless, this added altar of the father was of great importance and consequence to Cuong and his family.

Cuong was the youngest son among many. This altar marked his distance and independence from a fractious sibling group, which was afflicted with tensions over filial responsibilities and inheritance. After the death of his father, the mounting tensions among siblings led to the breaking up of the paternal house; as siblings – including the eldest brother and his family who have inherited the house – went on to establish their own separate houses in different localities. At the same time, this altar allowed Cuong to ritually reform and reestablish his relationship with his father and thus re-position himself within the paternal kin group. Most importantly, the incorporation of the newly built quarters and its secondary altar, as integral part of the house complex, was of pivotal significance for the family and its future. It would ensure the continuity of the house and the male line by redeeming the odds of maternal descent in the coming generation, when Cuong and his wife would take their rightful place on the altar alongside the ‘paternal grandfather’.

Let me revert here to Lévi Strauss and his definition of the house, which has inspired many studies and instigated fruitful debates (see for example Macdonald 1987; Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995). As Lévi Strauss and subsequently many others have stressed, the house unites within itself a series of conflicting principles, most notably, alliance and descent. In traditional anthropological studies of kinship such principles have been considered to be mutually exclusive. In their keen analysis of the notion of ‘*sociétés à maison*’, Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995), point to the merits and the limits of the original definition of the house. In this context they note that Lévi Strauss’s notion of the house, which ‘transfixes irreconcilable

oppositions', appears 'paradoxically static' (ibid.37). Pointing to houses as 'dynamic entities', the authors suggest instead a new reading of the house as a process rather than a fixed unit (ibid). Furthermore Errington, comparing a number of cognatic and lineally based societies of the Indonesian archipelago, argues that such theoretically 'incompatible principles' cease to trouble us if we look upon the 'House' as a 'worship community' whose two 'devices for recruitment are indeed to give birth and marry' (1987:406). Perfect unity she argues would mean the death of the house (ibid. 438). In the cases I have reviewed here it becomes apparent that it is not the eradication of differences that ensures the unity and continuity of the house but rather the perpetuation of disparities and their dynamic confluence. Centering on ancestral altars and the pertinent cult, Vietnamese houses are the physical and relational context within which incongruent categories of kin such as affines and consanguines are integrated as venerated ancestors at the cosmological level. Furthermore, examined as a ritual community the house appears to shelter both kin who have contributed to its reproduction and continuity, such as prolific forbears as well as non-reproductive members. This is apparent in gardens and yards, where house members who died in infancy or without spouse and children, are separately sheltered.

Gardens, outside space and the limits of the house as a kin grouping

In ethnographic studies of the house, description and analysis of space is often restricted to structural aspects and the actual edifice. However, in Việt Nam, houses are multi-dimensional, composite, and include not only built structures but also garden land and outdoor space as integral parts of the house. This is more apparent in Huế and especially in semi-urban locations where houses come with well-fenced gardens and ample courtyards. Gardens, yards, as well as balconies - in the case of city flats - are dominated by a series of outdoor shrines dedicated to unrelated errant spirits as well as to kin of ambiguous status. In his discussion of domestic ritual practices in central Vietnam, Kwon examines the significance of outdoor altars dedicated to ghostly entities, set up at the 'edge of fenced domestic

garden' (2006: 6). In his analysis domestic space and its ritual organisation are based on a 'concentric dualism' that is spatially demonstrated in a dyadic opposition between the 'house' (*nhà*) and the 'street' (*đường*), or inside and outside. In this scheme, outdoor shrines for errant ghosts fall physically and conceptually outside the domestic context. Similarly, in Hue, my informants often reiterate the distinction between *nhà*, as a safe environment and *đường* as unfamiliar setting.

However, gardens do not fall into the physical and conceptual landscape of the street but rather are construed as integral parts of the house. Furthermore, villagers register the distinction between the house and the street, inside and outside by means of a two-fold movement, encapsulated in the local idiom, *ra nhà*, literally 'exit the house', go out and *vào nhà* or 'enter the house'. These two movements markedly describe everyday activities. This movement is not a straight horizontal move from one to the other, but rather a process, physically reflected in the gradual movement of bodies from the dwelling's intimate inner quarters to its outer limits, whereby crossing the outer gate signifies the passage from one domain to the other. Here, I propose that, gardens and yards, as man-made landscapes, fall physically and conceptually beyond dyadic classifications such as 'house' and 'street'. Gardens and courtyards, are part of the bequeathed ancestral property, and therefore fall well within the context of the house complex. As well fenced and high walled outdoor space, they mediate between the sanctuary of the sheltered quarters and the world that moves beyond its walls. More so, I propose that outdoor domestic space and shrines signify the conceptual and physical limits of the house, as both a dwelling and as a kin grouping.

In Huế, gardens and yards are assiduously invested with a set of features and auspicious ornamentations, accorded to the principles of Chinese geomancy of *feng shui*, in Vietnamese *phong thủy* or 'wind and water'.¹⁵ *Phong Thủy* is a set of geomantic principles based on the conviction that 'human modifications of landscape not only bring about surface changes but create conditions that influence and control the fortunes of those occupying the sites thus modified' (Knapp 1999:15). Today, interpreted by eminent Huế historians and intelligentsia as 'landscape architecture' distinctive of the majestic structures pertaining to the

¹⁵ For more on Chinese geomantic principles and cosmology see Feuchtwang (1978).

former royal and mandarin elite, *phong thủy* resurfaces as a popular exercise in summoning good fortune, embraced by both prospering and modest households and epitomized in favourably arranged ornate garden settings.¹⁶

According to *feng shui* principles, screens are an essential feature for an array of dwellings, from houses to palaces and tombs. These screens serve a twofold purpose, firstly deterring malevolent influences from entering a dwelling and secondly preventing good fortune from escaping. In the past protective screens (*bình phong*) featured exclusively in the houses of the noble and mandarin elite yet today they are found in most houses around Huế. Most commonly *bình phong* take the form of concrete-made shields, painted with auspicious colours and messages in calligraphic Hán Việt script. Such calligraphic characters spell the word *lộc* (prosperity, abundance) on the inner side of the wall that faces the house and the word *phúc* (bliss, happiness) on the other side. Gardens are also carefully invested with a set of auspicious elements, such as elaborately adorned fish ponds, puddles and water features with rockery formations, which signify prolific and profusely blessed settings. The commonly found combination of fish ponds with rockery formations encapsulate the two elements that according to locals make up the country, namely mountains and water. Front gardens and yards are also meticulously arranged with parterres and pots featuring a variety of decorative plants and fruit trees, most commonly banana trees, which make for the perfect depository for the umbilical cord of newborns due to the coolness sustained in its roots.

Garden land and ample yards were in the past signs of affluence and high standing, as land came along with the official appointment or promotion of mandarins and thus as a sign of the favours bestowed by the king. Today, courtyards are painstakingly arranged as auspicious settings which accommodate guests on an array of ritual occasions such as weddings, funerals and ancestral anniversaries. At weddings, makeshift tents are set up in paved courts to accommodate a multitude of guests. Most commonly affines, neighbours and friends are entertained outside in the yard, while close kin and agnates are accommodated in the inner part of the house, next to the altar. Therefore, gardens

¹⁶ In former noble houses, gardens are now an essential feature, painstakingly planted and invested with geomantic features. Today, these houses are reintroduced as 'garden houses' (*nhà vườn*) which are construed as part of Huế's unique cultural heritage.

and yards do not easily fit in the category of the ‘street’, in turn construed as a potentially hostile environment that impregnates danger. According to local understandings, the street and the outside world lie behind the main gate situated in the yard which is thought to facilitate movement in and out of the house.

As mentioned earlier, gardens and outdoor space are endowed with a series of outdoor shrines that shelter errant spirits and unbounded wandering souls. Such shrines, known in Hué as *am*, come in the form of miniscule temples which rest on the top of an upright post. *Am* are found either in the middle of courtyards or front gardens or marking their perimeter, their positioning depending on the nature of the spirit they shelter. Shrines situated in the outer margins of gardens and yards are dedicated to unrelated errant spirits as well as to related souls of ambiguous existential and relational status. The former are identified as ‘open-air shrines’ (*am ngoài trói*) and are most common in houses around the province usually situated near the fence and facing towards the street. ‘Open air shrines’ are addressed to the crowds of unidentified, unknown spirits of anguished ghostly entities, who suffered an untimely and ominous death and roam in the environs of the house. These shrines provide shelter and food to such homeless, destitute spirits who depend on the charity of unrelated living as opposed to well-cared for ancestral spirits. In their most plain form, ‘open air shrines’ for ghostly entities consist of a plain wooden plank sitting atop a post, marking their lack of a place to take shelter. As locals put it lost souls do not have a ‘roof’, a ‘body’ or a ‘place to lean on’ (see chapter 3). Upon this plank, a rudimentary set of three articles are placed: incense burner, vase and small dish for periodic offerings. These outdoor shrines are tended twice monthly on the sideline of domestic rituals and periodic worship for ancestral spirits.

Currently, as houses are feverishly renovated, *am* are accordingly upgraded, often replaced with miniature roofed structures - correspondingly the craft and trade of *am* thrives - so elaborate and lavishly adorned that in exceptional cases they receive as much adornment and care as indoor altars. This growing concern for errant spirits most certainly bears relevance to recent turbulent pasts that remain mostly unspoken and muted or evoked through silences. In reluctant explanations about the practices associated with unrelated errant spirits, my informants referred to historical depths of previous centuries unearthing the dreadful fate of the Cham, the indigenous populations that formerly ‘inhabited this

land' that perished or were violently displaced in the course of the southward advancement of the Việt.¹⁷ Yet more often they reached to the depths of the unmaking of kinship, explaining that the 'lost souls' are those who fell to their tragic death, separated from home and kin and thus have 'no one to care for them'.

Individual outdoor shrines or *am* are also dedicated to known kin that suffered an untimely death, dying as foetuses aborted before birth or infants who died before three years of age. Such kin did not live to become full persons and thus full kin and therefore cannot be placed on the ancestral altar. Ancestral altars are reserved only for kin of reverent age and status that died as adults, ideally after marriage and having produced offspring, and therefore having contributed to the perpetuation of the house and line of descent. However, individual anniversaries are annually held for 'uncles and aunts' as much as for all other departed kin sheltered in the house, nonetheless more modest and lesser in scale with the sole participation of house members. The young spirits of infants are sheltered in individual shrines outdoors, as not fully formed and hardly cultured and refined, they embody danger for both their living and dead kin. Such kin are collectively referred to as 'uncles and aunts' (*bác cô*), as opposed to *ông bà* 'grandfather and grandmother', which is a common reference to forebears, enshrined in domestic altar.¹⁸ Unlike the usually unmarked shrines for 'lost souls, the shrines for uncles and aunts have elaborately decorated roof tops, often marking the gender of the infant, when it is known. In the village, locals most commonly explain such *am* as dedicated to 'maiden aunts' (*bà cô*), who died at a tender age and thus 'without a husband' and children. In the garden of my host family – a matrilocally based family - two *am* placed near the garden fence, were dedicated to the 'brother and sister', the siblings of my foster mother, who died in infancy, aged two and three years old. The *am* for the boy was situated to the left of his sister, who in turn stood the 'right' of her brother and a step behind him. The third *am* was situated in the middle of the garden amidst banana trees and growing plants. This *am*, which came in the form of a miniature house, was dedicated to the previous owners of the house, from whom the maternal grandparents bought the residence. Other shrines lying amidst trees in the middle of gardens and courtyards are dedicated to

¹⁷ This also served as a reference to more recent conflicts where local populations have suffered equally ominous fates (see chapter 3).

¹⁸ See also Kwon (2006:12), where the distinction between 'displaced wandering ghosts' and 'ritually appropriated ancestors' is underlined in similar terms.

protective deities and divinities, such as the spirit of the earth or the five elements. Such *am* are most found in the yards of ancestral halls and temples.

Inhabiting the fringes of domestic space, the existence of the spirits of 'aunts' and 'uncles', is beleaguered with ambiguities. Such ambiguities relate to their status as dead as well as kin. They are both part of the house as a kin grouping and ritual community yet at the same time they exist in its periphery, placed at the very edge of domestic space. Furthermore, such spirits are peripheral in terms of kinship and descent as unlike the prolific ancestral spirits they do not contribute to the continuity and enhancement of the house but rather spell the possibilities of non-reproduction and discontinuity. Bound up with notions of 'sacred space' and 'sacred time', the house comprising gardens and yards, is a setting for domesticity where strangers move beyond outer walls and gates while the family is united within. The sanctity of the house is marked through a series of indoor and outdoor altars that mark and designate the inside as opposed to outside as well as the levels and degree of relatedness. Placed along the physical boundaries of the house, outdoor protective altars mark not only the perimeter of the house but also the limits of the house as a kin grouping.

Next, I will concentrate on how deceased house member come to be placed at the core of the house as munificent ancestral spirits. This involves a long process of transition whereby one is ritually transformed from a newly deceased of ambiguous status into a largely benevolent forebear. This process of transformation is neither instantaneous nor unwavering. Newly deceased are ambiguous and perilous entities, whose intimacy and connections with living kin have to be re-established. Therefore newly deceased family members are sheltered on a separate shrine for the duration of the funerary cycle and until their transformation has been completed.

Chapter 2

Becoming an ancestor: funerary practices and making kin

‘Sống gửi, Thác về’

(Life is a temporary stay, Death is a return).¹

From vong hồn to linh hồn: making ancestral spirits

Since Hertz (1960:76) drew attention to death as ‘not merely a physical event’, anthropologists have focused on death and mortuary practices in a variety of ethnographic contexts (Bloch & Parry 1982; Danforth 1982; Metcalf & Huntington 1979; Tsintjilonis 2000, 2007; Vitebski 1993). In his seminal analysis of mortuary rituals Hertz has pointed to death as a long process of transition which involves more than ‘physiological phenomena’ (1960: 27). In his re-appraisal of Hertz’s analytical insights, Bloch (1988) remarks that despite understanding death as a transitory process and a ‘journey’, Hertz has not moved away from perceptions of death as something that happens in an instant. Challenging this ‘punctual’ view of death whereby one is either dead or alive, Bloch demonstrates that this view is impartibly linked with western ideas about the person as a ‘bounded unit’ (ibid, 26). Introducing a contrast between ‘bounded’ and ‘unbounded’ individuals, ‘holistic’ and ‘individual’ aspects of the person, Bloch shows that death is ‘not the end of all that matters about the person’ (ibid. 17). A number of other studies have reiterated this point, stressing that certain aspects of the person and connections with living counterparts persist beyond death. In his study on Chinese funerals Watson (1988a: 9) maintains that ‘what survives death is patrilineal kinship and ties with agnatic kinsmen’ (ibid. 8). Further, in his study of the Sora of Eastern India Vitebski (1993: 10) examines how interactions between kin are sustained beyond death and by means of mediated and recurrent ‘dialogues’ (ibid.

¹ Vietnamese adage, reiterated by Chanh, (1993:163) in his analysis of cultic practices pertaining to ancestors and the ontology of the human souls.

10).² Focusing on the local concept of *sonum* (dead, die) and on the dead as potent and active entities, he argues that death does not signify the annihilation of the person or the end of relationships with kin. Rather than a cessation or disruption, he highlights death as a case of ‘separation’ whereby living and dead kin are pulled apart in disparate realms and modes of existence yet sustain interactions and connections as two disparate but conversant sides (ibid. 9).

Following such insights, I examine here death and funerary practices as a long process of transition that signifies the transformation of the deceased into a potent and efficacious spirit that remains attached to his/her living kin. In Việt Nam, as elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia, funerals mark the gradual transformation of the deceased from a dangerous potent spectre attached to its earthly form into a benevolent and efficacious spirit that takes an interest in the well-being of his living kin. Funerary practices in Huế are concerned not only with the transition of the deceased into propitious other worldly realms but further with their re-integration into the family and kin groupings as revered mothers, fathers or grandparents. The passage from one realm to the other is marked both by disruption and continuity whereby the corporeality, essence and relationships a person embodies are formed and transformed, articulated, elicited and instantiated. In his analysis of mortuary practices in Toraja, Tsintjilonis points to a ‘sense-relatedness’ between kin, which is ‘not extinguished at the point of death’ (2007:188). He stresses that the funerary process does not simply ‘represent the passage from life to death and ancestorhood’, and therefore it does not merely represent given connections of kinship and descent. Rather it creates ‘an ancestral body’, which ‘instantiates and reveals the relationships upon which it depends’ (ibid. 191). Similarly, in Huế the funerary process signifies a formative and generative process that spells the emergence and nascence of an effectual and affective entity responsive to the prayers of its living descendants (*linh hồn*). In this sense, it forms and creates a different kind of intimacy that falls beyond the scope of everyday and face-to-face life. Focusing on mortuary practices and funerary rites, the present

² According to Vitebski (1993:10), the Sora are a highland group that linguistically and culturally bear more links with Southeast Asian traditions rather than lowland Indian populations.

chapter examines the process of becoming an ancestor and thus it is an exploration into the ontology of the person and the cosmology of relatedness.

This defining journey and transition into post-corporeal existence is not predetermined but contingent on the actions and ritual efforts of living kin. Through funerary rituals and prayers the living strive to ensure the transition of the deceased into auspicious other worldly realms and their due transformation into largely benevolent ancestral spirits, who guard and protect their living counterparts. However, this transformation is not conclusive or eternal and the becoming of ancestral spirits is continuous and open-ended. As explained in the following chapter (chapter 3), the well being of the dead depends on the constant care and continuing support provided by living kin. If the needs of the dead for sustenance and support are not duly met they can turn into destitute errant spirits and malevolent ghosts. Ancestors and ghosts are not rigid or impenetrable categories but instead reliant on continuing relations and exchanges between dead and living kin or the lack of them. Funerary practices are not examined here as an eventual transition or irreversible transformation but as part of a larger process of *becoming*, further punctuated by means of a series of practices relating to the dead, such as periodic propitiation rites and ancestor anniversaries (see chapter 4).

Funerary practices extend beyond the mortuary treatment of the corpse and its ritual expulsion from the community. A number of ethnographic studies on death and funerary practices in China (Watson et al 1982; 1988b; Oxfeld 2004) as well as in Việt Nam (Malarney 2002; Kleinen 1999) have focused primarily on the ritual treatment of the corpse and the ceremonial disposal of the deceased. In his study of Cantonese funerals Watson (1988a: 15) posits a clear distinction between ‘pre-expulsion’ and ‘post-expulsion’ rites, focusing his analysis on the former. In this context, funerals are examined as efforts in ‘parceling out death pollution’ and eliminating the adverse effects of ‘killing airs’ emanating from the decaying corpse (Watson 1982:169). However, as Sutton remarks in his study of Chinese funerals, *emic* perceptions do not draw such distinctions but rather consider the ‘whole process as a unit’ (2007: 134). Similarly in Hué, funerary practices and concerns stretch far beyond the burial and include a series of rites, which mark the gradual transition of the deceased to the other

world and punctuate their transcendental transformation. Such practices include rituals that punctuate the completion of the seven ‘sevens’ cycle (or forty nine days) as well as the first and second year anniversaries. The seven ‘sevens’ cycle, signifies an initial period of transition whereby the deceased becomes gradually aware of his/her dying. The completion of the first and second year after death marked respectively as the ‘small’ and ‘big clearance’, further signify stages in the process of transcendental transformation. In these stages, the deceased becomes accustomed to his new existential circumstances and is turned into a settled ancestral spirit attached and responsive to supportive living kin. Upon the second anniversary or soon after, the deceased’s transformation has been completed and they are subsequently installed on the main ancestral altar. These ritually marked stages subsequently mark the end of mourning for different categories of kin, its duration determined by their distant or intimate connections to the deceased. On the second anniversary, the chief mourner who upholds the longest period of grieving, ceremonially burns his white funerary garb.

Here I take a broader view on funerary practices, one that extends beyond mortuary treatment and the ritual disposal of the corpse, by means of burial or cremation.³ Moreover, analysis here shifts the focus from the decomposing body of the deceased to the emerging spiritual entity. In Huế, funerary practices are not primarily concerned with the treatment of the body of the deceased (*thân xác*) but rather with the bewildered soul and its development into an efficacious and highly responsive spirit (*linh hồn*). The ritual treatment of the body is of course an integral and crucial part of funerals, its appropriate care and subsequent condition closely associated with the fate of the soul. However, the treatment of the body is concerned less with its tangible or perishable parts – as in decaying flesh - and more with its intangible yet equally substantiated constituents. Funerals are primarily concerned with the vital forces or life-spirits (*via*) that animate the body and their separation from the spiritual core of the person, the soul (*hồn*). As Tsintjilonis argues mortuary rites

³ Burial customs in Viet Nam vary across regions and historical times. Today such customs do not largely include a second burial, although this is the case for highland groups in Northern Viet Nam. In lowland regions of the North as well as in Hue, the body the deceased is buried in a more or less permanent grave while in the South cremation is more common.

‘do not deal with the destruction of life but with its articulated fissure’ (2000:5). Similarly in Huế, funerals seek to effect the separation of different elements and constituent parts of the person and facilitate their return of *via* and *hồn*, to the appropriate cosmic domain, the former to its earthly form and the latter to its heavenly origins. Moreover, the treatment of the corpse, its coffining and burial are an important precondition for the enactment of funerals, yet it falls within the preliminary or preparatory stages of funerals. According to local understandings the treatment and coffining of the corpse falls within the more ‘private’ part of the funerals whereby family members and close kin attend to all sorts of planning issues and practical arrangements such as buying the coffin, notifying relatives and acquaintances and hiring ritual specialists. As my informants explained, funerals (*đám tang*), which are well-attended formal events, resume soon after such arrangements have been made. As they stressed, funeral rituals (*tang lễ*) are instigated upon the ceremonial distribution and donning of the mourning garb by close kin. Furthermore, funerary rituals do not center on the coffin, placed in the innermost part of the house but are instead around a purposely made altar (*bàn thờ linh*) that in turn shields the coffin from public view and malevolent influences. *Bàn thờ linh*, which can be translated as ‘altar of the soul’ is a provisional altar dedicated to the mystified soul of the newly deceased. All offerings of food and votive items for the deceased are made on this altar throughout the funerary cycle. The deceased remains enshrined on this altar until the second year anniversary after which he/she is duly transferred on the main ancestral altar. Concisely, funerary practices are not primarily concerned with the corporality of the deceased but rather seek to effect the transformation of the bewildered soul of the deceased (*vong hồn*) into an unfathomably divine spirit (*linh hồn*), responsive to the prayers of living counterparts.

Rather than focusing on death as a biological inevitability, I focus here on the local concept of *linh*, as central in the understanding of funerary and ancestral practices in contemporary Việt Nam. The word *linh* is of Sino-Vietnamese origin, meaning having power and efficacy, and it is used to describe an array of spiritual entities, be it of

human or heavenly origins.⁴ Deities and spirits are assessed and evaluated, venerated or abandoned on the basis of their efficacious powers (*linh*) and their responsiveness to the appeals of the living. As Do notes, the way in which a deity or spirit is ‘sensed, appreciated or judged... feared or respected, laughed or cajoled’ hinges on their perceived ‘ability to influence and affect the world of the living’ (2003:9). Efficacious deities and spirits are thus described as *linh thiêng* (highly divine), *linh hồn* (venerated soul of human origins) or *linh ứng* (highly responsive to prayers). The term *linh ứng* is used to describe potent deities such as the merciful Bodhisattva *Quân Thế Am* - the female apparition of Buddha’s male divine essence – who is considered to be particularly receptive to the appeals of suffering human beings, readily coming to their rescue. The term is also reserved for munificent ancestral spirits who through the passage of generations have become unfathomably divine and potent entities, venerated and prayed upon by a large number of living petitioners beyond the confines of particular kinship and descent groupings.

With regards to the souls of the dead, locals use an array of terms, each indicating the state of the soul with regards to its transcendental transformation. Thus, the term *linh hồn* is used only in reference to the souls of the ‘olden dead’ who have completed their transcendental transformation, becoming divine and largely benevolent ancestral souls, and therefore duly placed on established altars. In contrast, the soul of the ‘newly deceased’ (*ngươi mới chết*) that is yet to make the transition is referred to as *vong hồn*. The term *vong hồn* indicates the confused state of a soul, which caught up in the process and experience of dying, is bewildered, bemused and disoriented. Furthermore, different references to the souls of the dead indicate relationships and connections of the living petitioner to the soul. Accordingly, the term *linh hồn*, is not extended to any settled and enshrined spirit but most commonly to one’s dead kin and ancestors. Hence the term signifies not only the transformation of the soul into a settled ancestral spirit but further its responsiveness and connection to living kin, who have effected this transformation. In contrast, unrelated souls are often referred to with

⁴ In his analysis of Chinese rituals, Feuchtwang (2007:57) also points to the concept of *lingshi* - the Chinese root of the Vietnamese word *linh* – as central in the understanding of spiritual entities. He translates the term as ‘having the capacity for effective response’ (ibid, 60).

the generic term *âm hồn*. *Âm hồn* means the soul that belongs to the realm of *âm* (nether realm or underworld) and thus often denotes entities of uncertain or ambiguous status. Further, unrelated dead are referred to using the generic and admittedly ‘tactless’ term *người chết* (dead people), while dead kin are always referred to as mothers, fathers or any other appropriate kinship term.

The masses of unrelated errant souls, without name and known kin are unmistakably identified as *cô hồn* or ‘lost souls’ (see chapter 3). Lost souls are defined by lack of connections and attachments to living kin, who could effect their transition to the other world and ensure their well being in posterity. Being without kin to care for their funerary transformation and release from distressing life-worlds, *cô hồn* find themselves trapped between this world (*đương*) and the other (*âm*), between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead, unable to make the passage and transition in either. Despite their predicaments due to lack of constant support, *cô hồn* can potentially be released from their suffering or recovered into the realm of kinship (see next chapter). However, a number of other untimely or unfortunate dead, such as infants and children cannot become ancestral spirits or *linh hồn*, their potential severed by the lack of descendants. Children and infants do not receive proper funerary treatment as ‘fathers’ ‘mothers’ and forbears do. Subsequently, they are excluded from ancestral altars, their care and propitiation often assigned to religious institutions, such as pagodas. Pagodas shelter an array of ambiguous dead, such as those who died prematurely, young, unmarried or simply without offspring.

Largely uninvolved with other ritual aspects and life cycle events, such as births, weddings and ancestor anniversaries - all undertaken by respective families without the interference of ritual specialists - Buddhist practitioners are highly relevant in the context of funerary rites. Upon the death of a kin, most families turn to local pagodas (*chùa*) and Buddhist monks - in some cases they turn instead to Taoist priests and ritual masters – for guidance and assistance through the funerary process. Well-integrated into the urban and semi-urban landscape, Buddhist monastic communities or pagodas provide both ritual services and logistics to any inquiring family and often regardless of religious devotion. Buddhist dignitaries are called in to chant prayers and sutras throughout the funeral and escort the coffin to the burial ground while pagodas

and their kitchens often cater for vegetarian feasts - a ubiquitous requirement in the course of funerary practices. In Hué, which has historically been a major centre for Buddhist teachings the pertinence of Buddhism is even more pronounced. Pagodas in Hué are impartibly linked with the imperial past and court practices of the Nguyễn dynasty, which founded and sponsored a plethora of Buddhist institutions around the province. In anticipation of a propitious death, distinguished mandarins and royals have entrusted their posterity to such pagodas and planned for their graves to be situated within their enclosure. Today dominating the outskirts of the city, these pagodas, often still sponsored by exile members of the former elite, have been turned into 'public', 'open to all' temples that offer their services to ordinary bereaved families.

Buddhist dignitaries, with their proficiency in Han Viet script and mastery of esoteric texts and practices as well as keen knowledge of the ritual sequence, are most valued as ritual specialists. Versed in the issues pertaining to ethereal influences such ritual specialists have the ability to resolve karmic intricacies, disengage the soul from faults and burdens and contribute to their deliverance and safe passage to the other world. Their knowledge and effectiveness in resolving the issues and tribulations pertinent to troubled souls, make Buddhist practitioners indispensable contributors in the context of funerals. As ritual specialists, Buddhist monks are not only indispensable in the case of untimely or unfortunate dead, who are plagued by anguish and distress, but far and wide for all newly deceased, as the unsettling experience of dying ubiquitously upsets the dead, turning them into agitated, bewildered and bemused souls. Therefore, the contribution of monks and ritual specialists is required mostly through the initial stages of the funerary process – most commonly until burial - whereby the soul is yet to become aware of its condition and circumstances. As the soul grows increasingly aware of its state and changing status, it is the living kin who undertake the responsibility of funerary rituals and effect the eventual transformation of the deceased from a *vong hồn* into *linh hồn*, and thus from a mystified soul into an effectual and affective entity that cares and protects its living counterparts.

Bàn thờ linh: the altar of the soul

As noted above, funerary rites seek to effect the transformation of the soul from a precarious *vong hồn* to a divine efficacious spirit or *linh hồn*. Like other life cycle rituals such as birth rites, weddings and ancestral anniversaries that mark nativity, adulthood and existence in posterity, funerary rites are essentially organized in the house, the deceased's familial abode.⁵ For these purposes, the bereaved family set up a temporary altar for the soul of the deceased (*bàn thờ linh*) at the 'main house' (see chapter 1). As mentioned earlier, this altar becomes the focus of funerary practices in front of which ritual sessions and prayers are enacted. This is also the place where offerings of food and votive essentials are made throughout the funerary cycle and where living house members gather to take daily meals calling upon the soul to partake. After confining the body the deceased is placed behind this altar, which effectively shields them from errant malicious influences that might enter the house through open doors. In houses where there is already an ancestral altar, the coffin and *bàn thờ linh* are placed to either side of the main altar and in a prescribed order: male house members to the 'left' and female to the 'right'. As explained in the previous chapter (ch.1), 'left' and 'right' here are reckoned from the perspective of the centrally placed ancestors who form the inner core of the house, and thus from inside looking outwards. At the end of the funerary and mourning cycle – most commonly well after the second anniversary of death – after the deceased has completed their transformation into a settled ancestral spirit, the provisional altar is dismantled and the deceased's tablet is duly transferred on the main ancestral altar. In houses where there is yet an ancestral altar to be established, the coffin is placed on the perceived centre of the house, the 'middle' span. In this case, the temporary altar of the soul (*bàn thờ linh*) is upgraded into a permanent ancestral altar (*bàn thờ tổ tiên*).

This temporary altar or 'altar of the soul' (*bàn thờ linh*) holds a visual representation of the deceased, most commonly a recent photo – which members of

⁵ As Hickey notes (1964:128) in his study of a southern village, even in the case of Catholics who observe different funerary rituals, the corpse is rarely transported to the church and the funeral is held in the house. See also Kleinen (1999:180).

the older generations often have taken in anticipation - as well as an individual censer to which the soul becomes attached through daily offerings of incense.⁶ This altar is clearly separate from the main ancestral altar (*bàn thờ tổ tiên*). This difference between the two altars is marked both in terms of physical and conceptual distance. According to local understandings, the ancestral altar is suitable only for 'olden' dead (*cụ*) and 'senior' spirits who are of indubitable divine status. As my informants explained, the 'newly deceased' (*người mới chết*) cannot be seated alongside the 'olden' ones (*ngươi cụ*). Seniority and order among the dead and their subsequent placement on the altar hinges upon their age and level of maturity upon death as well as their generational and relational status towards other living or dead kin. Ideally, the main altar can only host kin who died as married adults and thus with offspring and descendants, who in turn will undertake the responsibility for their funerary transformation and due propitiation thereafter. More importantly, the ancestral altar can only host spirits that have effectively and unequivocally completed their transcendental transition and thus attained ancestorhood. Newly deceased are separately enshrined on a provisional altar, an interim place that signifies their liminal status and incomplete transformation. After the carefully coffined corpse is 'buried under three layers of soil' and the completion of the 'three year long period of mourning' according to Chanh, the soul of dead kin becomes an 'unfathomably divine spirit' (*linh hồn*). In Huế, the mourning period is specified as two years and three months, upon the completion of which the deceased is transferred to the main ancestral altar, signified with the moving the memorial tablet or portrait of the deceased and his/her censer.

The pending status of the newly deceased and the ambiguities involved in the funerary transition are not clearly apparent in the term *bàn thờ linh*, which is used to describe the temporary altar that the soul becomes attached to. The term does not describe the perceived status of the newly deceased, in turn yet to be transformed into a propitious and efficacious spirit (*linh*). Rather, downplaying the liminal status of the soul, the term seeks to evade offending suggestions or erroneous outcomes for the soul

⁶ In the case of eminent dead such like those of noble origin, high office or abbots, there is an added ritual item, namely an ancestral tablet (*thai vị*) that marks their name, age, position and rank.

and convey anticipation for the deceased's due transformation. Yet, the pending status of the soul and its developing transformation become apparent in altar arrangements as well as relevant practices centering on them. Most notably, they are reflected on the bodies of those who come to pray before the altar throughout the funerary cycle. Instructing me – along with other unacquainted funeral participants such as youngsters - on appropriate bearing and demeanor, elder participants were keen to point out how one should prostrate oneself before the dead, according to the perceived status of the soul. In front of a coffin, and thus before an unburied dead, one should perform only two kowtows (*hai lạy*) as opposed to the habitual three bows (*ba lạy*). After burial, one can perform three bows as the deceased has been 'buried under three layers of soil'. While paying respects in front of a coffin one offers a single piece of incense, while before ancestral altars the habitual number of incense is three. The three bows as well as the corresponding three incense sticks that petitioners clasp between their palms while kowtowing before ancestral spirits, correspond to the sacred triad of Taoist cosmology, namely Heaven, Earth, and human. The disparity in the number of kowtows and incense offerings, underlines differences between newly and olden dead, between *vong hồn* and *linh hồn*. It also marks the burial as a critical point in the process of transcendental transformation, albeit not as one that brings conclusion. As locals maintain, before burial as well as for a period after that, the soul is yet to find salvation (*đi toi thiên đàng*) and still wanders adrift (*làng thẳm*). Mystified and disoriented, suspended between this world and the other, between its corporeal existence and spiritual becoming, the newly deceased cannot fit in either the ranks of the living or the dead. There are nascent entities in the course of their becoming ancestral spirits. This journey of becoming is achieved through the ritual efforts by living kin to whom the new entity becomes gradually attached as they are formed and transformed into divinized kin.

Dying as a process

According to ethnographic accounts of death and funerary practices in North and South Việt Nam (Chanh 1993; Hickey 1964; Malarney 2002; Kleinen 1999), mortuary treatment begins several hours after death when the body is ritually bathed and dressed and coffined. Yet in Huế, mortuary treatment can begin much earlier, when one is soon to become dead (*sáp chết*). In the case of elderly or ailing kin for whom death is imminent, the dying person is placed on their bed or near the ancestral altar in anticipation. In this context, apposite behaviour requires the children, grandchildren and house members to gather around the dying relative. Auspicious death prescribes that one should leave their last breath surrounded by caring kin and intimates. The gathered kin and descendants must tend to the dying person's needs, vow to their wishes and bequests and thoughtfully 'remind' (*nhớ tưởng*) the dying person of his/her worthy feats and virtuous endeavours. Descendants are expected to commend them for being thoughtful and attentive fathers or caring and selfless mothers who produced and raised children and grandchildren. Such auspicious thoughts instilled into dying relatives prepare the way for a peaceful passage to the other world and a favorable afterlife (*kiếp sau*). Similarly according to my informants, a dying person must not be disturbed, saddened, or distressed in any way. The cause of pain and suffering during the process of dying imperils post-death existence, causing the soul to enter a world of anguish and distress. The following example about the treatment of a dying grandfather is rather illuminating.

The dying elderly man was the father of three, among them the eldest child was a Buddhist female dignitary (*su cô*). *Su cô* was heading a small pagoda sponsored by an eminent descent grouping, which sheltered the originators of the line. When I asked her to describe the funeral of her father the head nun started by recounting his final hours. She explained that her father was a devout Buddhist layman, a righteous man who had committed to the teachings of Buddhism and a strictly vegetarian diet (*ăn chay*) for the past fifty years of his life. Two days before he died, he fell into a state of 'unconsciousness' akin to the purity of the soul of monks, nuns and lay devotees. Yet he was still grounded to his worldly condition as 'he could still eat'. By then, the only

son, with whom the father lived, had informed his eldest and younger sisters about the state of their father. The sibling group gathered around the bed of their father and *sur cô* led prayers and chanted sutras in order to assist the peaceful passing of her father. As she explained, one's state of mind at this moment – when dying is imminent – can actively influence what happens after death and therefore relatives should avoid resuscitating the dying person, while wailing and howling at critical moments such as this is considered harmful for the dying person. After exhaling their last breath, the body of the deceased must be left lying still and tranquil to 'find peace' (*đề yên xác*). *Sur cô* instructed her siblings to leave the body of their deceased father lying still for eight full hours, unlike the couple of hours observed in most cases. According to the head nun, at this stage 'the soul has not left the body yet. If the body is touched, penetrated, or moved the person will suffer pain and that will undoubtedly affect its fate in posterity. In dressing the deceased buttons, pins and sharp trimmings are warily removed as they could penetrate the body and afflict its integrity while sleeves and hems are carefully sewn. Sewing the edge of sleeves seeks to prevent the deceased from injury caused by finger and toe nails, as their bodies are still animated. Similarly, newborn babies have their hems sewn or their hands and feet covered in cloth, so that they 'do not harm themselves'.

According to Buddhist views, one is not dead after exhaling their last breath but is 'still dying' (Yin 2006: 99).⁷ The corpse is still well-animated and at its most critical phase. According to local perceptions, upon death the soul falls into a state of confusion and bewilderment as the sacrosanct unity of body (*thân xác*), life spirits (*via*) and soul (*hồn*) is disturbed. This unity is not disintegrated fleetingly in a transitory moment but instead through a gradual process. *Via* are the powers that enable the sensory, perceptive, reproductive faculties. They are embodied, attached to vital organs and correspond to bodily orifices. Men have seven *via* while women have nine. The seven *via* of men correspond to an equal number of orifices located in the highest part of the body, the head i.e., eyes, ears, nostrils and mouth while women have nine orifices, that is the seven mentioned above plus her anus and reproductive path (Chanh 1993:165). The Vietnamese *via* and *hồn* are comparable to the Chinese

⁷ See also Cuevas et al (2006).

concepts of *po* and *hun*, respectively. *Po* is the earthly soul that lingers with the body and returns to the soil with burial while *hun* is the heavenly soul that survives death. There is a direct relationship between *xác* (body), *via* and *hồn* as the growth, protection and tranquility of one's soul depend on the safety and soundness of one's *via* and thus on the soundness of one's body (see Chanh 1993). The mortuary treatment of the deceased, seeks to separate the three elements and facilitate their return to their original form and appropriate cosmic domain. In funerals *via* are kept near the body of the deceased by placing an exact number of 'lights' - in the form of oil lamps or candles - on top of the coffin. These lights, seven for men and nine for women, accompany the corpse as it descends into the grave.

Another indispensable addition on top of the coffin, also buried with the corpse, is the five basic grains. An assortment of rice grains both 'ordinary' (*gạo*) and of superior glutinous quality (*nép*), as well as pea (*đậu*), maize (*ngô*), and sesame (*me*) are placed in separate containers on the lid of the coffin. According to locals, these are the five main products of the Vietnamese land (*vật sản xuất*) from which the deceased can 'choose and eat' (*chọn ăn*) or 'cook' (*nấu ăn*) according to their likings. Cooked food and drinks are indispensable parts of funerary as well as ancestor propitiating practices whereby rituals are instigated with the offering of cooked dishes (see chapter 5). One of the main features of funerals is the transfer of food, money and goods to the deceased on a daily basis during the crucial initial stages of the funerary process and more particularly until the completion of the forty nine days cycle. In this context, sacrificial offerings provide sustenance and support to the newly deceased during the difficult transition and thus sustain relations between dead and living kin. Appropriate food offerings highlight the state of the deceased and their existence as a mystified soul or benevolent ancestral spirit. Settled ancestral spirits only receive cooked food and they are invited to enjoy and share consumables with their living kin. Conversely, grains and uncooked food items are offered alongside lavish feasts to unrelated ghostly entities or 'lost souls'. As explained in chapter 3, these offerings highlight the aloofness and detachment of lost souls, who lack traceable connections to living kin. The grains placed on the coffin or in the mouth of the newly deceased are the only instances when related dead are provided with raw food and grains that has not been

caringly cooked and prepared in the domestic hearth. In the context of funerals, the newly deceased receives both cooked offerings, arranged on the altar of the soul as part of the ritual sessions and uncooked grains, placed upon the coffin or in the mouth of the deceased.⁸ This twofold arrangement marks the pending state of the deceased perched between their corporeality and attachment to their earthly form - still animated by lingering *via* - and their emergence as a divine and efficacious soul (*linh hồn*).

At this point, the soul is at a state of utter bewilderment and confusion brought about by the unsettling experience of dying. This disconcerting experience puts one into an intermediary state whereby one is neither a divine spirit nor a corporeal entity. This indeterminate state might cause the soul to go adrift (*lãng thăng*), aimlessly wandering away from the house and familiar contexts. This state is closely associated with ghostly entities and errant spirits. The reference to the soul of the newly deceased as *vong hồn* explicitly conveys this tempestuous and boundless drifting. The word *vong* suggests forgetfulness and detachment, forgetting one's origins and connections, moving away from familiar contexts, being lost and debased. In their genesis, ancestral spirits are thrown off balance; they are unsettled and agitated, perched between their vanishing corporality - and thus their fading attachment to intimates as people of 'like body' - and their potential of becoming divine ancestral souls. In this context, the fate of the soul has not been sealed, the odds can tip on either side and the soul can either become an unbounded ghostly entity or sheltered ancestral spirit. Their becoming depends on the ritual efforts of living kin or lack of them. Death can bring disruption in relations among kin as they are pulled apart in different ontological domains. Thus, death brings the possibility of separation and disconnection with intimates. Equally, it brings an opportunity to form and reform relations with kin as revered 'mothers', 'fathers' and forebears. In Việt Nam the funerary cycle is not a period of mourning, often associated with passive and sorrowful grieving but foremost a defining period whereby the actions of living descendants influence and shape the fate of departed kin.

⁸ Rice grains as well as money in the form of gold coins are also placed in the mouth of the deceased before sealing the coffin (see Hickey 1964; Malarney 2002; Kleinen 1999).

The group of mourners

After the body is ritually bathed, dressed, and the coffin carefully sealed by close kin, funerals formally resume. The first rite is the ceremonial distribution of the mourning garb to descendents and close kin, often officiated by a Buddhist monk or diviner. The mourning clothes consist of loosely fitting robes and headbands, both made of coarse gauze-like cloth in white color - the color of mourning. Made of rudimentary fabric, the mourning garbs are untailored, lacking hemlines or any kind of ornamentation, their unrefined character fitting mourning appearance. Mourning appearance requires being un-brushed un-groomed, uninterested in one's outward look as an acute sign of abjectness. However, mourning gear does not lack diacritic marks, which in turn plainly manifest different grades of mourning for different categories of kin. As Watson puts it, mourning garb encodes the 'degree of kinship between the mourner and the deceased' (1988a:12). In his discussion of funerals in North Việt Nam, Malarney notes that the diacritic marks of mourning dress can be read by any 'knowledgeable observer' (2002: 115). Indeed, looking through photos taken in funerals my informants could easily tell who was a daughter or daughter-in-law, eldest son or eldest grandson, spouse or sibling.

The 'eldest son' (*đích tử*), and 'eldest grandson' (*đích tôn*), in turn the eldest son of the deceased's eldest son, are the chief mourners who interchangeably lead the funerary process. As the 'male heads' (*trưởng nam*) of the family, *đích tử* and *đích tôn* carry the 'burden' (*nặng*) and 'responsibility' (*lo*) for the care of the deceased, and therefore must lead the ritual process (*đúng lễ*). This bearing is reflected on their mourning dress, which has added shreds of white cloth, known as 'burden pieces', attached on their shoulders, back and chest to show their excess load. On the last day of the funeral, when the deceased is buried, the eldest son is also given a cane to support him in his burdensome bearing as he leads the way to the grave. Unlike the eldest, younger sons do not carry 'burden pieces' or canes. Yet on the day of the burial all sons are given a headpiece made of roughly twined straw (*day rom*) and a straw belt to convey their abjectness and grievous loss. On this occasion, the sons' wives or the deceased's daughters-in-law cover their heads in hoods (*mũ man*) while daughters

maintain their plain white headband, which they wear throughout the funeral. Contributing to the continuation of the paternal line and often inhabiting in the same house, daughters-in-law are part of the 'inner side' of the family (*bên nội*) as opposed to daughters who are 'external' (*bên ngoại*). Daughters and daughters-in-law have different responsibilities towards the deceased and observe different periods of mourning.

The period and intensity of mourning clearly differentiates close and distant kin, and therefore degrees of kinship. Most notably, mourning responsibilities highlight the distinction between the paternal or *inner* side and maternal or *external* side (*bên ngoại*) of the family. Kin falling in the paternal side, such as spouses, sons, and paternal grandchildren are the ones who bear the responsibility for the care of the deceased and therefore the responsibility for holding proper funerals and due propitiation thereafter. On the other hand maternal kin, such as married daughters, sons-in-law and their children remain less involved in funerals and observe shorter periods of mourning. According to my informants, the longest mourning is of a 'son for his father' that amounts to 'two years, three months and ten days'.⁹ At the end of this period, that falls well after the second anniversary of death, the family marks the termination of all mourning (*ngày trừ tang*) in a small ritual whereby the chief mourners burn their mourning gear. In Huế, the burning of the mourning gear of the chief mourners often takes place on the sideline of the second anniversary. The first and second death anniversaries mark crucial stages in the transformation of the deceased and their becoming as divine ancestral souls. Subsequently, the first death anniversary marks the end of mourning for daughters (*con gái*), sons-in-law (*rể*) and the maternal side on the whole. Married daughters and their children burn their mourning outfits at the end of this ritual or earlier.¹⁰ On the other hand, unmarried daughters still living in the paternal house as well as daughters-in-law, wives and non first-born sons (*con rạ*) conclude their mourning on the second anniversary of death.

⁹ Similarly in China, as Naquin notes it is twenty seven months (1988:44).

¹⁰ Unlike the eldest paternal grandson, grandchildren of young age are not expected to observe a long period of mourning, especially on the maternal side. Maternal grandchildren often cease mourning soon after the completion of the 49days cycle.

Beyond this circle of kin, more distant relatives and acquaintances do not wear mourning clothes and observe only a short period of mourning that formally ends with a ritual held on the fiftieth or hundredth day after death (discussed in more detail below). In terms of genealogical depth, mourning extends up to five descending generations counting from the deceased to his great-great grandchildren (*chít*).¹¹ This corresponds to the 'Confucian ideal of a family with members of five consecutive generations', living under the same roof (Luong 1983: 744). According to Luong, this 'traditional' pattern of household formation, still dominant in the early 20th century, has been outdated by formidable changes throughout the past century, not least the advent of socialist modernity. Today in Hué, the participation of paternal descendants of the fourth and fifth generations in funerals is an all-auspicious sign, signifying the worthy feats and accomplishments of the deceased and therefore his advantageous posterity. The funeral of a distinguished Buddhist layman (*cu sĩ*) who died in an advanced age and with a plethora of descendants to mourn him was seen by his kin as an exalted event. The event was marked by the participation of distinguished abbots as well as his paternal great-grandson (*chắt*), a toddler who stood out in the funeral dressed in auspicious red gear.¹²

The presence and participation of offspring and descendants in funerals is crucial for the deceased as his fate and transcendental transformation depend heavily on their collective support and attentive care. Yet intricate and convoluted as they are, funerary rites are not led by the group of mourners but instead by ritual specialists. As Watson (1988b) demonstrates the participation and contribution of ritual specialists is pivotal in Cantonese funerals. In this context, it is the priest or ritual master who 'direct the flow of events' and not the chief mourner (*ibid.* 115). Further as Oxfeld reiterates, calling in Buddhist monks to assist the soul in its journey through the underworld is in itself a 'benevolent act' and a service expected to be provided by filial offspring (1988: 969). As mentioned earlier, in Hué most families turn for expert assistance to neighbouring pagodas. Monks are called in to chant prayers and sutras while pagodas'

¹¹Locals recount the order of descendents as *con*, *cháu*, *chắt chít*, or else 'children', 'grandchildren', 'great' and 'great-great grandchildren' respectively.

¹² Unlike other mourners who are dressed in white, great and great-great grandchildren are dressed in purposely made red and yellow outfits. Red, associated with good fortune, is the colour that dominates joyful events such as weddings. Yellow is the colour of kings and sovereigns.

kitchens often cater for funeral feasts, which are strictly vegetarian. Further, monks are consulted on a series of key issues, most notably auspicious timing (*chọn ngày tốt*) for critical events such as confining the corpse, removing the coffin from the house and burial.

Upon his mother's death, the young constable, who was responsible for my safety welfare throughout fieldwork, went to a local pagoda to ask about appropriate time for confining and burying his mother. Admittedly 'irreligious' (*luông*) but versed in what is officially called the 'people's moral customs and beliefs' (*tín ngưỡng*) the constable explained to me the significance and calculation of auspicious timing. Although suitable timing is assigned by a ritual specialist or versed masters, their calculation is not based on abstract principles and mystical knowledge but rather on the interlocking fates of the deceased and his living intimates. More particularly, calculation is based on the date of death of the deceased in conjunction with 'three dates of birth': the deceased's and his/her eldest son (*đích tử*) and eldest grandson (*đích tôn*). Thus, the providence of the deceased and their living kin are impartibly linked. The careful calculation (*coi ngày*) and designation of auspicious time (*ngày tốt*) for key funerary events is crucial in curtailing ominous influences and inducing favorable conditions. Inapt timing can have disastrous effects for the deceased causing them to enter the other realm in adverse circumstances and thus inadvertently affects their posterity. The unpropitious passage to the other world can subsequently affect the deceased's living kin. Burying the deceased on a 'bad day' (*ngày xau*), not befitting their circumstances and fate is a sacrilege act of irreverence that can have disastrous effects for the family of the deceased, not least causing another death. According to locals, inapposite or random timing in mortuary treatment could result to the tragedy of 'overlapping mourning' (*trung tang*) whereby the ill-treated soul of the deceased might return to seize the soul of its descendants (*về bat con cháu*). Most commonly, the distressed soul is said to return during his/her funeral or death anniversary day, therefore causing overlapping deaths in the family.

A person's time of death is as important as birth. While the time of birth (or rather conception) in accordance to the Sino-Vietnamese lunar calendar, designates one's life span in this world and individual destiny (*số mệnh*), the time of death determines the

conditions of access to the other world and thus, the conditions of ‘rebirth’ and reemergence in posterity (*thân sậu*). The name and age (*tên tuổi*) as well as the date of one’s death are critical elements of a person’s identity, both in this world and the other. As Ruby Watson points out taking and bestowing names is integral part of the process of ‘social growth’ and personhood that stretches beyond death (1986:629). One’s name is akin to the soul and thus the means through which living descendants communicate with ‘named ancestors’ (*ibid.*). The name and age of the deceased are clearly stated in every ritual interaction with the dead: uttered by kowtowing bodies that come to pay their respects to departed kin, written prayers (*sơ*) proffered to the deceased or marked on funeral banners and posters. In post-burial funerary rites and ancestral anniversaries, the name and age of the participating descendants as well as their relation to the evoked soul are written in a piece of paper placed on the edge of the altar that hosts the soul. This is to help the soul identify and acknowledge its beneficiaries and supportive intimates. Upon death, posthumous names may be added to the deceased’s family and known names. Yet in calling upon the soul, living kin use the latter rather than the former, which is the name in which they have come to know them in this world.

In funerals, the name of the deceased as well as his date of death as well as the date of birth – often unknown in the case of elderly men and women - are clearly marked in long fabric banners hung on the wall above the head-side of the coffin. The time of death is announced in both lunar and solar dates, while in the case of deceased grandmothers and grandfathers the banderol also notes the deceased’s ‘venerable age’ (*hương thọ*). According to locals, this venerable age is over sixty years old whereby one has attained elevated genealogical status producing children, grandchildren or further descending generations. Two posters are also prominently hung on the outer walls of the house overlooking the street or on the front gate. These posters are formal notices (*cáo pho*), announcing the death, the details of the deceased as well as the detailed schedule of the funeral. Moreover, funeral posters and banderols mark the deceased as ‘one’s own mother’ (*thân mẫu*) or father (*thân phụ*). Funerals are the context within which descendants articulate their gratitude for the selfless deeds and sacrifices of departed parents.

Elegiac scrolls and funerary banners donated by kin recount the good qualities and praise the feats of the deceased as ‘dutiful mother’ or ‘respected father’. Standardized by funeral specialists or personally devised by elderly kin, versed in poetic and literary Vietnamese epics, elegiac statements ubiquitously adorn the walls of the house in funerals. Such elegiac statements and adages praise deceased mothers and fathers and they appear today not only inscribed on walls but also in professionally recorded funeral videos, which are becoming increasingly popular today. The most popular adage featuring as an opening statement in funeral videos is the following. ‘The works of father are like the mountain, the worth of mother is like the water running from the source’.¹³ Mountains and rivers are the auspicious elements that form the blessed landscape of the country, often summing up the topography of a native locale or the nation (see also Do 2003). As locals, explained ‘all responsibilities of the family fall on father’s shoulders’ (*ganh vac*) and that the ‘father is the one who does all the important work in the family’ (*công việc gia đình*). Therefore, his works are as lofty and accomplished as the great mountains. The mother’s devotion is also invaluable, her sacrifices running as abundant as the water. Scrolls and banderols are prominently displayed in the main room of the house around the altar of the soul and remain there until the end of the mourning period when the departed, having completed their transformation join the rest of the ancestors on the main altar. In funerals, through mourning clothes and banners, the perplexed souls are constantly reminded of their particular identities as well as connections to living kin, their feats as mothers and fathers by means of which they are (re-)formed and transformed into intimate kin.

Elegiac scrolls and banners inscribed with less intimate messages, most commonly eulogies for a blissful posterior existence (*vang sanh cuc lac*) are also donated by more distant kin such as members of the wider patrilineage as well as colleagues and acquaintances who come to the funeral to offer their sympathy to the bereaved family and ‘share their grief’ (*chia buồn*). *Chia buồn* is signified with gifts and contributions made by kin and funeral participants. Gifts by more distant kin are presented after the deceased has been coffined and in front of the altar of the soul. In this context, patrilateral, matrilateral kin and affines as well as neighbors and colleagues take their

¹³ *Công cha như núi Thái Sơn, nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra.*

turn to pay their respect and ceremoniously kowtow in front of the altar of the soul. Gifts include food and incense as well as money contributions, aiming to assist the bereaved family with funeral expenses. Funeral expenses are substantial even in the case of modest income families who are said to go into debt in order to organise apposite funerals. *Chia buồn* or sharing grief is not exclusive to funerals but a practice evoked on a number of occasions and sorrowful events when one is in need of affection and support.¹⁴ In the case of funerals, the meaning of the practice is sharing the grief of ‘separation’ (*tu biệt*). As *ông* Bich, an elderly man who attended the funeral of his daughter’s mother-in-law, *bà* Nguyễn, pointed out: in life we share our food, bed or lives with each other; upon death we come to share the grief of the family for parting with their dead kin.

Funerals and ritual sequence

In the past, funerals lasted for weeks or even months. However, this only applied to distinguished dead, such as mandarins and members of the royal elite. This long duration marked the importance and influence of the deceased who had a lofty standing and position and thus large crowds of followers, who would come from afar to pay their respects. In his study on funerals in North Việt Nam Malarney shows how socialist modernity sought to change and reform the meaning and practice of funerals, from ‘wasteful’ to ‘economical’, eliminating agonistic overtones (2002:110). This fervent socialist campaign stressed the health and hygiene risks involved in keeping a corpse unburied for a long time, so today funerals resume soon after death, most commonly on the following day. Today in Huế, most funerals are organized over the course of three days, while in few prominent cases they are extended to four days. On the first day, monks are called in to officiate over the distribution of mourning garb to gathered kin and descendants and read funerary orations, speaking of the deceased as a

¹⁴When I found myself in a state of distress due to an unfortunate event during fieldwork, the Buddhist nuns who had befriended me invited me to stay over in the pagoda to ‘share my grief’.

beloved kin and parent. On this day or the next, families also hold a ritual to announce the event of death to unequivocally divine ancestral spirits who are called to contribute to the safe transition of the newly departed member to the other world. As Chanh notes the act of informing the ancestors (*cáo tổ*), was part and parcel of ‘traditional funerals’, performed by means of an elaborate ritual (*Lễ Yet Tổ*) (1993:467). However, as he admits this is not popular practice anymore (*ibid.*). At funerals I have attended the announcement of the event to ancestors often took place alongside other rituals such as *triệu diệm* (see below). At the funeral of the father of the head nun the announcement took place as part of the long funeral procession. On their way to the grave, situated in the native village of the deceased near the province’s fishing port, the procession stopped at the lineage hall, where members of the group have organised a ceremony to inform the lineage and receive the newly deceased.

The most crucial and well-attended rituals are held on the second day of the funeral. In the morning, the ritual of *lễ triệu diệm* is held before the ‘altar of the soul’, where all participants descendants pay due tribute to the deceased. As *ông Bich* explained, at the funeral of *bà Nguyễn* (his daughter’s mother-in-law), this ceremony articulates the gratitude (*cám ơn*) of the descendants to the deceased before the latter departs from the house on their way to the grave. In this particular funeral, as in others, monks leading the funeral chanted sutras and recited prayers (*sơ*). According to participants, the prayers enunciate the ethics of Buddha (*đạy lý Phật*), as well as the praise-worthy feats (*công ơn*) of the deceased, in order to instill the meaning of righteous praxis (*công thiện*) to both departed and descendants. *Sơ* are written prayers, formulated by Buddhist monks or knowledgeable diviners. They are standardized in form and content to fit an array of different ritual occasions as well as disparate spirits. There are different *sơ* for deities such as Buddha, for benevolent ancestors, for newly deceased souls and for ghostly unrelated entities. In funerary rites, two written prayers are recited in distinct spells of the ritual: a petition to Buddha (*sơ bạch Phật*) and a petition to the soul of the newly deceased (*sơ bàn linh*). The one appealing to Buddha, clearly announces the event of death, pronouncing the name, age and exact time of death of the deceased and appeals to for a ‘sound death’ (*chết mạnh khỏe*) and auspicious transition to afterlife for the deceased. At the funeral of a grandmother, *bà*

Nguyễn, the yellow envelop containing the petition was placed upon the Buddhist altar, which is often set up in front of the ‘altar of the soul’. Standing in front of the Buddhist altar, the head monk read the petition on behalf of the mourners while the latter knelt behind him with their touching palms on their forehead as an act of reverence. More particularly, prayers are recited on behalf of the chief mourner, the eldest son or grandson, who reverently holds the prayer envelop. At the funeral of an elderly man, his eldest son held the envelope of the prayer to Buddha (*sơ bạch Phật*) and three smoldering incense sticks on a silver tray. Leading the group of mourners, the eldest son and eldest grandson knelt in front of the altar while the rest of the mourners followed in order behind them. The next day, before the coffin left the house the eldest grandson took his father’s place in leading the group of mourners holding a tray with the prayer addressed to the deceased’s soul (*sơ bàn linh*). This prayer is directly addressed to the deceased seeking to verbally appease the soul and calling for it in this transitory stage to be aware of its kin and descendants and spare them from harm. For these purposes, the monks write at the bottom of this prayer - printed on white paper - the names and age of the descendants and close kin that make up the group of mourners. Customizing standardized prayers is common in all ritual occasions where *sơ* are used by means of which the venerated spirit comes to know and recognize its benefactors.

On the afternoon of the same day the mourners organize an elaborate ritual (*tích điện*) in order to appeal to the masses of anonymous ghostly entities and demons, which might roam the area around the house and might be tempted to interfere with the funerary process. The ritual of *tích điện* is led by monks or Taoist diviners, who appeal to hungry ghosts by reciting an appropriate *sơ* and chanting soothing sutras. In this case, prayer sessions are held not inside the house but instead in the open air where errant spirits frequent. A makeshift shrine is set up on the yard or alley street in front of the house consisting of an ample table laden with an abundance of food offerings and drinks. Ghosts and demons attracted by the soothing prayers of the funeral session and the food offerings can be disruptive and harmful during the funerary cycle. They are likely to harass the bemused soul of the newly deceased and hamper its safe passage to the other world. In order to gratify errant spirits – most of

them who had no proper funeral rites – and dispel malevolent influences, the bereaved family holds a magnificently bountiful feast, by means of which ghostly entities are invited to gorge and satisfy their lowly urges outside the house, away from the altar of the soul.

Mourners not only attend to the immediate material needs of ghostly entities but further seek to appease their anguish and torments by means of engaging in merit generating acts on their behalf, most notably by releasing living creatures. This practice is known as *phong sanh* ‘bestowing life’, by means of which one can generate merit (*công đức*) and hence contribute to the ‘release’ (*giải thoát*) of troubled souls from distressing life-worlds (see also chapter 3). Most commonly in Huế, fresh water fish, snails and eel – all of which are local delicacies - are kept alive in a bucket filled with river water. The live creatures are kept in a bucket placed next to the outdoor shrine during the prayer session and after its conclusion a male helper releases them in a nearby river stream. The ritual for the deliverance of unrelated ghosts is neither unfamiliar nor a novelty in Việt Nam where appeasing hungry ghosts is an integral part of ancestral propitiating practices. Such practices have been amplified and enhanced in post-conflict Việt Nam, as recent conflicts have generated masses of unfortunate and unidentified dead. According to recent studies in the late-socialist context ritual practices centering on ghosts have grown in scale and intensity and have even become comparable to ancestral rituals (Kwon 2008). The intensification of rituals pertaining to ghostly entities is plainly observable in Huế, which has historically been the site of fierce battles and clashes that have claimed the lives of many. Yet unlike ancestral rituals which seek to engage related spirits and invite them to partake in commensality with their living counterparts, rituals for unknown ghostly entities seek to dispel and dismiss unrelated and potentially malicious influences (see also chapter 3).

The burial

The burial takes place on the last day of the funeral, where mourners and funeral participants ceremoniously escort and depose the coffin to the burial ground. Moving the coffin from the house is a critical moment that instantiates the parting with the deceased, as the later shifts to a different ontological realm and milieu, marked by means of a movement from the house to the grave. This move brings commotion and unease among the subdued crowds of participants as well as howling and wailing among the mourners. The dawn of the last day marks the conclusion of a long wake, held by kin and intimates throughout the funeral. Warily waiting for the exit of the coffin, participants gather outside the house while the chief mourners in full attire and holding the ritual essentials, stand prominently facing against the threshold that the coffin is soon to traverse. At the funeral of a grandfather, the eldest son and grandson, standing alongside outside the house held the ritual essentials to which the soul becomes attached through the funerary rites and thereafter in periodical worship: a burner for incense offerings, an oil lamp to guide the soul through its transitional path and a recent framed image of the deceased.

In Hué, the removal of the coffin from the houses and its placement to the grave are not performed by kin and intimates but instead entrusted to hired professionals, whose keen knowledge and detachment ensure the smoothness of the operation and therefore, the safety of both the deceased and their living kin. 'Death pollution' (Watson 1988b), emanating from the decaying corpse and coffin deters anyone from touching the coffin with bare hands. The coffin is thus lifted and carried by means of a set of wooden posts provided and expertly handled by the pallbearers. Dressed in red attire with golden yellow trimmings - evocative of imperial soldiers and petty courtiers - the populous group of pallbearers arrives at the house lead by an elderly master dressed in blue ritual tunic and turban, in turn the clothing of eminent citizens of past times. The master enters the house first and approaches the coffin in carefully calculated theatrical movements. He subsequently kowtows before the altar of the soul and offering a piece of incense requests the 'permission' (*xin phep*) of the deceased to remove the coffin. Proceeding with the removal he directs the pallbearers in carefully

lifting and carrying the coffin out of the house using a set of wooden posts. The posts are assembled together gradually, in a series of well-orchestrated movements directed by the rhythmic thuds and commands given by the chief. The deceased is escorted to the grave in a long procession, where participants follow the coffin on foot or in hired vehicles and in a specific order. At the head of the procession the spiritual leaders of the funeral rites - most commonly Buddhist monks - mark the path to a righteous afterlife while the chief mourners following behind them guide the deceased to the grave. The rest of the mourners and other participants fall behind the coffin in due order, according to their grade of mourning and relationship with the deceased. The mourners are the only ones who accompany the deceased closely and sit with the coffin in the funeral car. Hanging over the edge of the funeral car, one of the male mourners holds a smoldering long thatch streak to 'light the path for the soul' while another male descendant throws handfuls of votive money, most particularly votive 'dollars' issued from the 'bank of hell', to distract malicious hungry ghosts lurking along the way. Small denominations of Vietnamese đồng issued from the worldly central bank, are also thrown along the path to the cemetery and especially as the funeral procession and the coffin approach the grave. The use of both worldly and other worldly currencies along the way to the grave do not only hint at the difference between the deceased who is cared for by kin and errant unrelated entities. Their combined use further denotes the liminal state of the deceased who at this stage belongs neither in this world nor the other, and is neither an ancestor nor a detached errant entity. Furthermore, the use of real money highlights that they are still closely associated with this world and their living kin who inhabit it.

As the coffin exits the house a kin breaks a piece of pottery or china (*vô đũa*), behind it, an act that comes with various explanations. As a niece explained at the funeral of her elderly paternal aunt, we make noise to 'notify the soul' about the departure, so that it follows the coffin and is not left behind. In the case of Chinese funerals, Naquin (1988:43) maintains that despite the diversity of explanations, the act indicates the breaking of the relation between parent and child. Yet the removal of the coffin from the house and its placement to the grave does not spell the end of the relationship between living and dead kin but rather its transformation. In his keen

analysis of mortuary practices among the Sora of Eastern India, Vitebski points out that death is not the end of the interaction between the living and the dead, who 'remain attached to each other but are pulled apart into separate realms of existence' (1993:9). One no longer interacts with them in the same way as when one was alive (ibid.). This 'ontological gulf' (ibid.) is marked in spatial and temporal terms in the distinct yet conversing *duong* and *âm* that mark separate realms or life-worlds, or successive points in the daily temporal cycle. More so it is marked in the spatial and conceptual distance between the house and the grave. Cemeteries and burial grounds are constructed as 'pure lands' removed from human dwellings disheveled in profanity, and thus ideally the dead rest on 'high lands' or the sacrilised landscape of mountains (*núi*).

As critical as it is in the funerary process, burial and the formal disposal of the corpse do not signify the end of the funerary treatment or mourning cycle. Rather, burial marks a pivotal stage in a long process of transition as the deceased continues the journey of transition and transcendental transformation. As mentioned in the opening part of this chapter, a number of studies on funerary practices have focused on disposal rites and burials as a cut off point whereby the disrupting influences of death and the corpse are expelled from the community of the living. As a result subsequent practices have been largely disregarded and only partially examined. Furthermore, putting the emphasis on pre-disposal practices, such studies have examined subsequent practices pertaining to dead kin as a separate domain largely understood as 'ancestor worship' or 'ancestral cult' (Kleinen 1999; Malarney 2002). This unabridged gap, between funerals and ancestor propitiation practices is at odds with local understandings in Huế, according to which the funerary cycle is completed after the second anniversary of death (*đại thương*). The following year, the family holds a comparable ritual which is marked as ancestor anniversary (*ngày kỵ*). In Huế, the burial is followed by a number of ritual practices, such as returning to the grave to make offerings and burn votive items two days after the burial, or ritually marking the 'sevens'. Further the first and second death anniversaries consist an integral part of funerary rites, marking the end of mourning for maternal and paternal kin respectively and thus the completion of the transformation from a litigious *vong hồn* to a settled

linh hồn. The concluding part of this chapter examines post-funeral practices, and more particularly the ritual marking of the completion of the seven seven-day period (*tuần*) after death that mark the stages of the transition to the nether realm.

Post-burial funerary practices

Upon death, the soul falls into a state of bewilderment and confusion unsettled by the experience of death itself. According to Buddhist understandings there is an in-between stage between death and reemergence to a new existence. According to Yin the soul of the deceased falls into a 'limbo state' wherein it is transformed into a semi divine 'intermediary spirit body' (2006:100). This intermediary spirit body which might be likened to a baby or a newborn, may linger up to seven 'weeks' (*tuần*) or 'forty nine days' (49 *ngày*) after death before reemerging into a new existence be it spiritual or corporeal. A spirit in its infancy, the soul of the deceased is neither fully aware of death nor familiar with the new existential circumstances. According to locals, the spirit of the deceased undergoes through the dying process in stages, and thus he/she becomes gradually aware of death. This process is more intense during the first seven 'weeks' after death, whereby every seven days, the spirit of the deceased is exposed to the 'experience' of death and becomes gradually accustomed to it, while at the same time, the soul is assessed on the basis of its feats and morality.

In Việt Nam as in China, each seven day period after death marks a cycle of the travails for the deceased's soul as it journeys through the underworld. As locals stress, funerary practices in Việt Nam 'follow Chinese customs' (*phong tục Tàu*). According to the Chinese model after death the deceased goes through the 'ten courts of hell'. Each seven day period after death marks an underworld court trial whereby the faults and merits of the soul are examined. Similarly in Huế, each 'week' signals a

‘clearance’ for the soul from otherworldly courts and divine adjudicators.¹⁵ The closure is marked with the all-important rite on the fiftieth day (*nam mươi ngày*), which brings about the end of mourning for distant kin and acquaintances. Yet the mourning for close kin and the transformative process of the deceased continue beyond that as the soul continues its journey until it is cleared through all the ten courts of the underworld. The completion of one hundred days marks the passage through the eighth court process and the end of mourning for distant kin and the maternal side, which is not ritually marked. Corresponding to the ninth and tenth court, the first and second death anniversaries, a year and two years after death respectively are duly celebrated. Soon after the second year or some times on the third death anniversary all mourning ends and the tablet of the soul is transferred to the main ancestral altar.

The period of forty nine days is critical for the soul’s transposition whereby the providence of the soul is impartibly linked with the fortune of its descendants. Navigating through the ten courts of hell, the deceased’s soul is in acute need of assistance from his kin in order to achieve transcendence and an auspicious posterity. Throughout this period, the bereaved family makes daily offerings of food on the altar of the soul (*cúng cơm*). *Cúng cơm* could be translated as ‘offering rice meals’ whereby the deceased is invited to partake in all three meals of the day.¹⁶ Throughout this period, daily family meals are taken in front of the altar of the soul and the deceased is verbally invited to partake. Partaking in daily family meals as while one was still alive seeks to demonstrate the continuing support of living kin towards the deceased and sustain relations and connections. Furthermore as Sutton remarks, weekly rituals that mark the completion of the seven days cycle are intended to ‘put the mourner almost physically in touch with the experience’ and travails of the deceased in its journeying through the other world (2007:135). In Huế, each cycle is marked with a small ritual whereby the offspring of the deceased gather around their altar to pray for the

¹⁵A number of studies on Chinese funerary practices have noted the similarities and analogies between worldly imperial courts and courts of hell, where saintly figures of the underworld are comparable to court officials and mandarins. See for example Watson et al (1988), Naquin (1988).

¹⁶Like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, eating rice is equivalent to having a meal (see also Bloch 1985:634).

deliverance of his soul and take a communal meal. On the completion of the sixth week after her father's death, the head nun along with all her siblings gathered around the altar of the father to chant Buddhist sutras and pray for the soul's safe passage.

In this modest familial ritual, the head nun came to participate in a double capacity: as the first born child of the deceased as well as a Buddhist dignitary. The head nun arrived at her brother's house in the company of her female Buddhist novices, carrying gifts for the newly deceased and all other departed members of the house. Gifts included basic offerings of fresh flowers and fruit, appropriate for both newly and long departed kin, as well as special gift for the newly deceased. The special gift for the 'venerable father' (*ông bo*) was a small battery-charged transmitter of Amittabha sutras (*A Yi Đa Phật*), the latest gadget that has proved most popular in Buddhist circles. These sutras are considered to sooth and elate the soul of the deceased and hence contribute to its passage to propitious after-worlds. The nuns arranged the gifts on the three principal altars of the house in a prescribed order. First on the Buddhist altar honoring the merciful bodhisattva *Quân Thế Âm* and then on the main ancestral altar behind it. Set in the middle compartment of the main room of the house, the main ancestral altar sheltered long departed members of the family, namely the mother of the head nun, the mother's youngest sister who had separated from her husband as well as her adult son, who in turn died unmarried. The newly deceased father was placed on a separate temporary altar, to the 'right' of the main ancestral shrine as he was subsequent in the order of departed family members. Later after his second death anniversary, he would join the cohorts of centrally placed ancestors alongside his wife. A modest makeshift shrine had also been set up in the house yard right opposite the main ancestral altar. This shrine was loaded with food and votive offerings for the contentment of errant spirits and ghostly entities. All altars inside and outside the house, were carefully tended to appropriate food and offerings before the prayer session could resume. Buddhist altars were furnished with fruits, flowers and candies, the offerings appropriate to spirits of higher essence. Altars dedicated to related and unrelated human spirits, both newly and long departed, were furnished with an additional variety of cooked dishes and drinks. While offerings were prepared in the kitchen by the deceased's daughter-in-law and paternal granddaughter, his

younger brother, a French speaking cook and his grandson were meticulously arranging votive money and clothes to offer to ghostly entities. Meanwhile, his eldest daughter, the head nun, arranged the gifts on in-house altars and lighting incense reverently announced her visit to enshrined house members. Then, standing in front of the altar of her father she casually engaged him in conversation with the same ease she chatted away with the nuns around her. After portions of the meal were proportionately distributed on altars and the head nun changed into Buddhist ceremonial robes, the nuns resumed prayers. Throughout the session the nuns stood in front of the Buddhist altar chanting and rhythmically directing kowtowing sessions. The rest of participating mourners, some dressed in grey robes worn by devout Buddhists and others in plain clothes, kowtowed to all three altars in prescribed order: first to the Buddhist altar then to the ancestors on the main ancestral shrine and subsequently to the altar of the newly deceased. Eventually, participants turned to the outdoor altar, requesting unrelated lost souls to desist from harming the newly deceased and thus hindering his safe passage to afterlife. After all in-house and unbounded spirits alike were given food and votive offerings were duly burned, the makeshift altar was dismantled and the family sat to a communal meal. Food dishes from the main and makeshift altars were transferred to the tables for living house members, while food and drinks on the altar of the father were left there to be consumed later. The son and his family were seated on the table right opposite the main ancestral shrine, whereas the nuns and I, as their guest, were accommodated on an adjacent table opposite the altar of the father. Before starting the meal, the head nun, clutching a pair of chopsticks turned towards her father and in a loud but affectionate voice invited him to eat as habitually and partake in the meal, repeating *mòi ông ăn cơm*.¹⁷

The following week, the head nun would return to her natal house to attend a similar ritual to mark the completion of the forty nine days period. The completion of the forty nine days period is marked with the ‘ritual of the fiftieth day’ (*nam mườì*

¹⁷ *Mòi ăn cơm* is a courteous ‘invitation to a meal’, that is extended to honored guests in ritual feasts, that is both living kin and departed family members. Further, this invitation is extended to older generations by dutiful children and minors in the context of everyday family meals. For a more detailed discussion see chapter 4.

ngày), a ritual event organized universally by Buddhist and non-Buddhist families alike. This ritual occasion is similar to the prayer session described above. Yet unlike the above mentioned ritual meal among close kin, this involves much wider participation and is a formal ritual occasion, led by ritual specialists. In the particular household, the ritual prayers for the completion of the seven weeks period were led by male Buddhist dignitaries.¹⁸ This is most commonly an occasion whereby all funeral participants, including close and distant kin, colleagues and acquaintances are invited to contribute to prayers for the soul. As the widow explained, this ritual is to ‘thank’ all the people who have participated at the funeral and shared the family’s grief (*chia buồn*). According to my informants the larger the number of participants the most powerful and effectual the prayer is, because it ‘joins the voices of many’. The family of a young father who died in a road accident organized the ritual feast for the completion of the fiftieth day in two separate sessions as the unfortunate death of their relative necessitated the involvement and active support of even larger numbers of living kin. In this case the family accommodated a feast for patrilineal kin at noon after the prayer session and another one for friends and affines following in the afternoon.

While the fiftieth day for the deceased young father was overcast by uneasiness about the soul’s fate due to the ominous circumstances of death, the equivalent for the father of the head nun was an auspicious and nearly joyful occasion, as the deceased died in propitious circumstances, at home and surrounded by caring descendants. The ritual starts in the morning with formal prayer sessions lead by Buddhist dignitaries and concludes with a lavish feast whereby all living participants are offered strictly vegetarian dishes and non-alcoholic beverages. Summing up the chanting sessions that takes place at different spells during the funeral, the ritual makes provisions for three different written prayers (*so*) addressed to the dissimilar recipients in a prescribed order: first to the higher deity worshipped in the house – most commonly Buddhist - then to the soul of the deceased and finally to mischievous and highly active errant spirits. While prayers to deities request their intervention to assist the soul through its

¹⁸ In Huế, nuns cannot officiate over funerary rituals as female bodies are considered to be incomplete and thus cannot attain full enlightenment.

transition, prayers addressed to malevolent errant spirits or demons call for them to resist interfering in the process. The *sơ* addressed to the newly deceased reminds them of the identities of the mourners (names and ages) and of hardships and calamities plaguing this world, such as sickness, war and devastating floods and urges them to settle in a favorable and peaceful realm of in the nether world.

The ritual of the fiftieth day signifies the end of daily offerings of meals to the deceased, who is thereafter offered food periodically on important ritual occasions marked on the lunar calendar as well as on ancestral anniversaries. During the period of forty nine days, daily offerings of food are essential for the deceased's transformation as he/she heavily relies on kin for sustenance and support. Material and emotional support by living kin is crucial to see them through a challenging and arduous process, whereby the accumulation of merit promotes their spiritual welfare. As a versed local explained "during the period of 49 days, the deceased heavily depends on their 'intimates' (*thân nhân*) and 'yearns' (*trong mong*) for them to perform benevolent acts (*việc thiện*) on their behalf. Such acts contribute towards the deliverance of the deceased as they add to the unmaking of their faults and the accumulation of meritorious accomplishments. Such merit engendering acts (*công đức*) include releasing captured creatures, presenting gifts to efficacious deities as well as making charitable donations and contributing towards the relief of destitute entities, both living and dead, who lack support from family and kin (see chapter 3). Holding due rituals and appropriate funerals for deceased kin is considered a benevolent and highly moral act as it assists the deceased to become a settled ancestral spirit.

In par with Buddhist teachings, the fundamental benevolent act is abstaining from harming and killing other living beings. In the context of funerary practices this is achieved by means of eating vegetarian (*ăn chay*) as opposed to eating flesh (*ăn mặn*), which is part of everyday meals. Therefore all funerary rites including the ritual for the fiftieth day, involve nothing more than vegetarian food dishes. Abstaining from killing and consuming flesh and from committing grave faults generates merit that is not only relevant to one's karmic odds but further relevant to the welfare and posterity of departed kin. In Huế, merit generating acts are enacted by locals on the basis of their transferability to kin who need it most, both living and dead. As explained in the

following chapter, women engage in merit engendering acts, such as releasing live animals (*phong sanh*) by means of contributing and promoting the well-being of ailing kin. Similarly, during the funerary cycle, all kin must refrain from committing faults (*tội*) as this would have an adverse effect on the deceased and his/her fate in posterity. Malevolent acts (*việc ác*) performed by living kin during this period jeopardize the well-being of the deceased as they can influence their transition, hindering their transcendental transformation or resulting in them emerging into unfavorable life-worlds. Thus the providence of parents and children, living and dead kin are impartibly linked, as merits and demerits are shared and transferable among ‘people of like body’ (*người thân*). The popular adage ‘ancestors ate too much salt so the children are thirsty’, which has caught the fascination of anthropologists working in Việt Nam, is not simply a ‘metaphor’ for the connections between anterior and present generations, as commonly suggested (Malerney 2002). It is an explicit idiom of close affinities between kin, whose connections and intimacy are sustained beyond death.

Similarly the first and second death anniversaries, relevant as they are to the deceased’s transcendental transformation, involve only vegetarian food. Unlike these abstemious anniversaries, ancestral anniversaries (*ngày kỵ*) that follow are indulgent and celebratory events that involve sacrificial offerings and plentiful consumption of meat and alcohol (see chapter 4). In Huế, locals clearly distinguish between ancestral anniversaries (*ngày kỵ*) and the anniversaries held on the first and second year after death, in turn marked as ‘small’ (*tiểu tìong*) and ‘big clearance’ (*đại tìong*), respectively. The small and big clearance rites are integral part of the funerary sequence, as the deceased is considered to be in a transitional state and the emerging entity is still developing and adapting to a new world and mode of existence. During this period, the deceased has yet to complete their transformation into an unfathomably divine ancestral spirit and thus the mourners are still filled with ‘anxiety and concerns’ (*lo sợ*) over the fate of recently deceased kin. In this context, the rituals for the small and big clearance are centered on the provisional altar of the soul (*ban tho linh*), where the deceased remains enshrined. Subsequently, the ‘big clearance’ signifies the conclusion of the funerary transformation and the end of mourning, whereby the deceased duly joins his/her dead kin on the main ancestral altar.

The small and big clearances are marked as important ritual landmarks in the deceased's transcendental transformation for an array of dead with different merits and demerits and grades of virtuousness. The 49 days cycle as well as the annual clearance rituals are relevant even in the case of virtuous dead such as monks and nuns who are more likely to 'join Buddha' in the course of an all-auspicious posterity. Similarly, such rituals are held in pagodas for deceased clergy, as in the case of death of a head nun in a semi-urban female pagoda. On the completion of the first year after death, her female disciples and Buddhist monks from associated pagodas gathered around her provisional altar (*ban tho linh*) to pray for the deliverance of her soul and mark her eventual clearance. As her successor in the pagoda explained clearance rituals must be held for all dead. The difference for righteous dead such as the deceased head nun and ordinary people is that the former only have one clearance ritual held on the first anniversary, while the latter have to undergo a more complicated and longer period of transition and thus have both a small and big clearance. Like other funerary rituals, the small and big clearance are lead by ritual specialists, most commonly Buddhist or Taoist masters, who in turn lead prayers for the deliverance of the soul. Furthermore, like funeral rites, these annual rituals are centered on the altar of the soul and enlist the munificent assistance of ancestral spirits and seek to avert malicious influences in order to ensure the unhindered transition of the deceased.

Conclusion

As noted earlier a number of current studies on ancestral practices in Việt Nam have dealt with funerals (*đàm tang*) as unique events clearly separate from all subsequent ritual practices pertaining to forbears. In this context, funerals have been examined as ritual events whereby the burial or ceremonial disposal of the corpse signifies an act of closure. Therefore such studies have posited a clear distinction between funerals and so called ancestor worshipping practices (Malarney 2002; Kleinen 1999, Jellema 2007). This has led to a fragmenting understanding of ancestral practices as a 'cult'

and ancestral anniversaries as ritual events primarily relevant to death and memory. Here, I take a broader view of funerary rituals that extends beyond mortuary treatment and the ceremonial expulsion of the corpse. I propose that as series of rituals following burial ritual are concerned with the due transition of the deceased and their transcendental transformation into a settled ancestral spirit and therefore fall well within the funerary cycle. I set the cut off point on the second anniversary after death whereby kin are divested of mourning burdens and anxieties about the fate of the deceased's soul.

Thus these events fall within the ritual efforts of living kin who seek to effect the transformation of the deceased from a dangerous soul into a largely benevolent ancestral spirit. This is pursued through a long and gradual process, which involves a series of elaborate rituals that rather than by means of a unique and resolute event such as funerals. This prolonged process and intense ritual efforts demonstrate the continuing care and connections between kin sustained beyond the disrupting influence of death. If death brings disruption immersing the soul into a state of bewilderment and confusion and thus causing the deceased to forget their identity and connections with existing kin, the funerary process seeks to re-establish links and relations between dead and living kin, by reiterating and re-establishing connections between the deceased and the group of mourners. Funerary rituals constitute not only a process by means of which given genealogical connections are reinstated but further a process through which relations between kin, both living and dead, are constituted and re-constituted, elicited and instantiated. By turning ambiguous detached entities into ancestral spirits responsive to their living kin, funerary practices produce and create kin. They do so by inducing and introducing a different kind of intimacy between living and dead kin, one that falls beyond the everyday and face to face contact. If no due rituals are performed upon death one is doomed to become a restless and errant ghost or 'lost soul', lacking connections to living kin. The next chapter examines the predicaments of these lost souls.

Chapter 3

The danger of becoming a ghost

Besides ancestral souls, the Vietnamese landscape has historically been populated by a multitude of spirits: historic figures, heroes acting as local guardians, tutelary spirits, court-like divine assemblies, Taoist immortals, Buddhist divinities and Bodhisattvas, nature spirits inhabiting grottoes, mountains and rivers.¹ Amidst this densely populated landscape, mischievous errant spirits such as demons (*quý*) and ghosts (*ma*) have historically been assigned a specific place. Ghosts and demons are made up of the souls of unfortunate dead that suffered an ‘untimely’, ‘unfulfilling’, and often violent death, drowning in water, dying in accidents and conflicts or simply without descendants. Ghosts are born from entities that upon death have no one to ritually treat and entomb their body, to facilitate their passage to the other world and to propitiate them thereafter. Falling outside of ancestral altars but well within the domain of otherworldly influences, ghostly entities and errant spirits have not received due attention in early studies which have been dominated by discussions of ancestral figures and indubitable gods (Cadier 1957; Hickey 1964; Le Van Dinh 1934; Nguyễn 1944).

In the post conflict cosmological landscape, the populations of *ma quý* have grown remarkably. Accordingly, ritual acknowledgment and response to the masses of unfortunate dead has greatly benefited from the effects of the *đổi mới* reforms. In line with these developments, ghosts and other ambiguous deities have been increasingly overtaking the space of anthropological work in Việt Nam (Dror 2006; Fjelstad 2006; Kwon 2006, 2007; Taylor 2006). In his study of burgeoning spiritual life, Taylor (2006) examines the popularization of pilgrimages to a potent female deity which defines both the physical and conceptual borders of Vietnamese popular religion. On another plane, Kwon in his recently published work focuses on the ritual commemoration of the victims of civilian massacres which took place during the war

¹ For a typology of spirits, see Chanh (1993) and Do (2003).

in Việt Nam (2006), pointing to the infiltration of the untimely dead into the realm of ancestor commemoration and suggesting that the ritual emancipation of ghosts (2007) is in line with market driven reforms. By bringing together history and cosmology, Kwon's study eloquently points to the historical background that informs practices related to ghosts, as well as, to the current transformations in the landscape of memory. The present chapter acknowledges the importance of history in the makings of ghosts. However, it seeks to move beyond the past century, the legacy of the cold war and the looming 'phantom of war' (Kwon 2008) by suggesting a multitude of historic spectres in operation in contemporary central Việt Nam. Most notably, it highlights the place and relevance of ghosts-victims of earlier conflicts such as those related to the anti-colonial struggle as well as those of the indigenous Cham who were displaced over the centuries by the advancing Viet forces. Both spectres are equally relevant, haunting with their presence contemporary Vietnamese society. Moreover, by moving beyond the 'war dead', I seek to draw attention to an array of additional ghostly entities and unfortunate dead acknowledged and propitiated by locals. Such dead include the souls of infants and aborted foetuses, as well as those who have died without offspring and thus without someone to care for them. According to local understandings, ghosts of the latter category are evocative of the fundamental predicament shared among all ghostly entities: the lack of support by kin and intimates. This chapter is concerned with the existential implications of unfulfilling death and the cosmological as well as historical makings of ghostly entities. It is concerned with what it means to be a Vietnamese ghost today.

Cô hồn or 'lost souls'

Ghosts are born out of an ominous death. Dying untimely, in unfamiliar settings, and often violently without the required burial, funeral and due rituals that enable the journey from this world to the other, encapsulate the danger of becoming a ghost. Locals distinguish between 'dying at home' (*chết nhà*) in familiar settings surrounded

by kin and ‘dying on the street’ (*chết đường*), in unsettling circumstances, ‘amidst nothing’. Dying away from home suggests a dislocating and disruptive death that upsets not only one’s predetermined life span and destiny but also one’s relations with intimates and kin. The unfortunate soul is prone to aimlessly wander around the ‘death spot’, unable to ‘return home’ (*về nhà*). It thus becomes a homeless errant spirit. According to Kwon (2006:12), *chết nhà* and *chết đường* are about the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ death in a ‘house-centered morality of death’. In this context, the moment and circumstances of death ultimately define the makings of ghosts and ancestors as opposing categories. Yet anguished spirits suffer not only because of a disruptive, violent death but above all by the ensuing deprivation that defines their posthumous existence. Ghostly entities are defined by an acute lack of material and emotional support from living kin as their connections to the latter have become untraceable. It is precisely this disconnection and ensuing destitution that permeates all facets of their miserable existence. Dying in unknown circumstances and without due treatment, unfortunate dead become trapped between *âm* and *đương*, between this world and the other, unable to fully reemerge in this realm or the other with certainty.

The generic and abstract term ‘ghosts’ like the conceptually opposite term ‘ancestors’ fails to capture the diversity and intricacies pertinent to eerie entities evident in the multitude of local idioms and explanations. In Huế locals highly sentient and apprehensive of ghostly entities rarely employ the indistinct term *ma* (ghost). Instead they use an array of terms such as *cô hồn* (lost soul), *âm hồn* (souls of the dead), *vong hồn* (soul of a newly deceased) or *oan hồn* (grievous souls) depending on context and presumed circumstances of a soul. The term most commonly used to refer to ghostly entities is *cô hồn* literally meaning ‘lone’ or ‘solitary souls’ and thus by implication ‘lost souls’.² Here I adopt the term ‘lost souls’ as an amalgam of the multifarious meanings attached locally to the term. The most salient attribute of *cô hồn* is that they have ‘no name and age’ (*không có tên tuổi*). Name and age are the

² The term *cô* has a series of interrelated meanings. As a kinship term it refers to paternal ‘aunts’, namely the wives of father’s brothers. On another plane, it means lone, solitary; hence it is often extended to non-kin as a polite reference to unmarried women (lone, without a husband).

fundamentals of one's identity with the date of death being added later. These three particulars are essential for ritually evoking and propitiating the dead, and their knowledge marks the difference between care for ancestors with whom the living intimately engage and the unidentified dead who are destined to remain unfamiliar. With their name and age left unknown, *cô hồn* lack an identity and traceable links and attachments to kin groups, descent lines and specific localities. In the words of locals, 'lost souls' have no 'house' (*nhà*), 'family line' (*họ*) or known 'place of origin' (*quê*). What defines lost souls is that they have 'no one to care for them and duly propitiate them' (*không có ai lo cúng*). Their predicament is that they are neglected for they are disconnected from their kin. The most evocative comment regarding lost souls and unfortunate dead is that they have 'no offspring' (*không có con*) and more particularly, that they have no male descendants (*vô từ*) who are responsible for their due care in posterity. Lost souls are deprived of the support of wives, children and descendants or 'people of a like body' (*người thân*) as locals refer to close kin. *Cô hồn* lack the support of kin and intimates who could propitiate them, enable their transformation and journey into the other world, provide them with continuous sustenance and ensure their well being. In his effort to explain the meaning of 'lost souls', a retired teacher and father of seven dutiful daughters who was without a male heir contentedly remarked that there are two kinds of lost souls, the 'living and the dead' ones. Living in dire poverty, without a house or a firm foothold in a locale, a decent means to livelihood and support of kin that could lift them out of destitution, the living dispossessed are like 'lost souls' for they are dependent on the charity and donations of unfamiliar others.³

Lost souls are also deprived of the possibility of obtaining a new 'body' (*thân*) and thus a life anew. According to local perceptions which are profoundly influenced by Buddhist traditions, the 'next life' (*kiếp sau*) entails the re-emergence of the dead either in this world (*duong*) or in the other (*âm*). In reemerging in this world, one acquires a new 'body' (*thân xác*), 'house' (*nhà*) and family line (*họ*). He/she is thus surrounded and supported by 'people of like body' (*người thân*) and is thus able to

³ In Huế, the living dispossessed live in boats, making their living out of fishing and picking shells around river banks.

make a life anew. Trapped between the two worlds, the lost souls can neither emerge into a new life in the *duong* realm nor join their ancestors dwelling in the *âm*. Their potential is wrecked not only by the circumstances of their death but first and foremost by the lack of the support from kin who could ensure their ritual deliverance and emancipation. Being without a body, house or ‘access’ (*cửa*) to sanctuary of any kind, lost souls are deprived of both the material and spiritual conditions of well being and the means to livelihood. Therefore as locals stress, lost souls are ‘without a place or someone to lean on’ (*không nơi nương tựa*) or a body to take shelter in (*thân trú ẩn*).⁴ Therefore, *cô hồn* lead an impoverished existence, scavenging the earth for scraps and in perpetual search for the means to livelihood such as food, clothes and shelter.

Unlike ancestral souls who are duly placed on family altars and cared for by kin and intimates, the ill-fated souls lead a destitute existence depending for sustenance and support on the living ‘anyone’.⁵ Hence, lost souls lead an insecure, disorientated and unbounded existence that is opposed to the sheltered and housed ancestral souls. Restless and edgy, *cô hồn* are doomed to endlessly roam the boundless outdoors, frequenting the streets and open spaces, lingering on pathways and crossroads (*ngã*), finding shelter atop trees or buried deep beneath water courses. Unsettled and overwhelmed by grievances and sufferings, lost souls pose a constant threat to the inhabitants of both worlds pestering and afflicting both living and dead. Unfortunate dead and errant spirits can pester and harm the living, inflicting illness, accidents, misfortunes or even death on them. They also mischievously harass the fortunate dead who died in auspicious circumstances. As explained in chapter 2, errant souls and malevolent spirits tend to bully the newly dead, pestering the vulnerable souls and hindering their transition to the nether realm. Thus, attending to errant spirits and lost souls with copious feasts is an integral part of funerals by means of which their malevolent influences are appeased and dispelled.

⁴ *Cửa* means door and signifies point of access. The word is often used as synonymous to having a house, abode or shelter.

⁵ In her article about naming practices and gender in China Ruby Watson (1986: 629) juxtaposes the named ancestors as ‘individuated and personed’ or ‘somebodies’ to the anonymous masses of ‘anybodies’, arguing that in life as well as in death women fall in-between.

Cô hồn is a generic term used only in reference to masses of unidentified unfortunate dead as opposed to proverbial ancestors who are most commonly referred to with the relevant kinship term. Despite the circumstances of their death or existential burdens locals refer to venerated ancestral souls using the term *linh hồn* signifying a divine soul which is responsive to the prayers of the living (see chapter 2). To my informants, many of whom had lost fathers, brothers and uncles in recent conflicts - some killed in the sanctity of their own house - their dead kin were by no means lost souls (*cô hồn*) or ghosts (*ma*) for that matter, but venerable fathers, mothers, siblings, uncles and aunts who were duly placed on ancestral altars. In his paper on the commemoration of the dead of a cold war incident in a community in Taiwan, Feuchtwang (2007) insightfully remarks that despite suffering a violent and ignominious death, the people who perished in the incident are identified as ‘ghosts’ only by ‘outsiders’. To their families and people of the locale they are ‘ancestors’ and intimate, named, identified dead. In Huế, unfortunate death does not place the dead once and for all on the ‘outside’ with regards to space, memory or kinship. It instead mobilizes intensive and collective efforts for the deliverance and release of ancestral souls from distressing conditions (see below). Thus, ancestors and ghosts are neither rigid and fixed categories entangled in permanent opposition nor do they form impenetrable and un-transformable states of being as explained in the last part of this chapter. Rather, *linh hồn* and *cô hồn*, ancestral and lost souls are categories involved in reciprocal implication with the boundary separating them being fluid and flexible because it depends on the perspective one adopts.

Oan hồn: infants and foetuses as grievous souls

The plights of ghostly entities come as the result of an unfortunate experience of death, its unsettling consequences and existential implications. In the local vocabulary there is no word equivalent to the English noun ‘death’ connoting a condition and a state. Locals always refer to ‘dead people’ (*người chết*) which describes a subject

position. Moreover, they employ an array of verbal forms to describe the experience of ‘dying’. In addition, they assign to the condition of being dead as well as to the state each soul finds itself in a multiplicity of forms. Death does not exist separately from the person that endures it. Different people experience different kinds of death and accordingly form different categories of dead. For example, the passing of sovereigns, statesmen and high ranking personages is marked differently from that of ordinary people. Thus, the death of an emperor is denoted by the term *băng hà* referring to the lowering of a banner or flag. The death of a virtuous Buddhist monk is *tịch* (pass away) and that of an abbot is *viên tịch* with the addendum *viên* signifying a higher position. Furthermore, the death of the enemy is *toi mạng* (perish) while *toi* is also used to denote the death of an animal. In contrast the term officially used to describe the state-glorified death of the soldiers who served the revolution and the nation and have thus become ‘martyrs’ (*liệt sĩ*) is *hy sinh* referring to ‘sacrifice’ (see Malarney 2001).

Responding to my naïve questions and clumsy use of the Vietnamese language, my friends sympathetically remarked that the word *chết* (to die) was a rather tactless and indiscrete term to use, counter suggesting the equally generic yet more ‘polite’ word *mất* (to vanish or die). Nonetheless, when referring to ancestors, locals do not use either word but revert to expressions such as *quá đời* (the past generation), *quá cố* for the generations preceding that of the great grandfather (*cố*), or *quá vãng* (the foregone generation), with the precise term used depending on the genealogical status and seniority of the forbear. Such pertinent differences between the dead are also apparent in graves and burial sites which mark the identity, position and standing of the dead as well as the cohorts of descendants who have undertaken the construction and preservation of the tomb. In addition, commoners have more or less elaborately marked graves (*mộ*) while kings and noble elites have majestic tombs (*lăng*). On the other hand, lost souls or those who died without descendants do not have marked graves but rather lie underneath a mound of soil without a stele marking their identity.

As mentioned above, death is not separate from the person that endures it. Therefore, death pertains to one’s preordained destiny (*mệnh*) and life span (*số mạng*),

their divinely determined chances and providence in life. As a knowledgeable and well-versed elder, *ông* Toan, explained the semantics of death lie in the distinction between ‘living in fulfillment of thy destiny and dying in peace’ (*sanh phận tử an*) and ‘suffering a frustrating death that comes in an inapt time-frame’ (*bất đắc kỳ tử*).⁶ In his words, *bất đắc kỳ tử* pertains and describes people who ‘died without reaching the end of their lot’ without fulfilling their destiny (*chết lúc chưa đến số mạng*), that is, to people dying soon after birth, to the ‘aborted’ fetuses (*sạ say*) or those who left before ‘acquiring a name’, ‘in the street’, in accidents (*tai nạn*) or in war (*chiến tranh*) ‘amidst nothing’ (*giữa sa*). Thus, according to local perceptions, the aptness of death is pertinent to one’s lot (*số mạng*) as well as to one’s feats and accomplishments in life (*công*). Upon being conceived one is placed appositely in the cosmological cycles of *âm* and *đương* and hence one acquires a predetermined destiny. Inapt deaths disturb these cycles and unsettle predetermined orders. Moreover, inapt and untimely deaths do not only unsettle celestial arrangements and delicate cosmic balances but most importantly bring unsettlement and disruption in the social realm. Inapt death brings disruption in the relations with intimates and kin, disturbing one’s placement in the family, descent group and local community.

‘Untimely and ‘unfulfilling’ deaths bear out the likes of *oan hồn* or ‘grievous souls’.⁷ *Oan hồn* are the souls of those who suffer not only an ill-timed but also ‘unjust’ death, falling victims to a ‘great injustice’.⁸ Their wrongly inflicted death implicates an immoral if not criminal act brought upon them which viciously intervenes with their destiny. This ‘injustice’ haunts the perpetrator as much as the victim. Born out of a tragic death (*chết oan*) the grievous souls are doomed to perpetually relive the tormenting experience. Entrapped by it and the grievous

⁶ The two terms are of Sino-Vietnamese origin and their transliteration has proved an overwhelming task for many, including my young research assistant. As this is an approximate translation I offer here the meaning of each word separately for the convenience of the reader. In the phrase *bất đắc kỳ tử*, *bất* means without and denotes negation, *đắc* means fulfillment or favourable, *kỳ* means period of time or right time and *tử*, has a double meaning: son or male heir and death. In *sanh phận tử an*, *sanh* means life or rather living, *phận* (*so phan*) means destiny, life-span and *tử an*, means to die peacefully.

⁷ I use here the translation ‘grievous souls’ as proposed by Kwon (2006).

⁸ The film with the same title, ‘*oan hồn*’ (2003) by Vietnamese-American director Victor Vu, can be taken as an insightful study on the experience and predicaments of such unsettled souls and their endless quest for deliverance and release.

memories these souls engage in a perpetual quest to avenge their death and reverse the injustice by which means they can be released from their entrapment. Release comes only with another death whereby the soul seeking to share its agonizing experience with a living person claims a substitute victim. Engaged in a consuming quest to avenge their injustice and escape their sufferings, *oan hồn* are highly active and potent spirits that can harm not just their perpetrators but most likely any unsuspected living. Having suffered similar torments, the new victim takes the place of the soul thus perpetuating the cycles of injustice. In Huế, stories and legends about *oan hồn* loom large with stories retribution and release not being always within reach.⁹

Among the most fear-provoking and worrisome ghosts are the souls of infants, newborns and aborted fetuses with their worldly lives having been terminated soon after they began. While alive, infants and newborns are unblemished and vulnerable beings. Their premature deaths transform them into vicious eerie perpetrators seeking to inflict death on other infants. Targeted by grievous infant spirits, healthy and hearty newborns are most vulnerable to malevolent influences which seek to claim them as victims. As a measure against malicious influences, my informants often acquire amulets and charms to protect their newborns. In addition, giving a funny or ‘ugly’ name to a baby is a common prophylactic practice in Huế. As a young father who worked for a foreign NGO explained, giving names like ‘mushroom’ (*nấm*) or ‘potato’ (*tây*) to newborns are favoured because they do not attract the attention of malicious entities.¹⁰ Among the most dangerous ghosts are the mischievous souls of stillborns (*con ranh*) who seek revenge on their mother by transmigrating into the next child she conceives often causing his/her death. The cycle can only be terminated by a shaman who ritually kills the *ranh* (Chanh 1993:176). Another less drastic way to avoid transmigration is ‘by deceit’ as Coughlin suggests (1965: 256) whereby the newborn baby is supposedly turned into an orphan and given back to its mother to become its ‘wet nurse’.

⁹ Such is the legend of a ‘good’ and an ‘evil’ mandarin, where the later has caused the death of the former. Unable to avenge his death, the good mandarin wandered endlessly as a grievous soul for several generations, eventually taking reprisal for the injustice by afflicting the body of his executor.

¹⁰ In the course of life, one changes and acquires several names, each marking important transitions such as the end of childhood and marriage as well as acquiring official position. See also Ruby Watson (1986).

Stillborns and infants that died before completing the first year of their worldly lives become a particular category of ghosts, the feared *quý* (Chanh 1993:174). This is so because their bodies, the vital spirits that animate their bodies (*via*) and their souls (*hồn*) have not yet fully developed (*chưa phát triển*). As their sensory and perceptual faculties are yet to develop, infants less than a year old are not considered to be fully human. Moreover, as my informants stress, they are dangerous because it is difficult to ‘reason with them’. Dead infants are difficult to engage with and propitiate because they have not yet learned to eat foodstuffs, eating only ‘rice gruel’. Furthermore, they have not yet acquired a ‘name and age’ and thus they cannot be properly identified. Infant ghosts are more prone to behave mischievously and erratically as they are unable to prevail over their grievances and feelings of distress. In the case of stillborns, the anguish, confusion and distress is more intense as the time of their emergence in this world and the time their death might overlap.¹¹ In the past a series of rituals was performed to mark a child’s development until the twelfth year of age. Today a most important birth rite is held upon the completion of one month of age whereby the infant is given a name and introduced to both dead and living kin. On this occasion, the parents and more particularly the maternal grandparents organize a lavish feast for the gratification of the twelve ‘celestial midwives’ (*bà mụ*) that assist with birth and train the infant to the realization of human capacities (laughing, crying, walking etc).

Other spirits that can interfere with childbearing and child rearing are ‘maiden aunts’ (*bà cô*) (see also Cadriere 1955; Coughlin 1965). As explained in the first chapter, *bà cô* are ‘maiden aunts’, that is, women that died ‘without a husband’ (*không cô chồng*) and thus, without offspring. Locals use the term to identify the soul of female kin that died in infancy but it is also extended to elderly ‘maiden aunts’. Most interestingly the term is used to identify kin who died as foetuses and whose gender is unknown. Due to their lonesomeness and barrenness, *bà cô* are considered to be potent spirits that can interfere with female fertility and childbearing, albeit not always in a destructive way (see Coughlin 1965). Maiden aunts as well as brothers and sisters who

¹¹ In Việt Nam it is the time of conception that determines one’s emergence into this world rather than the moment of birth. Hence, at the time of birth one already has an ‘age’ (*tuổi*) and therefore in determining one’s age one extra year is added on the birth age. See also Dror (2006:70).

died in infancy are placed in purposely made outdoor altars (*am*) set in house gardens and yards (see chapter 1). As their lives have been hastily disrupted, the souls of such untimely dead cannot be placed inside the house and on the ancestral altar which is reserved for parents and grandparents. However, these spirits are tended semimonthly as well as periodically on the sidelines of ancestral veneration practices.

Although some aspects of the identity of kin who suffered an unfulfilling death may be unknown, dedicated outdoor shrines (*am*) are customized in style and form to suit the gender and age of the spirit. *Am* for ‘boys’ have an elaborately adorned roof with a phoenix carved on top; ‘girls’ shrines tend to have unembellished roof covers. Girls’ shrines have a mirror and comb added to the basic worship paraphernalia such as incense burners, dish and flower vase. Unlike *am* for unfortunate kin that bear diacritic marks, shrines dedicated to the crowds of unknown and unrelated dead (*am ngoài trời*) are unmarked, plain and uniform in shape, style and appearance. They come in the form of plain shelves without lateral walls, roof, or ornamentation. Their architectural under-elaboration corresponds to the desolate existence of lost souls exposed as they are to the elements of nature and calamities of life. Such shrines are not only found in the environs of houses but also in busy streets and markets, hanging on trees and pillars outside shops and business premises, tended by the shopkeepers and petty traders who make their living in the vicinity.

According to local understandings the likes of ghostly entities are made of multitudes of dead who have suffered an untimely, violent, and unjust death. This multitude does not include only those who died in recent conflicts but extends to encompass an array of dead such as infants, ‘maiden aunts’ as well as those who died before producing descendants. This multitude is at variance with a number of studies on ghostly entities in contemporary Việt Nam which have focused on the political significance of recent ‘war dead’ and particularly the unfortunate dead who fall outside the categories of state-glorified ‘heroes’ and ‘martyrs’ (Kwon 2006, 2008; Malarney 2007). The material I gathered in Huế shows that this focus needs to be complemented by and expanded in two distinct directions; on the one hand, by including those untimely dead that fall short of explicit anthropological treatment and comprise infants, ‘maiden aunts’ and people without children, and on the other, by

reaching further back into the past and bringing into view other historical periods that contemporary Vietnamese are also anxious about for they too produced untimely dead in droves.

*Tết and the spring of our restiveness*¹²

The populations of eerie entities as well as the ritual response to them are subject to regional and historical particularities with Huế standing as a particular rather than typical case as it is the former imperial capital. Lying beneath the so called demilitarized zone of the 1960s, Huế has been the site of fierce battles in the course of the war in Việt Nam. With a major military station of the American led forces lying in the highland plateau of the region, Huế was of strategic importance to both sides.¹³ The *Tet* offensive launched during an informal truce to allow for the New Year celebrations to take place found Huế at the centre of the conflict as territorial forces engaged in hard-fought and extensive battles at the heart of the city. During the long and fierce battle for Huế, the city's historic landmarks were turned into combat settings as the two sides took the fight inside the imperial enclosure (see introduction). Flowing through the city, the Perfume River (*sông Hương*) itself is said to have been overwhelmed with lifeless bodies. Today outdoor shrines (*am*) for these errant spirits are found on either side of the river, in busy commercial streets and around the citadel. On the north bank of the river where the commercial hub of the city is located, several *am* have been planted on the perimeter wall of the imperial city. On the south bank, where hotels, shops and restaurants for tourists are concentrated, similar shrines

¹² *Tết* (*Tết Nguyên Đán*), the lunar New Year signifies the start of an auspicious seasonal cycle (spring) that is a time of rejuvenation and 'renewal' (Ngoc 2003:15). The reference here is to the *Tết* offensive that took place in the year of the monkey (1968), which according to many analysts proved to be a turning point in the war in Việt Nam. Launched by the Northern Vietnamese forces, the offensive involved a number of coordinated attacks across the territory of the then South Vietnamese Republic, aiming at seizing stations and urban sites of strategic importance. The first city to be attacked was the capital of South Vietnam, *Sài Gòn*, where the American embassy briefly came under fire. The longest and hardest battle fought was for the capture of Huế, the historic capital, which remained under fire for a month. See Willbanks (2007).

¹³ Khe San station was vital for the American led forces as it was sitting near the Hồ Chí Minh trail, through which the Northern Vietnamese army infiltrated the South.

feature atop trees tended on a daily basis by shopkeepers and petty entrepreneurs. All around the city centre as well as beyond, errant spirits and lost souls of unidentified dead are believed to be swarming the landscape and to require or even demand to be ritually appeased and placated by locals.¹⁴

In Huế, ghostly entities and lost souls are worshipped in a number of occasions, often on the sidelines of formal worship for ancestors. In these contexts, anonymous unrelated souls are provided with food and votive offerings in the form of *mâm thi thức*, literally ‘tray of handing out food’. As my informants stressed, handing out offerings for the benefit of destitute souls has traditionally been part of ancestral rituals. Today *mâm thi thức* is an integral part of funerary practices as well as ancestor anniversaries whereby trays often take the form of feasting tables. While ancestral spirits are invited to enter houses and ancestral halls and join their intimates in commensality during these rituals, errant spirits are instead fed separately in outdoor makeshift altars as a way of neutralizing the threat they pose. Errant unrelated spirits also receive basic offerings such as flowers, fruits and incense semi-monthly on the waning and waxing phases of the moon. This is a time during which locals habitually make similar offerings to ancestors (see chapter 1). However, ancestral and errant souls are provided for separately with the former being propitiated on the eve of each occasion (31st, 14th) and the latter being tended on the following day. Ghost appeasement takes place in house gardens but is even more pronounced in shops and business premises with makeshift low altars being established. Locals are well aware of the need to acknowledge the lost souls that roam the streets and ‘surround the locale’ and with whom they ‘share this land’.

The propitiation of errant spirits has also become part of the auspicious inauguration of the Lunar New Year. The first month of the annual cycle (*tháng giêng*) is crucial for setting the pattern for the year ahead. Throughout this month locals become involved in a series of ritual engagements whereby tending to ancestral altars and graves takes precedence and visits to pagodas and temples follow in priority. On the eve of the New Year families complete the feverish preparations around the house

¹⁴ For example on ‘all souls day’ (15/7), an occasion marked on Buddhist calendars whereby the living tend to all tormented souls in the underworld (*âm hồn*).

and receive the souls of mothers, fathers and grandparents. In the morning of the first day of the New Year (*móng môt*), elder male members gather in ancestral halls to welcome the founders of the different lineages and of the local community. After the fourth day of the first lunar month, the revered ancestors are sent off on their way back to the nether realm. During this period, locals engage in a series of charitable activities aimed at the relief of both the living and the dead destitute. Such merit making activities include donations to renowned ‘male’ pagodas which often shelter untimely dead as well as to orphanages and care homes for elderly who are without kin with the latter often run by ‘female’ pagodas. Accordingly, during the second half of the first lunar month, locals hold rituals for the masses of anonymous ‘lost souls’ in a series of different contexts.

In the village of Lưỡng Nghi, communal rituals for ‘lost souls’ (*cô hồn*) are organized during the first lunar month as well as at the end of the annual cycle, while locals prepare to receive ancestors in houses, ancestral halls and village temples. The twelfth lunar month (*tháng chạp*) is a period largely dedicated to forebears of all known generations and thus synonymous with ‘communal ancestral worship’ (*chạp*). The month is launched with a communal ritual (*ngày chạp*) dedicated to the most eminent ancestors of local lineages (*họ*), namely the founders and their first in order descendants, or as locals put it the ‘fathers and their sons’. Therefore the occasion is marked at the communal hall for the seven village lineages (*nhà thờ bảy họ*) and the respective halls of the first in order sub-lineages (*phái*). The ritual takes place on an agreed auspicious date on the first week of the month. Subsequently, throughout this month, different descent groups undertake the ceremonial weeding and tending of the graves (*tảo mộ*) of common ancestors. On the last week of the month, after ancestral graves have been tended, the village ritual council – comprising the seven lineages heads, the nominal village head and the appointed master of ceremonies - gathers to ‘tend the graves of lost souls’ (*tảo mộ cho âm linh cô hồn*) buried in the locality. As an elder villager explained, these are unfortunate people who have ‘no one to worship them or hold an anniversary for them’ (*không có ai cúng chạp, cúng kỵ*).

Unlike ‘ancestors’, who have elaborate graves crafted by their descendants, lost souls do not have a marked grave but instead lie under a bare mound of soil. The village burial ground contains a number of such burial mounds scattered among the graves. As participants explained, patching up the burial ground of the ‘lost souls’ is a ‘courteous act’ fitting the precepts of ‘filiality’ (*báo hiếu*). The menial part of this task is undertaken by junior lineage members – all married with children – whilst senior elder participants lead a ritual for the ‘lost souls’, at the purposely made shrine in the vicinity. This is a seemingly recent structure, erected and maintained by the village ritual council on the west corner of the village burial ground, between the village temple and the local pagoda. As befits errant spirits, the structure bears no protective lateral walls, standing exposed to the elements and winds (*gió*).¹⁵ Similarly, its concrete made altars lack the sophistication of wooden and gilded ancestral altars set up in respective halls, while there are no ritual paraphernalia such as incense burners and vases, which are essential items on sheltered altars.

The ritual involved bountiful offerings, including a whole yet dismembered pig – unlike the pigs or cattle offered in communal ancestral worship, which are painstakingly cooked to maintain their untainted integrity – as well as other essential offerings, such as cooked rice, betel and rice alcohol, and loads of votive items. The main votive items in this case consisted of packs of votive ‘dollars’ (*đò là*) issued by the ‘bank of hell’ as well as sheets of paper-made colored ‘fabric’ (*váy*). In Việt Nam, votive dollars are most commonly offered to unrelated errant souls while ancestors are instead presented with packs of ‘gold, silver’ as well as old imperial coins print in paper (see chapter 4). Dollars and fabric were burned at the end of the ritual session, as habitually, in a purposely made wood fire. In rituals for errant unrelated spirits, fires are an indispensable feature, as they serve to ‘warm’ the destitute spirits, who are often unclothed and unsheltered living in the ‘cold’ underworld or ‘under the water’. Being homeless, and without shelter, these unprivileged dead are most importantly deprived of the prolific heat of the domestic hearth and thus from the warm feelings pertinent to familial settings.¹⁶ Unlike ancestral practices, which involve the cooking food at the

¹⁵ *Gió* or ‘wind’ is synonymous to errant and chancy spirits, carried by wind currents.

¹⁶ Carsten (1997) ‘The heat of the hearth’.

domestic hearth as well as ensuing commensality between dead and living kin, rituals for ‘lost souls’ do not involve commensality between petitioners and responding spirits. In this case, the participants, returned to the village temple - where they have previously gathered to organize the operation – to sit on a communal meal and distribute remaining offerings.

Similar rituals are organized by different groups around the village, yet on a smaller scale, and as part of the auspicious launch of the lunar annual cycle (*cúng đầu năm*) and the ‘launching of spring’ (*lập xuân*). Most notably, such rituals are held by locally contained groups, namely environs or neighborhoods (*xóm*). Such rituals seek to dispel malevolent influences and appease ‘lost souls’ that surround the particular environs. *Xóm* is described as a group of ‘interrelated families’ (*liên gia*), which share the same street or passageway (*có một đường đi*). As mentioned earlier, the ‘street’ is an open and unbound locate, frequented by wandering spirits and spatially unbounded souls as opposed to houses and their altars where familial spirits frequent. The annual ‘worship in the neighborhood’ (*cúng xóm*) is an effort to acknowledge and respond to the needs of unknown unrelated spirits bound, with which the living inhabitants share the open unbounded space. As the elder veteran, who in the spring of year of the pig (2006) led the worship at the ‘twelfth *xóm*’ remarked, we commit to this ritual for lost souls, because ‘if we know them they will know us too’.

I attended such rituals over two consecutive years (2005, 2006), in the central hamlet (*thon*) of the village, where all *xóm* face the local rivulet. For the occasion, neighbours pool resources to buy offerings, which they arrange on a makeshift altar facing the river stream. According to locals, rivers are the place where the likes of *có hồn*, such as victims of floods, conflict or aborted fetuses abound. The altar here takes the shape of a three-tiered table, whereby spirits are accommodated according to their status and rank (see below here). The most striking addition on such altars was the placement of bamboo knives on top of boiled chicken and chunks of meat. As participants explained, the bamboo knife is for the spirits to cut and help themselves to the meat, according to their tastes. The knife was made of bamboo and not metal because this was a tool used by ancient populations like the Cham, with which they are therefore familiar. Moreover, while a metal knife is placed upon the sacrificial

cattle or pig in village ancestral rituals – where forebears of bygone generations are evoked - here it would be perilous to make such a sharp tool available to unfamiliar and largely mischievous spirits.

The displaced Cham are acknowledged in a number of different occasions, pertaining to errant spirits and ‘lost souls’. Previously settled all along the south central coast and here in Huế, the flourishing Austronesian kingdom of Champa was assailed by the Viet who marched in a southwards advance for centuries, gradually encroaching into Cham lands (see also introduction). In the course of this advance Cham populations were killed or displaced, forced to leave their homesteads and native land, as locals often acknowledge. As they remark, the Cham are the people who previously ‘inhabited the land we now live in’. While official attitudes to the Cham have been ambivalent - in Huế, Cham ruins lie hidden in the margins of the province while in other southern localities they have been turned into major tourist attractions - locals appear empathetic towards their predicament and the injustice imposed on them, while remaining fearful of their influence. My foster sister’s disquiet at the prospect of visiting the Đà Nẵng museum of Cham ruins is a telling example. Reluctant to admit the reason she wouldn’t join me in the visit – out of fear that as a foreigner I might misconstrue this as ‘superstition’ - she explained that for me as a foreigner the Cham statues were just an interesting exhibit but to locals they were evocative of people who lived and died viciously in Huế,.

Recent conflicts have brought about an enlargement as well as considerable commotion among the populations of *cô hồn* and *oan hồn*, whereby ghostly entities of bygone eras surface into relevance in the present. Today, the likes of *cô hồn* and *oan hồn* that swarm in localities around Huế, include an array of historical or more contemporary ghostly entities: from the Cham populations and the imperial soldiers that effected the expansion and consolidation of the Viet kingdom to more recent victims of injustice who fell in recent conflicts. To locals, ‘lost souls’ are not the familiar souls of kin, neighbors and co-villagers, many of whom have suffered an ominous death, amidst war and conflict, but the unknown dead who bear no connections to the locality. They are the ones, who came from afar and died here, coming from different provinces, regions and even countries as well as from distant

historical settings, and therefore from the spatial or temporal depths of unfamiliar milieux. Moreover, they are the ones who untraced by their kin and fellowmen remain missing and thus prone to become further attached to this land and its inhabitants.¹⁷

'The fall of the capital'

Although the events of 1968 marked a turning point in the war in favour of the revolutionary forces, they are neither glorified nor explicitly commemorated in contemporary contexts. For the most part they remain unelaborated, ambiguous and murky.¹⁸ The 1968 events generated masses of dead on both sides afflicting both combatants and civilians caught up in the fighting or fallen amidst bombing raids. Today, amongst the clusters of *am* dedicated to such dead in the northern barracks of the citadel, stands a small open air shrine dedicated to 'lost souls' (*miếu âm hồn*). Similar in structure to the equivalent temple in the village, this shrine commemorates a key historical event: the 'fall of the capital' (*Thất thủ kinh đô*) to the French in 1885. This event was of pivotal significance in both local and national history as it heralded a major turn in the colonial project in Indochina, spelling the start of French rule across the Vietnamese territory. According to official accounts, the shrine was 'made by the people' of Huế in 1895 in memory of the imperial 'soldiers and people who died defending the nation' (Hồ Chí Minh Museum 2001: 32). Maintained by locals

¹⁷ Besides the American POW/MIA, Vietnam has still thousands missing in action. In response to the swelling phenomenon of male and female spirit mediums employed by families to trace the remains of their relatives that died in action, the government has launched a project, called **TK05**. Undertaken by the National Science Council, the project sought to conduct a 'scientific' study on how the living can communicate with the dead and identify the 'best psychics' in the country fit for purpose. The state approved psychics were thus encouraged to support searching operations undertaken by bereaved families, lest exclusively for soldiers that served with the North Vietnamese forces. See BBC documentary 'Psychic Vietnam', broadcasted on BBC Two, Thursday 18th May 2006. See also relevant article, with the title '*Than giao cach cam voi MIA*' (Telepathic communication with the MIA) in the website *Dac Trung*, visited 12/08/2006 (www.dactrung.net) and also posted information about the project on the national website for Natural Resources and Environment Information, posted 12/07/2006 (www.ciren.gov.vn).

¹⁸ Speculation about mass killings taking place during the siege of Huế by Northern Vietnamese forces is rife among American scholarly circles. However, as Gareth Porter (1974), forcefully argues there have been no indications or evidence to support such rumors.

who live or trade in the immediate vicinity, the shrine has also been recently added to the ever expanding list of Hồ Chí Minh monuments in the province. The state appropriating of the site is accompanied by claims by the provincial museum that the shrine was a favourite hangout for young Hồ and therefore a key monument that has nurtured his patriotism and abhorrence for colonialists (see chapter 7). Furthermore, in 2004, after ‘long scientific research’ and debate, the museum eventually located and recreated the house where Hồ Chí Minh had briefly lived with his mother, found only a few yards away from the shrine.¹⁹ Meanwhile, local residents and sellers operating in this busy commercial street have added an ‘extension’ to the shrine. The extension consists of an adjacent altar to the right of the original structure where later victims of recent conflicts are secretly propitiated during the anniversary of the ‘fall of the capital’ (*Lễ Thất Thu*).

The ‘fall of Huế’ anniversary is marked on the 23rd of the fifth lunar month when rituals for ‘lost souls’ are held all around the province by a series of ritual groups.²⁰ On the citadel’s eastern barracks where opposing forces were stationed during the battle for Huế (1968) clusters of neighborhood groups assemble to collectively propitiate ‘lost souls’. As the young but knowledgeable daughter of one participant explained, this is a ritual in memory of those who died in the events of 1968 when ‘outside forces came to wage war in Huế’. According to her description, ‘a formidable battle took place in the citadel where countless people died, many of them crushed by the crowds trying to flee the battle; most were women and children’. As other worshippers remarked, on this occasion there are neither prescribed sites of worship nor particular offerings: ‘we do not worship at the house but in open spaces where crowds gather’ and ‘we put on the table whatever we have because the dead are so many that the food is never enough’. Most notably the occasion is dominated by petty traders and shopkeepers who propitiate ‘lost souls’ outside the shop premises or in market places in and around Huế. For the Vietnamese, the marketplace is a most public space infested with anonymous crowds where one rubs shoulders with the unknown anyone.

¹⁹ The authenticity of this memorial house and its veritable location are still contested and an issue of debated for many. See chapter 7.

²⁰ Such rituals are held throughout the ‘week’ of this anniversary and at the convenience of each ritual group.

In Việt Nam, in addition, markets and trade have been associated with marginal citizens and immoral attitudes.²¹ Dominated in the past by ethnic Chinese, markets are today run by Vietnamese; yet there is still widespread mistrust with regard to the nature of the practices and the motives of the people frequenting them, most notably those making a living in them. As in the rest of Southeast Asia, markets are dominated by women who sell their goods there or frequent them as customers. Today women run local and city markets around the province while in the past, especially during the 1976-1990 period they also run the black market (see Taylor 2006). The ritual for the fall of the citadel seeks primarily to appease the ‘lost souls’ of those unfortunate women and infants who died during the siege. The apparent unlikeness to Western eyes of markets appearing as a relevant worshipping place becomes quite intelligible if we remind ourselves that in Việt Nam markets as the main loci for the production of wealth, growth, and pleasure are bound to attract the interest of destitute entities who are eternally rummaging around for access to the basic means to livelihood.

The rituals commemorating the fall of the capital are held in the city’s central market as well as in local markets around Hué and are organized by bands of traders grouped together on the basis of their specialization (food vendors, votive item sellers, etc). In the morning of the ritual, the offerings are piled up before they are cooked on site: chickens, eggs, pork meat, fish and crabs, vegetables and prized fruits (watermelon, pineapple), vast amounts of votive fabric, gold, silver, old currency and dollars. This is an occasion to ‘burn loads’ (*đốt nhiều lam*) of votive paper, namely votive clothes and money. The plentiful offerings are arranged by husbands and elder relatives who undertake the habitually male tasks of setting up the worshipping tables, preparing the written prayers (*so*) and ritual paraphernalia and in many cases officiating the ritual session. The vast quantities and wide range of offerings underpins the immensity and broad spectrum of suffering souls appeased. For the most part, the latter’s identities and particular needs remain unknown to the living petitioners.

²¹ Historically ethnic Chinese dominated trade and commerce, and during the colonial period, they enabled trade between China and locally based Western entrepreneurs (French, Dutch etc). Tolerated by the French, ethnic Chinese came under fire with the advent of the revolution and especially after relations with China went sour (1979). By then the government has banned their trade, closed down their markets and expelled them from the country, while running a wider campaign that stigmatised trade as an immoral activity.

In addressing these anonymous masses petitioners can only account for fundamental disparities, namely differences in gender, age, and genealogical status. Therefore tables are arranged in three hierarchical levels (*ba bàn*), namely ‘upper’ (*cáo*), ‘middle’ (*vua*) and ‘lower’ (*thấp*) whereby those of higher standing (*người lớn*) and age are accommodated separately from the lower ranks and the young (*người nhỏ*). The upper table accommodates only efficacious local divinities (*thần thánh*) and lost souls of higher rank (*cô hồn cáo nhất*) and thus holds selected offerings: a whole chicken, fruits, votive gold and a lustrous mandarin outfit complete with a miniature throne. Middle level tables hold the full range of foods with the addition of cigarettes, beer, soft drinks, dollars as well as a load of *áo bình* (imperial soldier garb), an item that has become indispensable in rituals for ‘lost souls’. By way of providing clothing for ‘lost souls’, locals offer sheets of votive fabric (*váy*) as opposed to the complete and elaborate outfits presented to ancestral souls. This difference instantiates and manifests the distinction between ancestral souls and unrelated errant souls with the former being intimately connected to the living petitioners by prior and known kinship relations and the latter enjoying only a spurious and ambivalent connection with them. As several participants explained, the offer of fabric in this context is necessitated by the fact that the living ‘do not know the exact size, age and particular needs’ of the ‘lost souls’ present. The fabric however allows them to ‘have new clothes made by subordinate spirits’.

Engaging and appeasing ‘lost souls’ entails copious amounts of foodstuff and drinks as well as heaps of other material goods. Tables overflow with food and offerings with the enormous quantities committed underlining two things: firstly, the large and wide-ranging crowds of unfortunate souls, and secondly their destitution and dependence on handouts. Destitute and hungry as they are, lost souls can never have enough to satiate their lowly needs and gluttonous urges. Unlike ancestral spirits which are treated to selected dishes all of which are cooked with special care in the domestic hearth and provided with reasonable amounts of food, lost souls receive enormous quantities of consumables including uncooked foodstuffs. Aside from some cooked dishes, ‘lost souls’ are primarily catered for by means of a distinctive set of offerings exclusive to unrelated errant spirits: *gạo*, *muối*, *đường*, that is, uncooked rice,

salt and sugar. These are offered in their unrefined and unprocessed form with rice coming in the form of grain and sugar and salt in lumps of crystalline substance. Their unrefined or ‘uncooked’ nature here marks the uncouthness of errant spirits as well as their aloofness, detachment and dissociation from living petitioners.

The provision of rice grain is key in the establishment of the difference between ‘lost souls’ and ancestral spirits. Rice both glutinous and ordinary is always offered to ancestors in cooked form. Alternatively, it is presented in the form of rice alcohol. Lost souls might be offered cooked rice but they are most importantly presented with rice grain which they can use to cook a meal for themselves. Furthermore, the ritual staple, glutinous rice (*nếp*) is offered to lost souls in its most diminished form, namely *hót nỏ*. *Hót nỏ* are multicolored bubbles made of the residues of glutinous rice which are inedible. The set of uncooked rice, salt, and sugar lost souls are offered is most commonly complimented with edibles which as ritual offerings are exclusive to lost souls and other lowly entities, namely, boiled maize, sweet potato, and cassava (*bắp, khoai, sắn*). These are ‘secondary’ crops as opposed to the prized cereal grain i.e. rice and they are largely associated with deficiency and penury. As elderly women often said in describing difficult periods in their lives, ‘back then we didn’t have good quality or enough rice, so we were mixing it with cassava, potato or corn’. These crops are also used to make snacks and sweet delicacies which are popular with children. Another addition to the low table for lost souls is a bowl of rice gruel (*cháo thành*) which is meant exclusively for the souls of newborns and infants (*con bẻ, con nhỏ*) as they ‘cannot chew food’. At the end of the ritual session, the gruel, boiled potatoes, the pieces of fruit and candies are thrown to the ground for the ghosts to pick up. This is the moment when children who are waiting on the sidelines jump onto food fighting over scraps very much like the ‘hungry’ souls are imagined to do.

Towards the conclusion of the ritual session, the votive money and fabric are burned in a big fire. A printed petition (*sớ*) with the name and age of the living petitioners is also burned (see chapter 2). Such written petitions are used in addressing all spirits, human and heavenly, ancestral and unrelated. These praying letters are comparable to the written petitions submitted to kings and mandarins. All are written in Han-Viet script, the official script of the Nguyen rule, with a translation in *quốc*

ngũ, the Romanised alphabet used in modern times. Printed and standardized for each occasion or spirit, petitions of this sort are customized by male participants who carefully add the names and ages of all those attending as well as the exact location of worship, marking the country, province, district, commune and hamlet. Groups of petitioners are mostly made up by female sellers who dominate both local and central city markets. Despite this, the rituals are led by their adult male kin most commonly husbands. Dressed in full ceremonial attire, men instigate the ritual session, addressing the spirits with the written petition while women are kowtowing in front of the makeshift altar.

Locals who feverishly engage in the rituals marking the fall of the capital use alternative calendars in the calculation of the date the event took place and consequently engage with history from a diversity of perspectives. Most people belonging to the older generations were fully aware of the lunar date the event took place, that is, the 23rd day of the 5th month. Yet they paid little attention to the solar year, that is, the year of 1885. However, in official accounts found in school books, it is the solar year that is given prominence. Several people marked the occasion of the fall of the capital in reference to the year of the reign of the respective king. Others still, mainly those made up by young female sellers, who were unsure about how to respond best to my queries said that the fall happened in the distant past ‘more than one hundred years ago’. By contrast, younger interlocutors studying in university or fresh out of school appeared more confident in their explanations as they brought together the lunar and solar perspectives. As Nam, a young computer science student, explained ‘on 23/5/1885, the French waged war in Hué killing many people especially within the citadel; this is known as the fall of the capital’. Incongruent interpretations of time and history do not reveal uncertainties about historical events or their consequences on local populations. All different perspectives were underscored by a lasting certainty in the reality and existence of unfortunate dead and the subsequent and immediate need to acknowledge and propitiate them.

'Đi phong sanh': lost souls and merit making practices

Tending to lost souls is explicated as praying for 'peace and tranquility' (*cầu an*). As efforts towards dismissing disrupting influences for the country, village or locale, such rituals are organized and led by men with women being either all together conspicuously absent or and most commonly falling into the background, that is, in the precincts of the hearth, cooking and preparing victuals offerings. However, women's contributions are not easily dismissed as they are actively involved in the cause of abolishing ominous influences and engaging in merit making activities for the benefit of both living and dead kin. Throughout the year, women make the bulk of devoted visitors to pagodas and temples where in support of their petitions for family well being they make offerings to Buddha and other benevolent deities. In these visits, they also offer relief by donations to desolate orphans and the lonely elderly. Such activities intensify during the first lunar month when bands of sisters, mothers, daughters and their female friends, act as pilgrims and engage in charitable causes. Most notable, lay women together with Buddhist nuns organise and lead their own rites appealing to lost souls. As several of these female participants said to me, they pray for peace (*an binh*), good health (*sức khoẻ*) and being able to make a living (*làm ăn được*), prosper and bear offspring. Rather unique and particular to Huế, such rites are of recent origins as they have been organized over the past few years usually upon the initiative of certain pagodas. The majority of these pagodas have in turn traceable links and close connections to families of the former royal and mandarinal elite which in the past acted as their founders and sponsors.²² All female rituals for the propitiation of lost souls are usually organized on the fifteenth (*rằm*) day of the first lunar month. For Buddhist adherents this is a 'date dedicated to Buddha' and thus vegetarianism and virtuous thoughts and acts are paramount. On the sixteenth day of the first lunar month, the particular pagoda I came to know best summoned its lay followers for a ritual expedition by boat into the heart of the city's Perfume River. The expedition's

²² In the past many of these pagodas were male Buddhist institutions, yet in the past few decades most of them have been turned into female pagodas. Most female pagodas in Hue were founded after 1975, when many elite families resorted to requesting permission to erect a female pagoda where the ancestors have lived or were buried in order to save ancestral land from requisition.

aim was to propitiate the souls of those who ‘died in the water’ (*chết nước*) and who, due to having not been accorded a funeral and a burial, today ‘live under water’ (*sống dưới nước*).

The expedition involved a practice known as *đi phong sanh*, the granting or bestowing of life. As such, the expedition aims much further than the occasional offering of sustenance and support to desolate souls as is the case in the male-dominated rituals discussed above.²³ Instead, *đi phong sanh* entails ‘praying for deliverance’ (*cầu siêu*) and purports to secure the release of lost souls from the sufferings of the underworld (*địa ngục*). It primarily involves releasing living creatures captured for the purposes of the ritual. By means of releasing them, it seeks to contribute to the liberation of lost souls and the generation of merit for the benefactors. In Huế, where the landscape is dominated by rivers and water streams, the animals released are almost exclusively river species. Such species are construed as ‘living beneath water’ or lurking at the bottom. Common among them are fish, eel, cockles and water snails, all of which constitute local food delicacies. As locals explain, by releasing them they allow them to live a bit more, thus postponing the point at which they would be killed (*sat*) to be eaten. The effects of postponement are enjoyed by both the living and dead kin of the participants in terms of the merit thus generated. As in other occasions, a written petition (*sơ*) is customized during the *đi phong sanh* with the name and age of the dead kin of the participants being added to the name, age and home address of the participants’ living kin, defining in very precise terms the identities of those to whom merit accords.

The female participants contribute to the expedition not only by bringing along *phong sanh* or live river species, and ritual paraphernalia including incense, votive money and clothes, but also by preparing offerings. In the morning before they set off, grandmothers, mothers and daughters gather in the spacious kitchen of the female pagoda to cook and prepare vegetarian snacks as the main offerings. The snacks which do not include rice dishes are arranged on the worship tables as the hired boat makes its way along the river. Eventually the boat anchors in the middle of the Perfume

²³ *Sanh* or *sinh* means life, living.

River, not far off from the temple of a Cham female deity, which living destitute also frequent during festivals in search of hand outs from pilgrims. On an elaborate makeshift altar, women plant incense on cassava, sweet potatoes and maize while the porcelain statue of the deity presiding over the underworld is placed on the table. With turning the faces towards the river, nuns begin chanting and reading the *so* while adherents dressed in the grey prayer robes of Buddhist devotees kneel in prayer behind them. The uttered words call upon deities to come to the rescue of the unfortunate souls of soldiers (*cô hồn âm linh chiến sĩ*) and resolve their ominous fate (*giải oan*). At the conclusion of the praying session, the recorded names and personal details of the benefactors are loudly announced. Storming to the front deck where the *phong sanh* and the votive items are assembled, participants engage in a frenzy of throwing them into the river and towards all ‘ten directions’. Unlike other rituals where votive items are burned, here they are instead thrown into water following a particular order: first go the animals, then the votive money, next the essential *áo binh* (soldiers’ tunics) followed by the set for lost souls consisting of raw rice, salt, and sugar. The snacks prepared are not thrown in the river but instead consumed by the participants on board.

Ritual practices pertaining to ‘lost souls’ are pertinent to distinct aims. On the one hand, the rituals described above such as the neighbourhood ritual and the propitiation of lost souls on the anniversary for the fall of the capital seek primarily to provide relief to distressed and destitute souls by supporting and feeding them. On the other hand, the ritual expedition to the river seeks to redeem ill-fated souls and to ensure their release from distressing life-worlds. In the concluding part of this chapter, I examine concerted efforts made by living kin for the redemption of unfortunate ancestral souls. Reaching out to kin who died untimely and in unfortunate circumstances, such ritual efforts reach out to distraught and bewildered souls of kin, seeking to reinstate them in familiar milieus as unfathomably divine and settled ancestors.

Ill-fated ancestral souls and efforts in redemption

If dead kin cannot be placed on domestic altars as family ancestors due to unfortunate and untimely death, they are placed in ancestral halls where higher order altars and larger kin groupings are better equipped to cope with their demands and troubled existence (see chapter 5). During my fieldwork villagers feverishly engaged in the construction or regeneration of ancestral halls for lineage sub-branches. These halls pronounced the emergence of a newly active lineage sub-group (*kinh, nhanh*) by furthering the divisions already in place within larger descent groups (*ho, phái, chi*). The founding of new halls and the emergence of new sub-groups were processes impartibly linked with practices of commemorating sub-group members who had died under indistinct or ambiguous circumstances, or had fallen out of memory. The inauguration of new halls was marked by the holding of a communal anniversary (*hiep ky*) for all the ‘ancestors that are not known’ (see chapter 5). Further to these memorials, certain sub-groups endeavoured to ritually resolve the ominous fate of intimate dead and secure their passage to the auspicious realm of ancestry.

In the spring of 2004, a segment of a lineage sub-group (*phái*) whose shabby hall had fallen into disuse organized a grand ritual for the ‘resolution of the grievous destiny and deliverance’ (*lễ giải oan bất đố*) of forebears who had perished in the American war. The ritual marked the completion of a new hall for that particular segment, thus spelling its emergence as a lower order lineage sub-group (*nhanh*). Although, in this case as well as in others, the exact placement of this segment in the chain of lineage sub-divisions was unclear and often puzzling even to several of its members, their focus was to their duties towards common ancestors who have suffered an ominous death. The group organized a grand ritual which involved mobilizing remote yet potent ancestors to assist their ill-fated and dead descendants so as to reinstate them in the line of ancestry. The remote ancestors evoked were the founders of the lineage and the sub-lineage with both categories being certified as local tutelary spirits by past Nguyen kings while their ritual evocation in the respective halls was followed by marching them to the new hall. Through these acts, the ill-fated souls of

more recent forebears who had died under uncertain circumstances were installed as ancestors in the new hall.

In the case of another newly founded hall, the appearance of a female spirit who was lurking unidentified in the depths of the village rivulet mobilized a group of related families on the basis of their shared responsibility to her as a newly recovered ancestor. In this case as well as in others, the recognition of the spirit as an ancestor prompted the emergence of a lineage sub-group (*kinh*). Members of the *kinh* gathered resources to organize the ritual recovery and deliverance of a ‘maiden aunt’ (*bà cô*) who died as a fetus, aborted and ‘drowned in water’ (*chết nước*).²⁴ *Chết nước* literally ‘dying in water’ spells the most ominous death of all as it implies the loss of one’s body (*xác*) and thus the impossibility of its ritual treatment. Without a body the deceased becomes a restless ghost and as a result his/hers ‘descendants cannot find peace’. According to her relatives, *bà cô* died ‘three generations ago’ and was of the ‘seventeenth generation’ in the lineage. The elder who led the ritual, *ong* Tam himself a ‘nineteenth generation’ descendant explained that *bà cô* was probably the ‘sister’ of his paternal great grandfather around whom the group unified. Pieces of information about the spirit’s genealogical status and kinship connections to the living participants were revealed by a female spirit medium (*thầy bói*). The members of the descent group consulted with her after one of the members fell ill without apparent reason. One evening the soon abort to be afflicted young man was merrily making his way home after a drinking session. As he walked alongside the river bank he felt strange. The following days he fell ill suffering from terrible headaches. As doctors could not establish any cause for his ill health, a female relative went to a medium who determined that an anguished related spirit was the root cause of his ailment. The diagnosis spelled out the ominous fate of the soul revealing that it was killed as a fetus, aborted while the pregnant mother was washing the laundry immersed in the waters of the local rivulet. Further information came out concerning the gender of the fetus and most importantly its genealogical links to the victim.

²⁴ The expression ‘drowned in water’ often suggests fetuses aborted as mothers-to-be submerged into water. Accidental or intentional, abortions are associated with rivers and water streams where women bathe or do their washing.

The revelation of an active spirit of a kin lying disregarded in the depths of the local rivulet prompted a response from those who appeared to be related to *bà cô* and more particularly from those who descended from her siblings. The emerging decent group (*kinh*) was defined in terms of the genealogical distance between the present generation from the generation of *bà cô*. Therefore, dealing with the issue was not contingent on the wider lineage or sub-lineage but fell on the particular sub-group of descendants which looked upon *bà cô* and her siblings as common ancestors. Previously inactive in terms of holding communal ancestral rituals, this particular sub-group or *kinh* was instantiated through the ritual for the soul of *bà cô* that was aimed at 'lifting and releasing her drifting soul' (*le bat vot*). The ritual involved elevating the soul of *bà cô* from the depths of the rivulet and emplacing her on a purposely made *am*, an outdoor shrine, alongside other 'maiden aunts' or 'sisters'. Such outdoor shrines dedicated to 'maiden aunts' are not uncommon in temple yards and ancestral hall gardens.

The ritual took place in two distinct locations at the same time, in the ancestral hall and at the nearby river bank. To 'elevate the soul' and secure its release, the worshippers had to 'pay' the Lady of the Waters (*Bà Thủy*) abundantly in votive gold and silver while a luxurious votive mansion and a bamboo boat were also offered in exchange. For the benefit of other lost souls, *áo binh* (soldiers' outfits), and bundles of votive dollars as well as food were thrown in the river while *phong sinh* (live creatures) were released. The ritual involving contact with ambiguous spirits also necessitated the involvement and advice of a ritual specialist. In this case, the relatives hired the services of a ritual master (*thầy cúng*) who was well versed in Chinese language and was thus well equipped to deal with the spirits of past generations. The relation of the ritual specialist to the group further added to his eligibility. Unlike the rest of the participants who were all members of the same patrilineage, the ritual specialist was an affine, a son-in law (*cháu rể*) and thus, 'externally' related to the group. The person who was chosen to be possessed and carry the spirit lifting it from the river also fell on the 'external' side (*ngoại*) of kinship: an elderly widow who subject to her marriage several decades ago had changed lineage affiliation. The widow, an eminent and influential woman whose brothers built the ancestral hall ten

years ago, fell in trance during the ritual, 'seized' by the soul of *bà cô*. As she explained later, she was chosen by the spirit itself which seized her body in its effort to break away from the depths of the river.

Similar efforts at redeeming related souls (*siêu thoát*) were undertaken by the family of a young father of two who had died in a road accident, thus literally 'dying on the street'. Alongside the customary funerary rites, his widowed wife and paternal kin organised a ritual to resolve his ominous fate and enable his departure to a peaceful afterworld (*giai oan bat do*). The aim of the ritual was to recover the drifting soul from the 'streets' and facilitate its eventual 'return home' (*về nhà*). The gravity of the task at hand required the involvement of Buddhist clergy with the abbot and several monks from the neighbouring pagoda being summoned to organise and officiate in the rituals. In the ritual held several weeks after the funeral, the abbot dressed as the custodian of the underworld (*Địa Tang*) petitioned for the gates of hell to open so that the tormented soul could be rescued. Such ritual efforts require the support of a large number of living kin as the sheer numbers of participants and resources committed is held to determine the effectiveness and outcome of the ritual. Conversely, such efforts seek not only to deliver a single individual soul but mainly to release a multitude of other dead kin afflicted with an ominous afterlife and lead them towards their collective redemption. In this particular case, the effort to rescue the grievous soul of the young father was accompanied by attempts at saving both his father's and paternal uncle's souls too. Having died violently during the American war the two male kin also suffered as grievous souls (*oan hồn*). The ritual aimed at resolving not only the personal plights of a particular kin but the plights of all related unfortunate souls.

Conclusion

In sum, the danger of becoming a ghost is not circumstantial or fortuitous or exclusively relevant to the circumstances of one's death. Rather it is constant and suggestive, contingent on the relations and identified connections between living and dead kin. Thus, ancestors and ghosts are not opposing categories but rather

transformations of each other, implicating and implying reciprocally their engagement. That is, in specific contexts and under certain forces, ancestors can become lost souls, and vice versa. The non-becoming a ghost is brought about by the attentive care instantiated by the living who recognize a dead as a relative. Similarly, non-becoming an ancestor is precipitated neither by chance nor by the premature coming of death but rather by the neglect of the living to acknowledge a death as the loss of a relative, that is, a part of one's own self. Within this set of dynamics that are far-from-equilibrium, the turning of an ancestor into a ghost, and vice versa, corresponds to a possibility as much actual as virtual, something which the ethnographic cases discussed above readily attest to. The actions of living kin are the crucial dimension of posthumous identity, a case of becoming being partly determined by the agency of others located across the divide that death forms.

Chapter 4

Feasting with the dead: ancestor anniversaries, eating and sociality

'The word sacrifice is like the word present; one should sacrifice to the spirit as though that spirit was present. The master said: if I am not present at the sacrifice, it is as though there were no sacrifice'.

(The Analects of Confucius, trans. A. Waley 1938:97)

Eating with the dead

In Việt Nam, kinship and sociality are impartibly linked with food and commensality. The exchange of victuals and consumables among kin and neighbours is not only part of the creation of intimacy in everyday contexts but instantiates a sociality realized across ontological divides implicating gods, spirits, divinities, related and unrelated dead with living human beings. Flows of food and valuables are continually moving between this world (*đường*) and the other world (*âm*), instantiating connections and disparities between corporeal and divinized entities, between the living and the dead. Offerings of food and consumables and in particular, cooked food (*thức ăn*) and votive goods (*đốt ma*) are fundamental parts of veneration practices relating to humans in spirit form. The assiduous sustenance of ancestral spirits is an integral part of their relations with dead kin. '*Cơm áo gạo tiền*' literally 'cooked food, clothing, rice grain and money' are the essentials of sustenance and comfort for both the living and the dead and summarise the fundamental articles offered to related dead in adulation (*cúng*). *Cúng*, which is commonly translated in the relevant literature as 'worshipping', is rather synonymous to 'offering', 'presenting', or 'donating'. The practice of ancestor propitiation is thus firmly grounded on the practice of making offerings. In Huế, the centrality of prestations in the form of food gifts is manifest all around rural and semi-urban localities, whereby communal temples and places of worship are found alongside heaving marketplaces. As a young history graduate explained, the co-existence of temples and markets is longstanding and essential. In

her words, 'if we want to call upon a spirit, we first need to fetch incense, fresh flowers, fruit or other appropriate offerings'.¹

A number of studies have explored the semantics of feasting in mortuary rites and death rituals (Bloch 1985; Parry 1985; Foster 1990; Conklin 1995). Such studies have pointed to the symbolic associations between eating, death and the constitution of social relations. Examining post-cremation mortuary rites in India, Parry is concerned with how ingesting and digesting ritual offerings – by Brahmans and close kin on behalf of the dead – signify the process of purification and transformation of the deceased, not least by means of 'eating death pollution' (1985: 624). Writing with respect to Madagascar, Bloch (1985) explores the concept of descent through the symbolism of eating in Merina mythology. Associating different modes of eating with different modes of existence, he points to the metaphorical (or mythical) eating of the ancestors, the 'source of life', and argues that receiving blessings from previous generations maintain dead and living kin as 'co-substantial'. The practice of necrophagy and the meaning of mortuary cannibalism have been explored further afield in studies from Amazonia. In this region, eating the dead, an act that often follows upon the dismembering of the corpse and its roasting, is intimately involved with notions of affinity and consanguinity, as well as with their 'perspectival' entanglements (Viveiros de Castro 2000). Among the Wari', for example, 'all adult men are obliged to eat their close affines' (Conklin 1995: 81), a practice that Vilaça in a subsequent article (2005) interprets as necessary for and in aid of the realization of someone's death by that person's consanguines. The metonymic relations established between the corpse and an animal on such ritual occasions by the deceased's affines are forced upon his/her consanguines and in that way, both the centrality of affinity in Amazonian sociality and the unstable, contingent nature of humanity are evinced.

From 'almost eating the ancestors' by metaphorical approximation (Bloch 1985) to literally eating the flesh of dead kin, feasting in the context of death-related rituals has nurtured anthropological imagery of kinship and difference. Similarly, the present chapter is concerned with feasting and reciprocal exchanges in the context of ancestor

¹ Fruits, flowers, water as well as incense are the basic offerings to spirits of human and heavenly origins alike and are regularly replenished on domestic altars.

propitiation practices. However, the chapter is not concerned with the practice of feeding *on* the dead but rather with the practices of feasting *with* the dead. In the context of ancestor anniversaries and relevant propitiating rituals, the dead are invited to join the living, enjoy the copious offerings made to them, reciprocate in bequests, and thus encouraged to actively engage in the sequence of giving and receiving. I argue that eating in the context of Việt Nam is construed as an essential human capacity which is also fundamental to the enactment of sociality. As such, commensality underscores the basic similarity of the living and the dead on the grounds of which exchange can proceed. The ontological divide that death ushers in, effectively dividing participants into dead and living, does not cancel the former's humanity. Rather, rituals provide the occasions for the re-discovery or re-articulation of humanness across the realms of the physical and the corporeal, on the one hand, and the non-physical and incorporeal, on the other. In this respect, I am also departing from a series of studies that have been examining feasting as pertaining exclusively to the living, their memories and sociality.

Sacrificial offerings and presence

Studies of ancestral cultic practices in Southeast Asia and China have mainly focused on the practice of making offerings as pertinent to the pursuits and interests of the living petitioners (Kammerer *et al* 1996; Du 1996; Watson 1985). Discussing 'merit feasts' and 'blessing cults' in upland and lowland contexts across mainland South East Asia, Lehman (1996) suggests that despite apparent differences, they both provide a context in which worshipers compete for the accumulation of merit, power and status. Similarly, studies on Việt Nam have focused on ancestral cultic practices as agonistic performances, forming an arena where the living compete amongst themselves over social and cultural capital across expanding scales from local to national planes (Endres 2001; Malarney 2003, 2007). In addition, ancestral practices are commonly understood as acts of reverence and remembrance underpinned by Confucian ethics

and the precepts of filiality (Kleinen 1999; Malarney 2002; Jellema 2007). In his ethnography, Malarney suggests that ‘death anniversaries’ are annual ritual events ‘providing a context for the children to demonstrate their moral debt and filial piety to parents’ (2002: 140). Interestingly, such conceptualisations echo the formal ideology of the Vietnamese socialist state which sought to secularize funerary practices, in part by denying the possibility of communion between the dead and the living, and in part with reforming ‘wasteful’ feasting habits and redefining the meaning of anniversaries as mere acts of remembrance of absent entities.² State-supported reforms have not left my interlocutors untouched as the rhetoric of ‘remembrance’ and ‘frugality’ has shaped the narratives and explanations they offered. Nonetheless, the *praxis* and practice of commemoration in Huế today make clear two things: firstly, that anniversaries have been recently turned into ever more sumptuous events involving lavish and abundant offerings, and secondly, that the dead are not simply remembered as departed, inaccessible others but rather made into present and active participants in the ritual process. Indeed, ritual exchanges pre-suppose the dead as the living’s accessible interlocutors and necessary counterparts and not simply as spectres furnished by memory. Such a conclusion relating to the ritual status of the deceased is also supported by the verbal, explicit statements of my informants, as well as, by ‘what goes without saying’ (Bloch 1992).

Moreover, if anniversaries are enactments of remembrance, they ought to be engaging all conversing sides, and thus both the living and the dead. As Lambek (1996:239) suggests, memory is ‘inter-subjective’ and ‘dialogical’, meaning that it is embedded in social relations and ‘activated *between* people’ rather than ‘*within* the mind’ (ibid.). Drawing on such understandings of memory as an ongoing engagement, I examine ancestor anniversaries as ritual enactments that seek to evoke departed kin as active and present participants in their relatives’ lives. Ancestor anniversaries do not seek to restore the memories of the dead among the living, but rather to encourage the former to remember and engage with their living counterparts. Integrated in the other world (*cõi âm*) and accustomed to the ways of spiritual existence, the dead are

² Malarney (2002: 141). His study examines in detail the socialist campaign and state efforts in reforming rituals in northern Việt Nam.

likely to forget about this world (*cõi dương*) and to subsequently disregard their connections to living kin. This much becomes apparent in standardized prayers addressed to dead kin in the context of anniversaries:

'Dearest of our very own, honored father [or mother], who existing afar from this crowded world, would rather sense and experience the ample and capacious netherworld. We pray that divine ancestors enjoy the assistance offered from the living. We pray that any wandering souls find salvation in the other world'.

Anniversaries seek to activate the memory of the dead, remind them of their connections with the living and encourage them to act towards them as equally munificent kin, casting their divine and favorable influence. In other words, anniversaries seek to induce the dead to act in effectual and affective ways. The living entice the dead to remember by means of appealing to their 'senses' and 'sensibilities' providing riveting feasts and copious offerings.

Ancestor anniversaries and rituals are organized as enthralling feasts organized not solely for the enjoyment of living participants but primarily for the pleasure of the lofty tastes of the divinised kin. With their all-round sensuousness, entailing scrumptious dishes, beguiling fragrances and lavish decorum, such rituals seek to reignite in the dead the passions and joys of earthly existence, inviting them to 'engage playfully with the living' (Lambek 1996:246). Offerings in the form of food and consumables are central in ancestor propitiating rituals for several reasons. They do not only purport to beguile and engage the dead but further to convey the caring dispositions and heartfelt emotions of the living. Food gifts are tokens of affection and intimacy that is extended to both living and dead in ritual as well as in everyday contexts. As in other Southeast Asian contexts, sharing food in everyday familial contexts is pivotal in creating intimacy and relatedness (see Carsten 1997). In ancestor anniversaries food and votive offerings are presented along with earnest words of affection uttered by worshipfully posturing bodies. In this context bodies, words, and food, instantiate sincere and deeply felt emotions. Furthermore, they provide the principal means through which the dead are drawn in and their munificent presence is elicited. In anniversaries, offerings of food are deposited on ancestral altars where they stay for certain period of time. Their display on the altar and the visitation by the

divinised spirits of kin transforms them into ‘blessed gifts’ (*lộc*) which the living incorporate subsequently by means of consumption.

Anniversaries entail a series of reciprocal exchanges between living and dead kin whereby flows of goods and blessings between the two worlds, between *âm* and *đương*, evince and instantiate their multiple connections. In the context of anniversaries and ancestral practices, the dead are not passive entities but rather active participants who keenly contribute in the cycle of giving and receiving. Further, ritual interactions take place in an atmosphere of cordiality and warm fellowship engaging both body and soul, the corporeal and incorporeal aspects of human entities. In the course of this cordial atmosphere, participants do not only indulge in the passions of life but they also express their innermost feelings towards dead kin and therefore immerse themselves into a higher spiritual experience. This encompassing sociality effected by means of the continual movement of food and consumables between the two worlds and the oscillation of participants between materiality and spirituality creates a particular ‘chronotope’, a specific locus in time and place, where the living and dead can and do meet and interact with each other.³

Recurrent and reciprocal exchanges between dead and living kin are pivotal in forming and sustaining relations and connections. As Lambek suggests for Madagascar, royal as well as ordinary ancestors require tributes and gifts; they ‘require food, clothing, housing and attention’ and in return they proffer blessings, prosperity and strength (1999:6). In Hué, the lack of assiduous sustenance and constant care towards dead kin may lead to disconnection, neglect and the ensuing transformation of ancestors into disengaged ghostly entities. As explained in chapter 2, neglected ancestors often become lost souls; forgetfulness and abandonment sever the connections between ancestors and descendants, turning an already given relation into a void of mutual non-recognition. Conversely, the performance of rituals manifesting care and affection towards unrelated dead can transform lost souls into ‘adopted’ ancestors. The case of a young family, who took up an unrelated couple buried in their house plot as ‘grandparents’ (*ông bà*) is most illuminating.

³ The term ‘chronotope’ as a particular space-time continuum is proposed by Bakhtin (1981). Lambek is also using the term in his study of memory (1996:246).

The couple was found buried within the plot the family has recently acquired to build a new house in the outer suburbs of Huế. Although no actual graves or remains were found in the plot, the couple's presence was established by a hired geomancer or 'master of wind and water' (*thầy phong thủy*), who examined the plot before the foundations could be laid and actual construction work commenced. According to the master, the couple was an elderly 'husband and wife' who had perished in the 'war against the French' and were hastily buried here.⁴ Their presence was initially felt by the young wife Hiêu, a nurse in the city hospital who was also well-versed in ancestral affairs. Upon this discovery and before commencing building work, Hiêu and her husband undertook the costly task of erecting two graves for the couple on the nearby hill. Flanking the house plot, the hill was an old gravesite scattered with both old and new graves and guarded by a small female pagoda strategically situated amongst them. I met Hiêu on the very day she was to carry out the second ancestor anniversary in honour of the couple and she explained that although 'we do not know anything about them, we tried to find out their names and locate their families but because our efforts were unsuccessful, we have to care for them'. As nothing more became known about the couple's identity, the family assigned the date of the transfer of the souls to their new graves as the anniversary date. Unlike other anniversaries that commonly take place in the house the ritual was conducted at the newly constructed graves. On the day of the anniversary, Hiêu along with an aunt, a young niece and myself recruited as helpers, climbed up the hill in motorbikes carrying bundles of votive paper, incense and food offerings. In the course of the ritual, Hiêu addressed the couple as *ông bà* (grandfather, grandmother) and invited them to enjoy the offerings. The next time she would return to the graves would be during *Tết*, the lunar New Year, which is impartibly linked with tending to departed kin and forebears.

⁴ Franco-Vietnamese war (1946-54).

Ngày giỗ or ancestor anniversaries

In both classic and more recent ethnographies of Việt Nam, *ngày giỗ* or ‘death anniversaries’, as they are currently commonly translated, are invariably mentioned for their importance (Nguyen 1944; Hickey 1964; Kleinen 1999; Malarney 2002, 2003; Kwon 2006; Jellema 2007). Current studies outline *ngày giỗ* as ‘family commemorative practices’ (Malarney 2002: 139) or ‘death remembrance rituals’ (Kwon 2006). However, the etymological meaning and various significations of *ngày giỗ* are not exclusive or restricted to death and the endings of life. In Huế, locals commonly refer to such anniversaries as *ngày giỗ* or *ngày kỵ*, whereby *ngày* stands for day or date and *kỵ* signifies forebears of the fourth ascending generation, namely great-, great-grandparents.⁵ Most commonly, ancestors of up to the fifth ascending generation (*cổ*) are enshrined in the house while beyond this generation departed kin are enshrined in dedicated halls or else fall into disregard and oblivion. In general, *giỗ* (like *trỗ*) denotes ‘rice plants beginning to ear’. The expression *giỗ tết* sums up all ancestor anniversaries and celebrations held according to the lunar calendar, all of which are centered on the welcoming of ancestral spirits ‘back home’ (*về nhà*). Such rituals are construed as joyful and auspicious events rather than as death remembrance rituals. As neither the signification nor the practice of *ngày giỗ* are exclusive to death, I depart from ethnographic conventions and use the term ‘ancestor anniversaries’ instead of ‘death anniversaries’ as a more appropriate translation for *ngày giỗ* and *ngày kỵ*.

Unlike funerary practices which are solemn and mournful events concerned with the deceased’s transition to a different world and mode of existence, ancestor anniversaries are described by locals as festive (*tết đẹp*), propitious (*tốt đẹp*) and joyous (*vui vẻ*) occasions. The first ancestor anniversary is held on the third year after death, well after the completion of the funerary and mourning cycle whereby the deceased has completed his/her transformation and has unequivocally become an

⁵ Vietnamese scholars also employ the formal term *cat kỵ*, which could be translated ‘grain of ancestors’ (see Toan, 1970:27).

efficacious spirit responsive to the prayers of living kin (*linh úng*).⁶ As explained in chapter 2, the first and second year anniversaries are integral parts of the funerary sequence marked as the ‘small’ (*tiểu tìong*) and ‘big clearance’ (*đại tìong*) respectively. During this period the deceased is in a liminal state and the emerging spirit is considered to be still developing and adapting to a new world while the soul is susceptible to demonic and malicious influences which can obstruct and overturn its transcendental transformation. During this period, mourners are filled with anxiety and concern (*lo sọ*) over the fate of their deceased kin. The ‘big clearance’ brings about the conclusion of mortuary treatment and the end of mourning, and effectively brings to a close all concerns about the deceased. Divested of such worries, ancestor anniversaries and periodic propitiation are concerned with sustaining divinized kin in afterlife and contributing to their well-being.

Unlike funerary rites, ancestor anniversaries do not entail the involvement and mediation of ritual specialists. In the course of the funerary cycle, mourners recruit the assistance of a series of ritual specialists whose knowledge and expertise in dealing with ambiguous and precarious entities is essential in guiding the bewildered soul through its transitory journey (see chapter 2). On the other hand, ancestor anniversaries do not necessitate the participation of mediators and ritual specialists as the ritual sequence is organized and performed exclusively by descendants and knowledgeable kin. In this context, close kin and descendants encounter ancestral spirits in a direct manner engaging with them in ritual communion without mediation. Ideally, such rituals are led by the deceased’s eldest son (*đích tì*) and the eldest grandson (*đích tôn*) who carry foremost responsibility for the care of forebears. Hence, anniversaries as well as all propitiating rituals for settled ancestral spirits effect unmediated interactions between living and dead kin. Seeking to establish direct communication and contact with the intimate dead, anniversaries differ from other instances whereby communication is interceded by spirit mediums, shamans or ritual priests (see Fejstald 2006; Vitebsky 1993). Connections and relations are direct and established by means of reciprocal exchanges of food and valuables. This directedness

⁶ See also Toan (1970), who notes that ancestor anniversaries in the north resume after the second burial. In Northern localities, disposal practices are different from those in south and central regions, and prescribe a temporary burial, exhumation and reburial of the deceased after one or two years.

has been noted by Cadiere (1955), the French pastor who spent most of his life in colonial Annam, as a salient characteristic of Vietnamese ritual practices.

In general, anniversaries mark a departure from funerary practices and signify a transformation in the relations between dead and living kin. This change is on a par with the ontological transformation of the deceased who move from being a dangerous corpse, neither an animated body nor a fully formed spiritual entity, entangled in the process of 'dying', to become a largely benevolent and responsive spirit. As the deceased complete this transformation and grow aware of their existential circumstances, their interactions with living kin change from arbitrary encounters marked by evasion and apprehension to intimate and regular interactions. Nonetheless, anniversaries mark not only a departure from the mortuary cycle and death rites, but also constitute a break with the everyday and the quotidian. Death brings disruption in relations among kin, severing not only the bodies of intimates but also their ability to engage in endearing encounters with kin in daily contexts. After the death of intimates, engagement and interaction with beloved fathers, mothers and forebears can only be effected in ritual contexts. Ancestor anniversaries and periodic propitiation seek to restore the regularity of kin interactions across the ontological divide. Thus, if mourning brings about discontinuation in relationships among kin, anniversaries seek to effect continuity and easy communication both of which are effected by means of calling upon the dead, enticing them to return to familial settings and transiently engage with the material world and the living.

The ritual sequence and structure of ancestor anniversaries suggests both disruption and continuity as they instantiate both connections and separations. Anniversaries are organized over the course of two days. The first day of the anniversary takes place on the eve of the actual anniversary of death as marked on the lunar calendar and thus, precedes the mournful event. As my informants repeatedly explained, it is held on the day when the beloved departed kin were still 'alive' (*còn sống*), still living in this world.⁷ This is the 'main anniversary day' (*ngày giỗ chính*) when both dead and living relatives are invited to attend a jubilant ritual feast. As a

⁷ *Sống* means living, and also be present or lively. *Còn* has an array of uses and here means 'still' or 'again', signifying continuity and recurrence.

historian with a young family explained, on this day ancestors have not yet died, they 'still live' and therefore they can still 'eat' (*ăn*) and 'receive' (*hưởng*). On this occasion, the honoured forebears along with their shrine cohorts are summoned to 'receive' and 'enjoy' the material and emotional support earnestly offered by their living kin. This support becomes manifest in the copious offerings and consumables and the sincere cordial words uttered by the living who dressed in ceremonial attire bow before altars. Main anniversary days are joyful occasions marked by the munificent presence of departed kin. Around the village and Huế, anniversaries are organized as cordial feasting events whereby kin immerse themselves in an atmosphere of euphoric sociality. In contrast, the second day of the anniversary is marked as a 'sad' (*buồn*) occasion for this is the very date of the actual death and the honoured ancestor is 'already dead' (*đã mất rồi*). The solemnity is occasioned by a modest farewell ritual restricted to the close kin of the deceased. The family holds a small ritual feast involving the sending off of the summoned spirit to the other world. Before being sent off, the spirit has been provided with further food gifts, votive valises (*và li*), and travel essentials to see it through its journey. In this context, non-present relatives can contribute a series of gifts, including food and votive items, which are displayed on the altar. The ceremonial burning of the votive items later on that same day concludes the anniversary.

According to local understandings, anniversaries are made up of two consecutive parts which signify both the 'presence' and 'departure' of dead kin and thus, both their engagement with and separation from living kin. Living and dead are brought together and pulled apart at once. Anniversaries also evince the fundamental changes that human beings undergo from a state of being alive to a state of being dead, changes which are objectified in this two-day event. This alternation in the existential state of humanity is reflected on the changing emotional state of the ritual participants whose first day 'happiness' caused by the felt presence of dead kin gives way to the 'sadness' that follows the dead kin's departure. Overall, anniversaries are marked by a series of movements and oscillations: between joining and parting, joy and sadness, living and dying, and ultimately between this world (*duong*) and the other (*âm*). This movement between existential realms and realities, between immersion to the passions of life and

spiritual elation creates a unique locus in place and time, a particular ‘chronotope’ within which dead and living kin come together in communion as human beings.

Presence and participation

Anniversaries are only part of a series of ancestral practices whereby departed kin are invited to partake in sumptuous feasts and catered for with palatable offerings. Ancestral altars become the focus of ritual communion between dead and living kin in a number of events throughout the lunar calendar, including the lunar New Year (*Tết Nguyên Đán*) and subsequent festivities (*tết*), as well as life cycle events such as the birth rituals and weddings.⁸ Nonetheless, anniversaries are exceptional events whereby kin and forebears are honoured individually on the basis of their particular identity and revered as ‘fathers’, ‘mothers’ or grandparents. Hence, anniversaries are held for proverbial ancestors whose name, age, and date of death as fundamental parts of their identity are known and inscribed on genealogical records (*gia phả*), ancestral tablets (*bai vị*) and graves (*mộ*).⁹ As informants maintain, ancestor anniversaries are performed for ancestors of up to five preceding generations. As some explained, after this point the dead do not require sustenance and support as their souls ‘become dust’ or disappear into the nether realm. Long departed spirits become so accustomed to the ways and existence of the other world that they might disregard and grow forgetful of connections and affiliations with this world and with the living. Nonetheless, anniversaries are also currently held for prominent yet long-gone ancestors whose genealogical distance from the present exceeds the fifth layer. Such revered ancestors are often founders of local lineages and royal lines and their commemoration is enacted in recently restored communal halls and royal temples. Anniversaries of

⁸ *Tết Nguyên Đán* or the ‘festival of the original dawn’ is the most important occasion in the Vietnamese calendar, centered on the reunion of dead and living kin (see Huữ & Borton 2003; Avieli (2005). Subsequent *tết* include *Tết Đuan Ngọ* (5/5), dedicated to the founder of Chinese medicine, *Tết Trung Nguyên* (mid-year festival on 15/7), and *Tết Trung Thu* (mid-autumn festival).

⁹ These individual anniversaries (*ngày kỵ*) are different from collective anniversaries (*hiệp kỵ*), in turn dedicated to a group of ancestors whose identities or dates of death remain unknown (see chapter 5).

exalted ancestors such as former kings are considered in chapter 6. Here, I examine anniversaries held in houses and lower order halls which are part of a domestic complex of propitiation.

In the context of the house, anniversaries are exceptional occasions whereby family members and close kin often residing in different houses and localities gather around the ancestral altar. More particularly, anniversaries bring together the sibling set. Sibling sets are divided by gender, age and birth order differences and after marriage, are often dispersed in space. Anniversaries (re-)unite siblings in acts of propitiation of parents and grandparents.¹⁰ The relationship between siblings is mediated by their relations, attachment and responsibilities to parents, thus their unity is closely associated with the care for common forebears. Hence, the visit of a brother or sister living abroad, often in the United States or France, can equally prompt an occasion for collective propitiation of forebears enshrined in the house. In this context, siblings gather around the altar and pull together resources to organize the ritual. Male and female siblings contribute towards rituals albeit, as locals remark, ‘according to their means’. While contributions are proportionate to relatives’ resources, participation in the ritual is contingent on gender, age and birth order.¹¹ In anniversaries the eldest son, on whom the responsibilities for the care for forebears customarily rests, acts as the most senior member of the sibling group. He is responsible for leading the ritual (*đúng lễ*), assigning tasks to other siblings and junior male kin, and acting as a courteous host to all guests, both living and dead. These responsibilities rest with the eldest son even when he does not reside in the house where the honoured ancestor is enshrined and the anniversary take place.

In anniversaries, living participants change their bearing, comportment and demeanour. Distinctions such as between male and female, older and younger, descendants and affines are reiterated. In everyday contexts, men and women, children

¹⁰ The film *L'Été Vertical* (English title, *At the height of the summer*, directed by Tran Anh Hung (2000)), is a keen study on the significance of anniversaries for the relations among siblings. In the film, the anniversary of a mother is a key event that brings together three married sisters and prompts them to review their lives and relations with their spouses by means of pondering over the marriage of their parents.

¹¹ Relations among siblings are determined by not only gender and age differences, but also order of their birth, whereby there is a differentiation between ‘first born children’ (*con so*) and those of ‘subsequent birth order’ (*con ra*).

and adults all interact around the ancestral altar which marks the sacred core of the house. In rituals, female hosts and children refrain from approaching the altar area and from entering the 'main house' unless invited to do so. More particularly, in anniversaries women usually gather and interact around the hearth and secondary area of the house where female hosts along with daughters-in-law and 'aunts' cook, portion and garnish the dishes for the ritual. With their bodies literally leaning against the threshold separating the main from secondary areas of the house, female kin pass trays of food to male kin to arrange on shrines. Male kin are responsible for leading the ritual, as well as, setting up the altars with food and ritual paraphernalia, spending hours before the ritual cleaning and polishing candle holders and lambs, arranging flowers, fruit and tableware, folding sheets and placing votive offerings.

Preparations and cooking in the kitchen are overseen by the most senior female house members, most commonly the daughters, brothers' wives, and daughters-in-law (*dâu*). In patrilineal societies such as Việt Nam, daughters (*con gái*) are by definition 'external' to the house and the lineage as they are destined to marry out and join their husbands' family (*đi lay chông*). Women are integrated in the marital house as valued members in their capacity as daughters-in-law who produce descendants for the male line. In anniversaries and ancestral rituals, daughters though unquestionably contributing towards the organization of the ritual, are not expected to kowtow before the honoured ancestor. Conversely, it is in their capacity as daughters-in-law that women are expected to pay their respects and prostrate before the husbands' ancestry to whose lineage they belong after marriage, and especially after the birth of the first child. Most notably, the eldest daughter-in-law (*chị dâu*), the wife of the eldest son and mother of the eldest grandson, comes to prostrate before the paternal ancestors. Sons-in-law, belonging to a different line of descent are even more 'external' to the house and the lineage. In anniversaries, sons-in-law do not participate at all in prostrations in spite of contributing their labour to preparations. More particularly, 'younger sons-in-law' (*em re*) - husbands of younger daughters - are usually summoned for the most tedious tasks and running errands such as dashing off for extra provisions or burning the piles of votive paper in the yard. The most important tasks and worship duties are undertaken by kin who have reached maturity, having been

already married with several children or grandchildren. These stand out during proceedings donned in ceremonial outfits for the occasion: mature or elderly men in black gowns and turban and women in colorful long tunics (*áo dài*).

Ritual sequence and effect

In his analysis of Chinese rituals Feuchtwang (2007) identifies a fundamental sequence which is common to all rituals whether addressing gods, ghosts or ancestors. This sequence is summed up in the following stages: invitation, address, response, thanks and separation (ibid. 61). This sequence is also pertinent to the Vietnamese context whereby worshipful ‘invitation’ (*mời*), deferential ‘address’ (*báo*), ‘presentation of offerings’ (*cúng*) and ‘departure’ (*vê*) punctuates engagements with human spirits. In turn, in his analysis of Chinese popular religion, Chau (2004) argues that this ritual structure is comparable to precepts of ‘hospitality’ where the arts of welcoming, accommodating and seeing off guests sum up temple festivals. However, as Feuchtwang argues there are a series of markers that differentiate rituals and sacrificial offerings from events of hospitality not least the burning of incense (2007:62). Feuchtwang’s analysis focuses on the burning of incense as a pivotal act which signifies the difference between rituals seeking to effect communication with divinities and spirits from everyday practices. Burning incense is as much part of Vietnamese ritual engagement as it is of Chinese; its smoldering essence creating a sacred locus in space and time. Moreover, as much in China as in Việt Nam food and commensality are essential and crucial parts of the ritual process involving related human spirits. Ancestor propitiation rituals are launched in front of high altars where worshipfully posturing petitioners clasp smoldering incense after having these altars adeptly and adequately furnished with copious amounts of food, drinks and votive essentials. The propitiation of ancestral spirits is founded upon the production and donation of apposite offerings, as well as, on ensuing commensality implicating dead and living kin. Accordingly, anniversaries start with male bodies reaching inside altars

chests to unearth ritual and family paraphernalia such as formal dinner sets, as well as, inside kitchens where squatting female bodies cook and prepare scrumptious dishes.

Cooking food and arranging dishes on tables for guests, both living and dead, is a foremost concern. In the morning of the main anniversary day, male hosts and senior descendants start with cleaning and polishing ritual paraphernalia and meticulously arranging offerings on domestic altars. In particular, ancestral altars are meticulously set like eating tables for a formal banquet. Designed for purpose, the middle part of ancestral altars consists of a long wooden plank, shaped like a dining table (see chapter 1). Along this table hosts arrange sets of eating bowls and chopsticks on either side while drinks and food dishes are added gradually as they are cooked. The number of tableware and quantities of food placed on this table are carefully calculated to exceed the needs of the enshrined forebears. As locals explain, extra crockery serves to accommodate the guests that the forebears might bring along to visit. Such arrangements account for the keen sociality of spirits who in the nether realm intermingle not only with other kin – as they join their ancestry - but also with other dead with whom they form friendships and alliances. Tables for living participants are subsequently arranged by male junior affines. Descendants are mostly preoccupied with tending to altars and accommodating the invited spirits. Living guests are accommodated in separate tables on the basis of gender, age and seniority. All elder participants and senior kin are accommodated on the two tables flanking the altar: male kin to the ‘left’ side and female kin to the ‘right’ with left and right being defined from the ancestor’s perspective. The rest of the living guests, including young daughters and women with young children, are always accommodated outside the main house, in the house yard.

Food both for this-worldly and other-worldly entities is arranged in ‘trays’ (*mām*) around which cohorts of status peers gather. These trays form collectives of commensality groups formed on the basis of gender, age, genealogical status and rank. In physical form, trays come in a round shape, designed to contain a number of different dishes consisting of meat, fish and vegetables. Co-eaters gather round the tray holding their individual rice bowls and dip into the shared dish. Over the past

century Euro-American influences have brought about changes shaping eating habits and trays have moved from sofa beds and mats onto tables while the lotus sitting position has given way to chairs. However, tray configurations still permeate commensality arrangements.

In anniversaries and ritual feasts, altars receive the full range and the full amount of food and drinks destined for consumption. Unlike ordinary meals, ritual feasts comprise a great variety of dishes, displaying a range of local cooking styles and an assortment of flavors that would gratify any gustatory preference and lofty taste. Particular attention is paid on combining a range of ingredients and different tastes (sweet, bitter, salty, sour) that create a balance of 'hot' and 'cold' substances. 'Hot' and 'cold' are associated with *âm* (yin, female, nether world) and *đương* (yang, male, this world) respectively and are held to regulate and balance the human body and maintain it in good health. A combination of sweet and savoury dishes which are 'hot', with bitter ones which are 'cold', is considered ideal as it keeps bodies temperate and warm.

Unripe bananas, an exemplary 'bitter' fruit, are a most essential item for the sustenance of human spirits. As such, unripe bananas are ubiquitously found on ancestral altars and are replenished twice a lunar month. Growing in disorganized profusion, banana trees are found everywhere in the south and central regions of the country. Reaching for moist soil and preserving water and coolness, their roots are considered an apposite spot for placing the placenta of newborns. In semi-urban and rural settings around Huế, banana trees often found in back gardens are harvested by senior female kin for family ritual purposes with any surplus being channeled to the local market. 'Delicate' and graceful in appearance, bananas are one of the 'five fruits' (*ngũ quả*) associated with the five constitutive elements of cosmos (*ngũ hành*) and the 'five blessings' (*ngũ phúc*). But above all, ripening bananas grow from a fresh 'bitter' to a 'sweet' yellow fruit and thus from a cold substance associated with *âm* (yin, female, other world) to a hot one associated with *đương* (yang, male, this world). Their transition is marked by them being moved from high altars to kitchens where they are consumed by living house members. In everyday contexts, bananas, water and flowers are the ubiquitous offerings laid on domestic altars while in ritual occasions

ancestors are provided with the full range of five fruits - which includes orange, pommelo and citrons – as well as with wholesome food dishes.

Xôi (sticky rice), *ché* (bean pudding) and *thịt* (meat) comprise the fundamentals in ritual communion with related human spirits. As Avieli (2005:174) remarks, rice, beans and pork stand as the quintessential products of Vietnamese land and farming, that is, cereal grains, legumes and husbandry. Cooked rice is a fundamental and indispensable part of meals in both everyday and ritual contexts.¹² Ordinary rice (*gạo*) is the staple of daily meals while glutinous rice (*nếp*) is used for ritual purposes. In ritual feasts, *nếp* is proffered in two different forms: cooked as *xôi* or ‘sticky rice’ and distilled in the form of rice alcohol (*rượu*). *Nếp* or glutinous rice is considered to be a highest quality rice grain and according to Vietnamese ethnologists, it is the ‘real rice’ or ‘original rice’ cultivated by the ‘ancestors of the Vietnamese’ as a staple until the 10th century (Avieli 2005; Nguyễn 2007:250). Embodying the fine qualities of the rice with refined grains producing ‘soft’, ‘moist’, and ‘fragrant’ rice, *nếp* stands as the superlative order of the Vietnamese staple and thus appropriate for divinised human spirits. The evocative distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ rice construed as ‘dry’, ‘coarse’ and ‘flavorless’ is often employed by locals to talk metaphorically about the differences between abundance and deprivation, blessings and misfortune, scarcity and times of plenty (see also Avieli 2005). Furthermore, the expression *ăn xôi*, literally ‘to eat sticky rice’ signifies an all-auspicious death whereby one dies from old age surrounded by descendants, who in turn, will provide due sustenance and support in posterity.

Meat is also essential in the ritual communion between dead and living kin. In everyday contexts, meat consumption is kept to a minimum as it is considered to produce ‘poison’ and if consumed in large quantities it can have harmful effects on one’s health. Instead, fish which is ‘less poisonous’ and vegetables are the main accompaniments to daily rice meals (see also Vinh Phoi 2002: 422). In Huế, most meat consumption occurs in conjunction with sacrifice and the propitiation of ancestral spirits whereby food is distributed along the lines of kinship and community

¹² Locally produced French style baguettes are now becoming rather popular and in some cases replace ordinary rice in weddings and birth rites. Nonetheless rice - the staple to which ancestors are accustomed to - is indispensable in anniversaries.

relations. Cattle, pigs, chicken and ducks are all sacrificial animals used in that order in rituals of different magnitude. According to locals, in pre-revolutionary times buffaloes were pivotal in rice farming and the main sacrificial animal but as their role in agriculture decreased with the mechanization of farming, they came to be replaced by cattle.¹³

Today in the village male cattle are ceremonially sacrificed at the grand village ritual that takes place every two or three years at the village temple. On this occasion, the cooked animal is presented whole and intact before the altar of the consecrated local council which includes the village founder – the first lineage founder to arrive in the locality - and other eminent local benefactors before being dismembered and distributed to village and lineage representatives. Similarly, in the context of the annual ritual held at the communal ancestral hall of the seven local lineages, piglets or ducks are presented whole to the apical ancestors before being dismembered with different parts being distributed to sub-lineage groupings. Pork is also indispensable in an array of family and lineage rituals. In the past most households kept one or two piglets for ritual purposes while today pork is obtained from local markets. According to Hickey's classic study, raising pigs depends on a 'divinely ordained talent' (*tai*) indicating the presence and munificence of ancestral spirits. Today in rural localities around Hué, households raise pigs on a commercial scale while handfuls of chickens and ducks are kept by women in house gardens. Chickens and ducks are considered nourishing and a delicacy fit to beguile exalted spirits. They are slain or bought for ritual occasions or to treat a weak member of the household. In ritual occasions, the boiled chicken is presented with its innards removed and placed on top of the cooked animal. This act of turning the inside out is taken to be instrumental in calling upon the spirits to emerge in this world and hence to turn the inaudible and invisible into visible and perceptible.

Aside from cooked food, ancestors are treated to Vietnamese tea and betel, a couplet that is habitually used to welcome visitors and guests. The Vietnamese arts of hospitality prescribe that hosts should first quench the thirst of visitors. Thus offering

¹³See also Sprenger (2005) who discusses the importance of buffaloes as both trade and sacrificial animals in neighboring Laos.

tea (*trà*) or water (*nước*) – the two are often the same as water is often boiled and ‘flavored’ with tea leaves – is a common gesture extended to visitors in both casual and formal encounters. Fresh water is always available on altars with cups being regularly replenished. Vietnamese tea is considered to be medicinal and is consumed in many cases, no less at the end of a fulsome meal or banquet to facilitate digestion. In anniversaries, ancestors are first offered water and betel with hot tea being poured in their cups at the end of the ritual session. Once widely popular but today consumed by a few elderly women, betel (*cau*) and areca nut (*trầu*) are proffered to past generations as a keen stimulant and heart-warming essence. As a male-female couplet signifying lasting affection, betel and areca (*cau trầu*) are a centerpiece gift in weddings and betrothals whereby the groom’s family offers a tray of fresh *cau trầu* branches to the bride’s family initiating thus the cycle of reciprocal exchanges. Portions of *cau trầu* usually accompanied with tea also have a rightful place in tables around which affines and neighbours gather. Considered to ‘refresh the heart’ (Hickey 1964: 151), *cau trầu* instigates conversations and cordial encounters.

In ancestral rituals, *cau trầu*, skillfully prepared in ready portions by female hosts, are among the first offerings presented on altars, seeking to instigate interactions between living and dead kin. According to locals well-versed in ancestral affairs, there can be no worship without *cau trầu rượu* or betel and rice alcohol. Rice alcohol which is also valued for its medicinal properties is an indispensable part of commensality realized among male peers. In anniversaries, rice alcohol is offered by way of engaging male forebears, while female spirits are catered to non-alcoholic beverages, most commonly sodas and colas. As the ritual master prostrates himself in front of the smoke emitting altar, whispering under his breath to summon the spirits, junior male descendants standing on the side of the altar pour *rượu* into the cups and serve food in the ancestors’ eating bowls.

After all offerings have been arranged on the ancestral table, all lamps on the altar, both oil lamps which are familiar to ancestors and fancy electric red glowing ones, are lit and fragrant wood (*trâm*) and incense (*hương*) is set alight.¹⁴ The master of the

¹⁴ As explained in chapter 1, red (*màu đỏ*) is an auspicious color signifying good fortune that is predominant in weddings.

ritual, clad in ceremonial black gown and turban, lights a bunch of fragrant incense and stands before the altar to begin the ritual address. Clasp the bunch of incense, he lowers his head in reverence, brings his touching palms on his forehead and whispers under his breath, calling upon the revered dead, inviting them to partake in the feast. The address starts with stating the date and exact place where the ritual takes place as well as the name, age and date of death of the ancestor honoured. A scrap of paper listing the names and ages of all close kin contributing to and participating in the ritual is carefully affixed on the altar to be read by the incoming ethereal guests. As noted earlier, address and invitation are not limited to the individual forebear honoured on the day but are extended to all spirits enshrined on the domestic altar.

The invitation to ancestors to join in is repeated by the living kin present who must utter a prayer, pour wine and serve food. If the hosts do not appeal to their ethereal guests, they will not 'be able to receive' (*không phôi hưởng*). As Vietnamese folklorist Toan (1968: 35) remarks in discussing anniversaries, 'eating requires an invitation, action requires an appeal, and so it goes with the dead'. Thus, the ritual master deferentially invites the forebears to 'enjoy' and 'receive' (*thương hưởng*) the offered consumables, while male and female kin take turns to prostrate themselves before the altar, repeating the appeal and inviting the ancestors to 'eat' and 'receive'. The invitation to eat (*mời ăn*) is later extended to all living guests by the male hosts who often desist from taking their rightful place on the table and instead go around the tables to ensure that all guests are well provided for, urging them to eat while repeating the courteous invitation *mời ăn*.

Mời ăn is a gratifying invitation to a meal extended to guests in ritual as well as in everyday contexts. Daily family meals are instigated with the invitation to eat addressed by juniors to seniors, that is, by filial children and descendants to grandparents, fathers, and mothers. At the house of my hosts, the call to a meal echoing around the house would emotively signify mealtimes. While the younger siblings were busy setting up the table, the eldest sister would go around the house calling her mother and father caught up in chores to *ăn cơm*, 'come to eat rice'. In her rounds she would first call her father, then her mother and eventually me as her older

sister.¹⁵ Sitting at the table, she would then urge her younger siblings to wait for their parents before starting the meal and repeat the call to their parents. While everyday meals involve only living intimates and house members, ritual feasts cross the ontological divide and engage ancestors and living kin in commensality. In anniversaries, it is the forebears as the most senior generation and higher beings who are invited to eat first before their status juniors can sit to a meal. Daily family meals are not taken in the main room of the house, dominated by the presence of antecedent generations but instead in the subordinate secondary hall where living descendants' sleeping and eating needs are fulfilled (see chapter 1). In everyday contexts, the main house is a place where house members work, relax and interact. The two formal dinner tables flanking the altar are often used by male kin to receive visitors and converse with neighbors and affines over tea and coffee. However, these same tables are mostly used in ritual occasions such as life cycle rituals and anniversaries when ancestors are invited to partake. Distinction between ritual banquets and daily meals, between the ritual and the everyday becomes less clear in the context of funerary practices. In this context, recently departed kin are invited to partake in daily family meals as they habitually did while still living. In the period following the burial and until the completion of the seven weeks cycle (49 days after death), the newly deceased is invited to partake in all family meals whereby filial daughters and sons alike call the soul of father or mother to join them (see chapter 2). In this case, the deceased is yet to complete his/her transformation into an ancestral spirit and is thus more likely to be still attached to his/her worldly needs and familiar milieux.

In Việt Nam, sharing food and living space are essential in the configuration of intimacy and likeness (see also Carsten 1995a, 1997). Enshrined in the house, ancestral spirits are tended to food cooked in the hearth which they are invited to share with their living counterparts. Conversely, unrelated ghostly entities sheltered in gardens are offered unrefined and uncooked foods. In the case of Việt Nam,

¹⁵ Like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, eating a meal involves eating rice and as Bloch denotes the 'phrase used to say that one is eating a meal literally means 'eat rice'' (1985:634). In Vietnamese, the phrases *mời ăn cơm* and *ăn cơm* have the same meaning, 'come to eat rice'. The former preceded by the most polite *mời* (please) amounts to a more formal call, while the latter is common in contexts of familial intimacy.

participation in meals enacted both in everyday familial contexts and in ritual occasions is fundamental in creating relations of kinship. Staying at a family house, my hosts required my attending of daily family meals reserving a place for me at the dinner table as an 'older sister'. Further, in the context of family or lineage rituals, I would be invited to partake in the feast while elderly women would compete over my affections by adding more food on my bowl and urging me to eat until I was positively satiated (*no*). As a foreigner, my 'eating like a Vietnamese' - that is nibbling with chopsticks out of a common food tray - never ceased to astonish friends and neighbours who often took to initiating me to appropriate ways of eating.

In Việt Nam, commensality among kin persists beyond death and across the ontological divide implicating corporeal and non-corporeal entities in a series of exchanges. Eating practices in everyday and ritual contexts establish and reiterate connections among kin while at the same time highlight differences articulated on the basis of hierarchal and/or ontological status. In everyday contexts, family meals bring together living house members in commensality. Yet such meals do not only sustain relations on the basis of shared substances but further reiterate differences and hierarchies among co-eating house members on the basis of gender, age, and birth order. In this context, older sisters (*chi*) - rather than mothers - tend to younger siblings (*em*) urging them to eat sufficiently and behave appropriately. Furthermore, the significance of commensality and food sharing is of utmost importance for the (re-)incorporation of beings coming from the other world, or simply from another country as in my case. In anniversaries and ancestral rituals, food and eating highlight both similarities between living and dead participants, as well as, their fundamental differences. Like in other communal meals, participation in ritual feasts is marked by differences in age and seniority. Such hierarchical differences require that the ancestors are the first to sample and enjoy the offerings while subsequent generations are the ones that follow. This pertinence of hierarchy is made manifest in the ritual sequence whereby food is deposited on altars before it is transferred to tables to be consumed by the living. Furthermore, eating in the context of rituals highlights the ontological differences between living and dead kin; while the former are able to eat

with their mouths, the latter are able to enjoy the food through the senses of sight and smell (see below here). Thus, through eating kin both come together and are set apart.

Communion and reciprocity

Ritual is an endeavour fraught with risks and dangers. As Feuchtwang suggests, the quest for response is ‘shadowed by the possibility of no response, of giving offense or being abandoned’ (2007:57). Rituals have a double cutting edge whereby appropriate conduct can force and extract blessings from the spirits while lapses, mistakes or failures can cause offence that will bring about suitable punishment. In Hué, ritual etiquette and configuration purport to protect the living against unfavorable and hostile responses. Thus, in anniversaries and ritual feasts, the commensality and active involvement of the dead is expected to be of a specifically defined duration and is measured in explicitly defined spells, that is, in ‘incense burning spells’ (*tuần nhang*). Such spells are defined in terms of a full burning session of long incense sticks, methodically designed for this purpose. One incense spell (*một tuần nhang*) is commonly considered time enough for the ethereal guests to ‘receive’ (*hưởng*) the copious offerings.¹⁶ During this spell, kin and participants in obsequious bearing and clad in ceremonial attire or formal dress take their turn to prostrate themselves before the altar and address the revered forebears. As the flare of the smoldering incense dies out, living kin turn their attention away from the altar and the ethereal guests and towards the living participants. After the incense dies out, living kin can ‘sit down to a meal with each other’ with the food being swiftly transposed from the altar to the tables.

The transfer from the altar to the table is direct and unswerving and the dishes remain unaltered. The only exception is meat which is usually diverted to the kitchen

¹⁶ In some anniversaries, the hosts would stretch this spell by adding a supplementary bunch of incense on the altar just before the first one died out. Yet this would prompt negative commentary among participating kin who would later remark in exasperation that the hosts did not know better about ritual affairs.

to be cut up in small pieces.¹⁷ As mentioned earlier, whether in the form of chunks (pork leg or head) or whole animals (chicken), meat is presented to the spirits in uncut and un-portioned form. The meat the living are presented with is served in small pieces and consumed in mouthfuls. Informants explained that the dead are presented with un-carved meat for the living remain quite uncertain about the precise tastes and distastes of the dead. In life, house members take a keen interest in each others habits and likings - often teasing one another over soft spots – but the deaths of relatives and their transformation into spirits introduces the element of uncertainty. Thus, sacrificial animals are presented whole or in the form of meat chunks with a knife often provided – laid on the back of the cooked cattle or pig – so that the invited spirits can carve up the animal parts and portions according to their liking.

Although on their transfer from the altar to the table, victuals remain unaltered in quantity and composition their placement on the altar and contact with divine and largely benevolent spirits change their essence and value. In discussing contemporary mediumship practices in the north of the country, Fejstald (2006) points to the transformations the offerings presented to spirits or deities undergo into ‘blessed gifts’ (*lộc*). Such offerings are thence ‘redistributed as a token of the spirit’s benevolence that extends to the invitees’ (ibid: 92; see also Endres 2007; Nguyen 2006). In anniversaries, the copious food offerings on the altars are indicative of the wealth, prosperity and abundance the living command. Wealth, prosperity, and abundance are commonly construed as the substantiated form the blessings and favours bestowed by spirits take. Hence, offerings and material goods committed in rituals are both a sign of abundance and profusion as well as a means for eliciting it. Indeed, in ancestor propitiation practices, the profusion of all things material are evidence of the three core ‘blessings’, namely ‘happiness’ (*phúc*), prosperity (*lộc*) and longevity (*thành*), which emanate from the other world. In Huế, the contingencies of fortune are subject to one’s positioning in the cosmological terrain as well as on divine support, especially that provided by kin spirits. Despite socialist modernity’s influence on assigning positive meanings to ‘modesty’ and poverty (*nghèo*), ill-health and calamities are

¹⁷ In vegetarian feasts, the dishes are directly transferred to tables without any further processing. That includes anniversaries falling on the first or fifteenth of a lunar month, dates dedicated to Buddhism at which lay people abstain from consuming flesh.

signs of deficiencies in divine support and more particularly of the absence of or separation from potent and efficacious ancestries. At the same time, poverty and lack of means for organizing apposite and effectual rituals limits one's chances to alter ominous fortunes (see also Feuchtwang 2007:69). The food offered in rituals instantiates divine influences and aims to elicit further blessings, multiplying in this way the abundance the living enjoy. As food offerings are consumed by the living as 'blessed gifts', the act of offering (*cúng*) to spirits calls on the ancestors to act as the ultimate sources of plentitude and to reciprocate in further bequests.

In anniversaries, the ritual feast takes place at an assigned time, designated as 'noon' or 'midday' (*trua*). 'Midday' falls between the hours of eleven and one. Assigned as *giò ngọ* - the 'seventh earthly branch' symbolized by the horse - this time period unequivocally belongs to the realm of *duong* (this world, the world of the living).¹⁸ The all-pervading couplet of *âm duong* that ordains the Vietnamese cosmos divides the daily cycle into worldly and otherworldly spheres. The spell between sunrise and noon fits firmly into the world of the living while the other half spell extending from afternoon to the early hours of the morning, is subject to ethereal influences originating from the realm of *âm* (the other world). The spell between eleven thirty to twelve at noon which falls well-within *giò ngọ*, is habitually the time when locals take the core meal of the day with families gathering around the table. Similarly, anniversary feasts are carefully timed so that they fall within the realm dedicated to the living. These ritual sessions start around eleven in the morning with guests taking their place on the table some half an hour later. This time arrangement construes the living and dead kin as engaged in commensality within a time frame that unambiguously belongs to *duong*. This opportune arrangement evokes ethereal kin as vigorous, affective and highly responsive beings who are incited to shift from *âm* to *duong*. Their emotional connections with the world of the living furnish the motive for this shift to take place.

¹⁸ Vietnamese calendar is modeled after the Chinese, whereby calendric cycles such as years, months and days are divided in clusters of 12, each symbolized by an animal (see Feuchtwang 1978).

Unlike ancestral rites who call on forbears to engage with this world, ritual sessions dedicated to unrelated human spirits take place in the hours that belong to *am* (the other world), namely during ‘afternoons’ (*chiều*) or ‘evenings’ (*tối*). More specifically, rituals for appeasing errant spirits of anonymous dead are most commonly held between three and five in the afternoon. Bimonthly offerings to lost souls are made at sunset, a time when errant ethereal influences emerge roaming the streets (see chapter 3). These periods and moments are well separated from the habitual meal times for the living and although they involve plentiful offerings, they do not involve commensality between spirits and petitioners. Unlike ancestor propitiation rituals which take place in ‘interior’ (*nội*) spaces, inside houses and halls and around sheltered altars, the worship of unrelated spirits always takes place in the unbounded ‘outdoors’ (*ngoài*) whereby makeshift shrines provide temporary shelter for wandering and homeless ghostly entities. The offerings made to these makeshift shrines are not painstakingly arranged like those of the altars and the eating tables of ancestor anniversaries. In contrast, the food is often hastily deposited on the shrines with bits of it being subsequently thrown on the ground for hungry and lowly spirits.

Ritual aesthetics and votive offerings

In Hué the effectiveness of rituals is assessed on the basis of their aesthetic refinement, elegance and graceful articulation. Aesthetic exquisiteness is summed up in the adjective *đẹp* (beautiful) which is ubiquitously used to describe ancestral rituals. The attainment of exquisiteness in rituals is contingent on the available resources, the proficiency and deftness of living petitioners. Yet the aesthetic effects are mostly pertinent to the revered dead. All tangible aspects of a ritual such as food, ceremonial clothing, and votive offerings must be refined, sophisticated and delightful, and thus appropriate for the lofty standards and tastes of higher entities. This is possibly more pronounced in Hué where the former ruling dynasty has set an example for highly

wrought and elaborate ancestral practices. What are currently promoted as ‘traditional’ Huế dances, music and performing arts have historically been a part of the worshipping practices of nobility primarily enacted for the ‘entertainment’ and ‘enjoyment’ of entities such as potent deities and patron-spirits as well as royals and kings. As Norton (2006) points out, music and dances are an integral part of spirit related practices whereby the selection of dances and songs performed by mediums in trance are suggestive of the spirit’s particular identity and dispositions. In contemporary Huế, traditional music bands are hired for funerary rites of eminent dead such as Buddhist dignitaries and royals, while families of meager means hire audio systems to play Buddhist sutras. As Feuchtwang remarks, ritual events are about the ‘opening of the divine senses to human address’ (2007: 53). In anniversaries and ancestral rituals, this all-round sensuousness and excess is directed to the ethereal guests first and foremost rather than their living counterparts. The lively nature of rituals infused with colorful offerings, the delicate and pervading fragrances of burning joss and aromatic wood, the finely served and delightful dishes placed on lacquered and festooned altars seeks to please and engage the senses of the spirits and thus elicit their favourable dispositions towards their worshippers.

All aspects of rituals - dress codes, consumables, sounds, fragrances and votive offerings - must be tuned to the standards, requirements and this-worldly experiences of the revered dead. Spirits recognize the clothing of the time when they were alive, ‘speak the languages of the past and embody past habits, customs and comportment’ (Lambek 1996:243), and thus rituals must be tuned to their experiences and perspectives. Thus, in Huế, sacred inscriptions and ritual scripts are written in Han Việt (*ngữ Hàn*), the Sino-Vietnamese script in which all official and formal documents of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802-1945) were written. As the headmaster in a local primary school whose deceased father had died recently stated *ngữ Hàn* is the language that ‘our ancestors understand’. In anniversaries the leading participants, namely the male descendants, wear a ceremonial black gown and a turban, both the distinctive attire of dignified citizens of imperial times while elderly female kin wear

the formal, 'traditional' tunics (*áo dài*).¹⁹ Although in anniversaries participants who are less involved in the ritual sequence as well as crowds of onlookers in village rituals are clad in everyday clothes, it is essential that the key participants who make the address and offerings are clad in ceremonial clothing the dead are able to recognise. Yet regardless of clothing, all participants must change their bearing, comportment and demeanour to embody reverence and express their deeply felt affections for their departed forbears. The meticulously prepared food, the votive offerings, the attire, the words and comportment, all tangible and visible aspects of the rituals are means of manifesting the 'true feelings' of living towards departed kin. At the same time, anniversaries and ancestral rituals do not only prescribe the garb and comportment of the living but also provide revered spirits with clothing, travel essentials and assets in the form of votive items.

In contemporary Việt Nam the range and variety of votive items available in markets is extraordinary and boundless. Despite of their semi-legal status, the production, sale, and use of votive paper has developed remarkably in the past fifteen years.²⁰ Historical developments, technological advances, and trends in global market forces have not failed to inspire and affect the votive item markets. Among other things votive items now include mobile phones, motorbikes, fancy make up sets and male shaving equipment as well as an assortment of military uniforms. According to Nguyễn (2006), the surge in popularity of votive offering is associated with the rise of mediumship practices in post-socialist times with innovation and variety being deemed as critical in pleasing the often capricious and demanding patron-spirits and deities. However, votive items have long been an integral part of the propitiation of

¹⁹ *Áo dài* is today promoted as 'traditional' Vietnamese female clothing and is often worn in government offices and state run or private businesses. However, *áo dài* emerged as a novelty in the early twentieth century representing western influences in female dress. At the time it was considered both 'fashionable' and highly controversial.

²⁰ In the context of socialist reform, the practice has been vilified as 'superstitious' and 'wasteful' and as a result production and use during the 1970's and 1980's in the South went 'underground' (see Nguyen (2006). In 1998, the government issued an instruction (04/1998/TT-BVHTT) regulating the burning of votive items and prohibiting their use in the context of family rituals and temple festivals alike. Most notably, the edict prohibited burning votive paper in temples that were awarded as 'historic and cultural vestiges', such as the communal temple (*đình*) in Lường Nghi village. Today, although the making and sale of votive items is not fully recognized by law, local authorities do not persecute sellers and many families thrive and prosper on the trade.

humans in spirit form. With regards to departed kin, there is a fundamental set of votive items which are essential for their survival and well-being in the other world: gold and silver (*vàng bạc*), money (*tiền*) and clothes (*áo quần*). In anniversaries, each ancestor is provided with a sophisticated outfit which is distinctive of the eminent citizens and mandarins of the early and later Nguyễn dynasty. This outfit is often accompanied with western style accessories such as stylish black umbrellas and pearl necklaces.²¹ Male and female ancestors are also provided with individual colonial style valises (*và li*) complete with travel essentials and personal hygiene items such as shaving sets for men and combs and mirrors for women. These outfits and essentials draw upon the lived experiences of ‘mothers’, ‘fathers’, and ‘grandparents’ many of whom lived during the era of the French sponsored Nguyễn dynasty. Yet votive items are far from just reflective of ancestral experiences as they also reveal processes of selection and innovation. Ancestors are provided with sheets of *vàng bạc giấy tiền* or ‘gold, silver, paper and money’ folded and piled in the above order. Money comes in the form of ‘ancient’ imperial coins and is always accompanied by blank sheets of ‘writing paper’ (*giấy*) used by scholars-officials or mandarins. While imperial coins were out of circulation since the decline of the Nguyễn dynasty, ancestors are specifically presented with this extinct form of currency which is however evocative of the imperial past.²² Bundles of votive money piled upon bowls of fruit on the altar in anniversaries are burned on the first day while outfits and valises are handed on the second day as the ancestors are send off on their return to the nether realm.

Differences in the type of currency and clothing offered to human spirits not only echo disparities of gender, age, and genealogical status but most importantly reflect the fundamental difference between settled ancestral spirits and unbounded ghostly entities. Unlike forbears who receive full outfits unknown ‘lost souls’ receive instead sheets of paper-made ‘fabric’ (*vải*). This is because unrelated ghosts remain unidentified and unfamiliar to living petitioners who cannot speculate on their gender, age, size, and particular needs. Furthermore, unlike ancestral spirits who are catered for using old currencies and assets, ‘lost souls’ bound with this world and keeping up

²¹ Locals do not use umbrellas to protect in the excessively rainy and humid of Huế but instead colorful anoraks.

²² For more on currencies and their use in spirit practices see Kwon (2007).

with its developments are increasingly and consistently offered votive US dollars (*đô lã*). Issued by the 'bank of hell' and featuring the guardian of the underground world, this votive currency has become greatly popular in the underworld of ill-fated lost spirits. In his engaging article, Kwon (2007) suggests that the 'dollarisation' of the ghost economy brings about the emancipation and empowerment of disadvantaged ghostly entities vis-à-vis ancestral spirits, and suggests that such developments are inexorably linked with the 'democratization' of the nether realm.

Despite Kwon's insightful argument, the question of why ghosts and ancestors are catered for using different currencies still persists. Dollars are not unfamiliar to ancestral spirits of preceding generations as many of them were entrenched in the dollar-infused economy of the Southern Republic. Furthermore, they are by no means unfamiliar to their descendants many of whom currently live or have close kin living in the United States. As a highly valued currency in post-socialist times, dollars appear in current exchanges among living kin who use money as gifts to sponsor the construction of elaborate ancestral tombs and halls contributing substantially towards the well being of their ancestry, as well as, the welfare of their residual relatives who take the lead in fulfilling this filial task.²³ However, while the well being of both living and departed kin may actually depend on flows of dollars, dollars appear to be unsuitable as a direct offering to ancestors. Dollars might be part of ancestors' lived experiences, yet they remain a 'foreign' currency for ancestral spirits. Most importantly, potent foreign currencies remain alien to their divine essence and superior spiritual existence as offering dollars to ancestors risks drawing too close an association between them and 'foreigner aggressors' as former enemies are connoted in official narratives, branding them as 'unpatriotic'. Moreover, offering dollars to ancestors exposes them to the risk of becoming associated and compared to lowly ghostly entities which, trapped between this world and the other, are bound by unquenched needs and lowly desires.

²³ The Vietnamese community in the United States is the biggest and overall more prosperous of all the other overseas Vietnamese communities, such as those in France, Australia and Germany. Remittances and donations from overseas Vietnamese are contributing substantially to the country's developing economy and further growth. The government is making considerable efforts to encourage overseas Vietnamese to invest, promote and set up business in Việt Nam.

Votive money and items are not spurious imitations or 'fake' as commonly suggested by contemporary scholars (Feljstad 2006; Kwon 2007) but replicas of essential objects which are functional and valuable in this world, the *durong* realm. Votive items are crafted in this world which knows little about life in the other realm. As such, votive items are *like* the objects the ancestors used and were accustomed to while in this world. They are not made with the intention of looking identical to the 'original' ones and as such they can not be characterized as counterfeit. Rather, they have to be fit for use to a different realm, the other world. They are both similar and different to non-votive items at once.

The use of paper indicates neither the 'fakeness' nor the invalidity of votive objects but instead underscores their transposable and transmutable value. As a material, paper can be burned to ashes. By this means the object is transported to the other side. By means of its consuming power, fire – one of the five elements of cosmos - transforms the object's essence and composition to fit a different, largely immaterial reality and mode of existence with the emitted smoke becoming the vehicle of transportation. Citing popular sayings, Toan remarks (1969:34) that 'as the bones of the dead disappear, what is paper gold in this world will become real gold in the other world'. In burning votive offerings, worshippers take great care to meticulously burn the items to their entirety, rolling and pushing the items into the blazing flames. After the fire subsides, a cup of rice wine is poured over the ashes, an act akin to a wish for receiving the items in the other world. In sum, the critical question arising here is not if votive items are 'real' but rather what do the dead make of and with them? Can the dead receive and appreciate all these colorful, sophisticated and caringly proffered items? Do incorporeal entities have a use for clothes, shoes and money? How can humans in spirit form eat food or is this just about the desires, objectives and aspirations of this-worldly beings that are projected onto the largely uncharted and unknown nether realm?

Eating as human capacity

Throughout my fieldwork I would sit through countless rituals catering to human spirits and quotidian acts tending to ancestral altars with basic offerings - incense, fruits and water. In these settings, questions about the condition, circumstances and capacities of the dead emerged pressingly for my informants as well as me. Sympathizing with my initial bafflement and the limits of my understanding as a 'westerner' who is accustomed to think of life and death differently, locals would often explain that 'death is not the end'. After dying which is construed as an unsettling experience and a critical phase in one's existential journey, departed kin are thought of as continuing 'living' (*sống*) albeit in a different realm and mode of existence. Entertaining my assumptions as a 'westerner', locals lightheartedly asserted that the dead could not 'eat' (*không ăn được*). As *ông* Dường, an elderly villager who was a fervent advocate of ancestral practices and with whom I shared several tea drinking afternoons, teasingly said to me one day: if the dead could eat no one would offer them so much food because there would be nothing left for the rest of us. *Ông* Dường who like so many others had close kin living in the United States was highly aware of 'western' and Christian traditions about the afterlife and was wary about possible misconstructions of local customs as 'superstitious' (*mê tín*) and 'irrational' characterizations that were once vehemently endorsed by the socialist state. Nevertheless, in many keen conversations about ritual practices, the sensory, emotive and cognitive capacities of the dead emerged as of paramount importance time and again.

As many of my interlocutors remarked on several occasions, the dead are taken to 'have no eyes but are capable of seeing'. Similarly, 'they have no ears but are capable of hearing'. A female Buddhist dignitary explained that the dead can 'see' (*xem*) and 'hear' (*thể nghe*) but 'not like us', the living. They see in a different way: it is like when you are asleep and dreaming (*giấc mơ*), your eyes are closed but you can still see things. According to her account, dead persons' sensory capabilities are much sharper and superior to ours, allowing them to see and hear 'through walls', to be present in many places at the same time and able to travel between realms instantly in

a way, as she put it, comparable to a ‘phone call from abroad’. They constantly ‘talk to us’ (*nói*) but ‘we cannot hear’ them because they ‘do not produce sounds’. Disagreements over the senses of the dead and speculation about the ways in which they see, hear or smell (*khứu giác*) often occur. However what is shared among my interlocutors is that in posterity one retains awareness and consciousness with the dead being capable for perception and knowledge (*hiểu biết*) as they can still ‘sense’ and ‘feel’ (*cảm giác*). As explained in chapter 2, in the context of mortuary treatment, the acts of bathing, dressing and coffering the body are undertaken with extreme care so as to avoid harming it and causing pain and suffering to the deceased. But beyond that, the loss of corporeality does not divest human entities of their ability to experience intense emotions such as anger and joy, suffering and distress. According to many locals, departed kin rejoice in the sight of their descendants gathered in anniversaries and are equally overwhelmed with despondency and anger when neglected or abandoned. It is their emotional capabilities that allow them to relate to the living and act appropriately towards them, that is, either favorably by bestowing blessing or vengefully by causing accidents and illness. This is most apparent in the case of unfortunate dead and ‘grievous souls’ (*oan hồn*) which dash into action, driven by overwhelming angst and grief. It is precisely the capacity of the dead for emotive experience that necessitates ritual action towards both related and unrelated dead and calls for the constant and due propitiation of the former.

As locals maintain, the dead have needs and desires (*nhu cầu*) just like the living (*nhu người sống*). Most importantly, after death, human spirits retain their capacity to ‘eat’ (*ăn*) and/or ‘receive’ (*hưởng*) what is offered by the living. In ritual feasts, presenting and consuming offerings are the main ways in which all participants, both living and dead, engage with each other. The living are said to ‘eat’ (*ăn*) and thus to receive what is offered by way of bodily incorporation and gustatory consumption. The dead are able only to ‘receive’ (*hưởng*) offerings in a wholly different sensorial register: they are mainly able to see the offerings, smell the fragrant incense, hear the earnest words of intimacy, and savour the food. Furthermore, as an elderly female participant in an anniversary explained, the dead do not savour food with their mouth but rather through the sense of sight, literally ‘eating with their eyes’. In this regard,

other interlocutors would often reiterate that ‘in seeing the offerings they already feel satiated’ (*họ thấy thì no rồi*).

In standardized prayers for anniversaries of fathers, mothers and grandparents, living descendants appeal to their forebears to enjoy and receive the offerings. In such prayers, living descendants affably address their forebears as intimates, calling upon them as ‘people of like body’ (*thân*) or people of ones’ ‘very own soul’ (*tiên linh ta*). Invocations invite the forebears to receive and rejoice in the offerings (*thuong hưởng*) and more particularly, to ‘receive fragrant rice grain’ (*hưởng gạo thơm*), ‘carry cooked rice in their mouths’ (*cong lam lu*) and ‘drink delicious water’ (*uống nước ngon*). In Huế, *hưởng*, meaning ‘receiving’, ‘coming into’, ‘enjoying’, is impartibly linked to the capacities of spirits and ethereal entities, and therefore denotes their active participation in ritual feasts. The capacity to eat (or receive) is pivotal in human sociality, enabling not only interactions and encounters to take place amongst the living but it also serves as a means for drawing in and engaging incorporeal entities.

What is being ‘offered’ (*cúng*) and ‘received’ (*ăn*) in ritual feasting defines the hierarchy pertaining among spirits. The quality and quantity of offerings as well as the underlying needs they seek to satiate mark essential differences between deities and humans, exalted divinized beings and lowly eerie entities. Deities and human spirits are not only accommodated separately on different altars but they are also offered different foods. Spirits of higher essence such as Buddha are catered for with an explicit selection of offerings that is fit for their purity and enlightened status. Liberated from their worldly needs, such divinities ‘do not need to eat’ (*không cần ăn*), nor do they depend on sustenance provided by the living. However, such deities receive delicately prepared offerings such as five-colored candy towers and sweet delicacies, sticky rice (*xôi*) and bean pudding (*chè*) as well as fruits and fresh flowers. These offerings are not consumed for nourishment but they are rather classed as gratifying snacks.

Higher Buddhist and Taoist divinities are offered only vegetarian offerings as is fitting to their elevated standing. This is in accord with the sanctimonious Buddhist diet that dictates abstention from eating flesh (*ăn chay*). *Ăn chay* or ‘abstaining from eating animals’ effectively desists the ultimate offense (*tội*) which is the ‘killing’ (*giết*)

and harming of a living being. Hence, *ăn chay* is a fundamental ‘meritorious act’ (*công đức*), an act that engenders merit and spiritual superiority for those who uphold the practice (see also chapter 2). Buddhist adherents abstain from meat and other misdemeanors twice a month, that is, on the first and the fifteen of every lunar month. Monks’ and nuns’ resolute and total abstention is along with meditation the principal means towards spiritual perfection. Conversely, *ăn mặn* or ‘not abstaining from meat’ is a characteristic of worldly-bound entities. The consumption of meat is an integral part of propitiating rituals pertaining to related dead, and thus underlines their past shared corporeality as kin or else ‘people of like body’. In Việt Nam, meat is mainly consumed in ritual contexts and is the main sacrificial offering to related spirits. On the other hand, gluttony and insatiability are attributes of lowly entities and point to an overpowering and ‘consuming’ materiality.

Conclusion

In Vietnamese the word *ăn* (to eat) does not merely denote consumption but has an array of meanings, including ‘attending’, ‘receiving’, ‘obtaining’ or even ‘living’. While its semantics as a verb are context specific, its common use as a prefix denotes human participation in a series of events with commensality being an integral part. In life cycle rituals and events such as weddings (*ăn cưới*), anniversaries (*ăn giỗ*) and *Tet* occasions (*ăn Tết*) and simple gatherings of peers (*ăn tiệc*), locals are literally ‘eating’ their way into conviviality with commensality instantiating sociality. Eating encapsulates the ultimate human capacity which is not eliminated by death, being thus, pertinent to both the living and the dead. The dead do not lose their ability and desire to eat and receive. Because of that they are able to engage and interact with other human entities. In such encounters the dead savour and enjoy what they receive and counter-offer their blessings which in turn perpetuate their connections with their living kin. Eating and receiving could be thus be considered to act so as to establish a kind of ‘metonymic continuity’ (Viveiros de Castro 2000) between two disparate

realms, between *âm* and *đương*. The capacity to eat and receive is a core part of the human condition that persists beyond death and the transformation it ushers in. The fact that this capacity endures beyond death is not only suggestive of the persistent material needs of the dead but it also hints at the durability of the sensory, emotive, and perceptive capacities of humans across the great divide.

Food and other offerings are tokens of appreciation and affection expressing the earnest feelings of the living towards their dead kin. The link between food offerings and earnest feelings is not without import. According to Vietnamese physiology and cosmology, the stomach (*bụng*) occupies the centre of the body and is the place where one's personal dispositions and feelings are stored and emanate from. The human body like the cosmic landscape is a well-balanced whole composed of *âm* (the other world, lunar, female) and *đương* (this world, solar, male) principles. *Đương* forces lie in the abdomen to which six internal organs are attached: gall bladder, spleen, small and big intestine, left kidney. *Âm*, on the other hand, has its origins in the brain and the spinal cord and governs five vital organs, namely heart, liver, lung, stomach, right kidney (see Nguyễn 1990:215). According to local perceptions, *âm* is the principle that governs emotions, thoughts and dispositions. Thus, in Vietnamese a generous and righteous person is not a 'good-hearted' but a 'good-stomached' one (*tốt bụng*).

Food offerings in rituals nurture the centre of the body while at the same time satiate the emotional needs of both living and dead participants. In all their sensuousness, anniversaries and ancestor propitiating rituals do not appeal merely to the material needs of the living or the past shared corporeality of living and dead. They primarily seek to induce deep feelings of intimacy on both sides and therefore to instantiate, draw out, and perpetuate connections, creating an 'inter-subjective field of relations' (Viveiros de Castro 2000:477) in which the living and the dead come together as equally human and sociable entities.

Chapter 5

Shifting ancestorhood: houses, ancestral halls and communal rituals

Developing trajectories of ancestorhood

In both earlier and current studies on Vietnamese kinship and ritual practice, ‘ancestors’ and the pertinent cult have been a focal point of analysis. While earlier studies have largely focused on the significance of the ancestor cult for the continuity and unity of kin and local groupings, recent studies have shifted the emphasis to change and disruption in the realm of kinship (Luong 1989, 1993; Malarney 2002, 2003; Kwon 2006, 2007). More particularly, anthropologists have explored the changes in kinship and ritual practices brought about by shifts in political economy (see chapter 6). Focusing on the effects of both socialist reform and *đổi mới* Luong (1989) argues about the ‘dynamic’ and ‘synthetic’ nature of Vietnamese kinship. He points to the co-existence of two ‘alternative models’, namely a male and a non-male oriented one, and therefore to the significance of both bilateral and unilateral reckonings of kinship. On another plane, Kwon (2008:5) counter poses ‘alternative kinship practices’ centred on ghosts to the ‘genealogical ideology of predetermined, exclusive relatedness’ centred on ‘ancestors’. His analysis points to the historicity, fluidity and transformability of spiritual entities, nonetheless, this transformability is exclusively associated with ‘ghosts’, construed as the categorical opposite of ‘ancestors’, in turn associated with ‘given genealogies’ (ibid.). The present chapter engages with the insights of the above mentioned studies about the mutability of spirits and the synthetic nature of kinship relations, yet moves away from dipolar spectrums and binary oppositions such as settled ‘ancestors’ and dynamic ‘ghosts’, within which the dead have largely been understood in Việt Nam. Focusing on a plethora of different categories of ancestral spirits as found in the local idiom, it explores the variable and changing trajectories of ancestorhood.

In recent studies on Việt Nam as well as on China, ‘ghosts’ have consistently appeared as proactive entities with unlimited potential (see Leshkovits 2008, Harrel 1974). On the other hand, ‘ancestors’, despite their dynamic and eventful journeys in history and posterity - through wars, conflict, dispossession and prolonged hardships – have persisted as an over-arching category. This is partly due to the indistinct use of the generic term ‘ancestors’ in English language studies (or ancêtres, in French) as a translation of the learned Vietnamese term *tổ tiên*. The term *tổ tiên* indistinctly signifies past generations of forebears, antecedents and originators on a grand scale, and has been widely used by Vietnamese folklorists and ethnologists since the 1970s. This fits well with ideas and theories about primordial origins and national ancestries. However, such terms fail to acknowledge the diversity of ancestral souls and antecedent figures, which becomes evident in the local idiom. My informants employ an array of distinctive terms in reference to departed kin, clearly distinguishing between deceased family members of the first or second ascending generation or else father, mother (*cha mẹ*) and grandfather, grandmother (*ông bà*), originators of small order descent groups (*cáo tổ*), local lineages (*khai canh*) or clans (*khôi tổ*) and primordial ancestral souls (*thủy tổ*). Rather than construing ‘ancestors’ as a single, monolithic conceptual category this chapter examines different local categories and conceptualizations of departed kin and forebears.

Such pedantically graded categories of anterior generations do not merely point to fixed hierarchies or rigid typologies but most importantly to an emergent and evolving ancestorhood. This emergent nature of ancestral spirits is evident even in their nascence (see chapter 2), at which point a series of funerary practices seeks to transform deceased kin from bewildered unbounded souls into efficacious ancestral spirits who guard and protect their living counterparts. In posterity, life and existence do not remain unchanged for any ethereal entity, be it an enshrined ancestral spirit or wandering soul. Efficacious and active as they are, ancestral spirits change, develop and evolve through time and with the passage of generations. In ideal positive schemes of development, fathers and mothers (*cha mẹ*) emerge as grandparents (*ông bà*) with the advent of the next generation and later as great grandparents (*ky*), and hence the apical couple of a small order descent group, and therefore further propped

up in the order of ancestral seniority. In this spiraling trajectory of ancestorhood, twists and turns as well as setbacks are more than likely. The succession of generations can bring about the endorsement of a distant forebear as originator of a high order descent group, lineage or clan or else lead to their being neglected, disregarded and abandoned. As shown in chapter 3, the danger of becoming a ghost is imminent and constant. Ancestral figures can transform into lost souls (and vice versa), as links and communication with their living descendants become severed, either due to unfortunate death or the childlessness of descendants. Thus, ancestorhood is neither immutable nor 'fixed' but rather marks an existential trajectory.

This trajectory does not mirror, parallel or emulate that of the living but rather the two are intertwined. The evolving posterity of forerunners is impartibly linked with the procreative phases and fecundity of the living and thus with the advent, growth and life cycle of subsequent generations. The birth or marriage of a child can enhance the existence and status of forebears, transforming a deceased 'grandfather' (*ông*) into a 'great grandfather' (*ông ky*) as explained above. Such a development can lead to the enhancement of the house and its reformation as a dedicated hall or otherwise to the establishment of a new purposely made ancestral hall with the participation of a wider group of descendants. In turn, the establishment of an ancestral hall spells the transformation of the 'great grandfather' into the originator of a lineage sub-branch. Just like ancestorhood, descent lines and kin groupings are not fixed, lineal or unremitting. This chapter considers ancestorhood in this light whereby the lives of dead and living kin and lines of descent are intimately connected. A main part of my account is concerned with this shifting ancestorhood and the changing relations between dead and living kin.

The relational cycles of ancestors and progeny are charted here through a series of sacred structures and ritual practices around which living and dead kin gather and interact. A series of shrines, ancestral halls and communal temples around the village are evocative not only of the active presence of related dead but also of their manifold and evolving relations with the living. Furthermore, relational cycles and existential trajectories are traced here on an increasing scale moving from houses, as the smallest order kin group, to higher order descent groupings and local lineages. Differences in

context and scale mark variable relations between living and dead kin. In the context of the house, enshrined kin are not only patrilineal kin and forebears but can further include matrilineal as well as non-lineal kin, such as in-laws and ‘aunts’. More particularly, domestic altars can shelter parents and grandparents from the paternal and maternal side as well as their siblings and wives, all genealogically proximate and thus considered to be intimate kin. In this context, bilateral and unilateral connections are not mutually exclusive. The co-existence of bilateral and unilateral kin persists beyond the confines of the house and is an integral part of the configuration of lower order descent groupings, such as *nhanh*, *kinh* or *chi*.¹ The respective halls of these lineage sub-divisions do not enshrine male forebears but rather conjugal couples from which subsequent generations have originated. Communal rituals held in these halls involve the participation of ‘both sides’, as locals maintain, that is, both matrilineal and patrilineal kin. In higher order ancestral halls, such as those for lineage (*họ*) and sub-lineage (*phái*) groupings, conjugal couples are replaced by male originators and more particularly by a pair of ‘father and son’. In lineage temples, the high altar is dedicated exclusively to the lineage originator and his eldest son in turn, founder of the first in order *phái*. Thus, moving up in scale to higher order groupings brings a shift in emphasis from multilateral to unilineal reckonings of kinship and from conjugal to genealogical connections.

As Astuti (2000:91) points out, ‘cognatic kindreds and unilineal descent groups have often been treated in kinship theory...as fixed in time and place’ and mutually exclusive. In her study of the Vezo of Madagascar Astuti demonstrates that such formations can be considered as ‘transformative stages in the process of making human relatedness’ (ibid.). She shows that the existence of either cognatic kindreds or descent groups is a ‘matter of perspective’, that ultimately depends on what ‘kind of person one is’ (ibid. 93). Pointing to an ‘intimate connection between the changing nature of the person’ and particular ‘perspectives’ on kinship, she shows how kinship reckonings change in the course of one’s life and most importantly at the point of

¹ According to villagers descent groupings, which are locally based, have three main sub-divisions: *họ* (lineage) *phái* (sub-lineage) and *chi* (sub-branch). Currently, subsequent subdivisions are emerging as popular, namely *kinh* (third in order sub-branch) and *nhanh* as the smallest in order lineage sub-group. However in the village some go as far as identifying the house (*nhà*) as the smallest in order division and thus integral part of a lineage.

death, whereby one shifts from a bilateral perspective into a unilateral one (ibid. 101). In this context, death signifies a person's becoming as patrilineal kin and their definitive transformation into an 'ancestor-like figure'. Yet in Việt Nam, this transformation from bilateral to unilineal reckonings is not effected by means of death as an eventual 'act of closure', i.e., death, rather the dead evolve from intimate and genealogically proximate kin into originators of descent groupings and lineage apical ancestors in the course of generations. Thus, a person's transformation continues beyond death and by means of an evolving ancestorhood. The shift in emphasis from bilateral connections to patrilineality and the transformation of dead kin into generative, ancestor-like figures ensues in higher levels of genealogical formations, and therefore the difference in scale is crucial in this process of becoming. This difference in scale marks changes in the existential trajectory of forebears and ensuing transformations in the relations between living and dead kin. Such changes can be traced in different order altars, found in houses and ancestral halls, which enshrine disparate categories of ancestors.

Compared to northern and southern regions, central Việt Nam is noticeably marked by the presence of ancestral halls and lineage temples and (*nhà thờ*). That is even more pronounced in Huế, the former imperial capital, where the ancestral halls of the royal and noble ancestry have historically marked the urban and semi-urban landscape. In the village of Lữơng Nghi, the communal ancestral hall dedicated to the village founders was constructed in its present form at the height of the Nguyen dynasty (see introduction). According to locals, the establishment of a communal hall for the seven local lineages (*nhà thờ bảy họ*) goes further back in time to the establishment of the village in the late 15th century. For centuries, *nhà thờ bảy họ*, which today serves both as a communal hall for village rituals as well as separate shrine where each lineage deals with its particular ancestral affairs, has been the only ancestral hall in the locality. With the dawn of the 1960s, when optimism was still abundant - fueled by the victory over the French and the promise of a new national future within the prospering South Republic - a number of ancestral halls were established in the locality. The first in order lineage in the village (Nguyễn), erected two new sub-lineage temples, in the immediate vicinity of the communal lineage hall.

Subsequent lineages followed suit, like the third in order lineage (Đoan), which made a temple on the other end of the hamlet. Modest in scope when they were first established, today these halls are identified as sub-lineage temples (*nhà thờ phái*), dedicated to the first, second and third in order sons of respective lineage founders. With the advent of the revolution in 1945 and again in 1975, temples and worship communities around the village fell into disuse and disarray. Neglected or destroyed through adversity and privation, today *nhà thờ* of various orders are rising again into prominence, in rural and semi-urban localities all around the province. In line with the current official endorsement of the ancestral cult as an integral part of long established 'customs and tradition' (*phong tục*), old ancestral halls are painstakingly renovated while novel ones are erected by newly emerging lineage sub-groups. In the context of this regeneration historic temples, of noble lineages and former royal lines are also feverishly restored as places dedicated to distinguished ancestors (see chapter 6). But aside from the revival of noble higher order halls and eminent lineages what is most striking is the unprecedented surge in constructing new, small order ancestral halls that signify the emergence of newly active descent groupings on a smaller scale. The chapter examines the growing presence and significance of small order ancestral halls as well as the enhancement of ancestral houses as places of worship.

The rise of small order groupings and halls into prominence reflects changes in the realm of kinship brought about by recent historical developments and changes in political economy.² The advent of the revolution and the ensuing land reform, have removed land and immovable assets from lineages, descent groups and local communities.³ However, houses and small residential holdings, bequeathed as 'ancestral property' to individual families have largely escaped requisition. With the shift from centrally planned to market economy and the reinstatement of the family as fundamental economic unit, ancestral bequests and communal halls have acquired a new meaning. Today, the newly erected and old ancestral halls are highly valued by kin and descent groupings as communal and ancestral property. *Nhà thờ* are most

² See Ljungren (1993), Luong (1993) and Malarney (1993, 1998).

³ The infamous 'land reform' took place first in the North during the early 1950s (1952-53), while in south and central Viet Nam it was applied only after the re-unification of the country. See Kerkvliet (1995).

commonly erected on land bequeathed by forebears and by means of joint contributions and extensive cooperation among kin who trace descent from the particular forebears. Access and participation to the hall and its activities are determined not only on the basis of genealogical connections but primarily on the basis of contributions towards the establishment of the communal hall, and thus membership is neither prescribed nor given. Effectively, it is the construction of a communal hall, as a noticeable manifestation of a prospering and active descent group, through which kin groupings acquire presence in the locality. Without a dedicated hall or established altar, forebears lack presence and relevance, slipping through the depths of neglect and forgetfulness, and therefore pertinent genealogical connections remain latent and covert and fading.

Communal halls and pertinent practices have not remained unchanged through time and the passage of generations but have rather been formed through war, adversity and privation. Changes and developments regarding *nhà thờ* not only point to the historicity of sacred structures and kinship practices but also to discontinuity and disruption as integral parts in the formation of kin and local groupings. What is striking in *nhà thờ* all around Huế is that they do not enshrine continuous or unremitting genealogies, but rather incoherent lines and disarticulated or re-articulated genealogies. They enshrine not only distinguished antecedents but also ancestral figures, whose identity and particular connections to members of the descent grouping, either living or dead, are unknown. Such unfortunate forebears, whose identity and connections with kin have been forgotten, neglected or become problematic, are reinstated as 'descendants' of the group's apical ancestor, and find their rightful place in ancestral halls. Antecedent generations of forgotten kin, become enmeshed into an indistinctive collective ancestral entity, whose unidentified parts share a censer on a lateral altar of the ancestral hall. This is most commonly the case in higher order groups, such as *phai* (sub-lineage) or *chi* (sub-branch), as opposed to lower order halls and domestic altars, which in turn enshrine only forebears who are known and familiar. The scale and size of the grouping and the respective hall are mostly relevant in this case. Higher order groupings are better equipped than houses and smaller order kin formations to deal with the propitiation and mishaps of such unfortunate souls.

While houses and lower order halls are the context where ancestral anniversaries (*ngày kỵ*) are held for forbears, whose identity and date of death are known, higher order halls can undertake communal anniversaries (*hiệp kỵ*) for all the indistinct generations of ancestors. The ability of the latter to hold communal ancestor anniversaries is based on the size of the group and thus the extent of participation and available resources as well as the rank, potency and efficacy of the group originator, all closely interrelated. Therefore, forgotten ancestries and mislaid genealogical connections are integral part of the commemorative process. Hence, ancestral halls here do not epitomize lineality, continuity or fixity but rather enshrine fluctuating lines and changeable connections between dead and living kin.

Ông bà cha mẹ: parents, grandparents and the scope of domestic altars

As explained in chapter 1, Vietnamese houses are centered on ancestral altars and constitute the physical and relational context within which living and dead kin engage with each other as intimates. I have shown that although domestic altars are ideally dedicated to paternal forbears, in practice they shelter a number of close kin including non-lineal kin and collaterals. I have further argued that in houses, it is not uncommon to have ‘one altar with two sides’. That is, siblings, aunts and parents-in-law, who might be childless (*không có con*), and therefore have ‘no one to care for them’, are incorporated in lineally envisioned shrines whereby nephews, uncles and sons-in-law undertake the responsibility for their care. In this context, maternal and paternal relatives can co-habit in the same spatially bounded unit. This encompassing dimension of domestic altars can be partly explained with reference to recent historical developments and past conflicts, whereby sons and rightful heirs have perished or fled overseas or ancestors died in the streets (see Kwon 2006). Nonetheless, the coexistence of lineal and non-lineal kin on the same altar is not merely incidental - or a paradox of patrilineality for that matter - but rather an idiom of local kinship. This co-habitation is evocative of close affinities and bilateral connections in the context of the

house. The dead inhabiting the domestic altar are not indistinct categories of ancestors (*tổ tiên*), but rather intimate kin such as fathers (*cha*), mothers (*mẹ*), grandfathers (*ông*), grandmothers (*bà*) as well as spouses, daughters-in-law and parents-in-law, all falling into the category of intimate kin (*người thân*).

Despite considerable variations and adaptations with regard to who is worshipped on domestic altars, locals ubiquitously identify domestic altars as *bàn thờ ông bà cha mẹ*, which can be translated as the ‘altar of grandparents and parents’. Such identification highlights not only the lineality of domestic altars but also the close affinities and intimacy with deceased kin of the first and second ascending generation. As an elder grandfather explained, ‘parents are the ones who gave birth to us and grandparents gave birth to them’. The relation between parents and children is the most intimate and a pivotal one in Vietnamese kinship. To children, parents are the most intimate of kin or *người thân*, that is people of like body.⁴ They are constituent parts of their children’s corporeality, whereby father is the bones (*xương*), the hard, ‘dry’ and enduring part of the body and mother is the flesh (*thịt*), the soft and ‘wet’ part. This corporeal connection and close affinity between parents and children is not effaced with death. The relation between parent and child as intimates (*người thân*) is sustained beyond death. Funerals led by the deceased’s children - the first and nearest generation of descendants – reconstitute the departed foremost as righteous mother and dignified father (see chapter 2). *Người thân* is a reference extended to both dead and living kin. In the village, elderly locals with grandchildren, refer to their deceased parents as *ông thân* (for father) and *thân mẫu* (for mother), thus marking both their senior genealogical status as forbears (*ông*) as well as the sustained intimacy (*thân*).⁵

Moreover, this intimate connection between ‘people of alike body’ (*người thân*) is extended to both sets of a couple’s parents, and thus to both sides of kinship, the paternal or ‘inner’ (*nội*) side and the maternal or ‘external’ (*ngoại*). According to locals, a family or house group has ‘two sides and four intimate kin’, a

⁴ *Thân* means self, body, and is often used to denote proximity and identification ‘one’s very own’. *Người* means human, people. Thus here I translate the term as ‘people of like body’. For more on the term *thân*, see Marr (2000).

⁵ The terms *ông* means ‘grandfather’ and is a reverential term for addressing male persons of senior genealogical status. *Mẫu* is the Sino-Vietnamese term for ‘mother’ and is mostly used as a formal or reverential address often for deceased mothers or female deities.

conceptualization encapsulated in the phrase *tư thân phu mẫu*. *Tư thân phu mẫu* which can be translated as ‘four intimates, fathers and mothers’, is a most common phrase, used to describe the affiliations of a family and hence their bilateral connections. These bilaterally formed affiliations are created and sustained by means of everyday and ritual practices. Daughters are considered the ‘children of others’ (*con của người ta*), as upon marriage they leave their natal house to join the family and lineage of their husband (see also Malarney 2002:158). However, they sustain relations and affinities with their natal house, offering gifts and support to parents and siblings, attending family events and contributing towards rituals for mothers, fathers and grandparents. Upon marriage, a woman retains her patronymic and her relations with her parents and siblings. The birth of the first child and ritual for the completion of its first lunar month (*đủ một tháng*) takes place at the wife’s natal house, where she stays for the first three months after birth, supported by her mother and matrilineal kin. A married daughter and her husband must return to her natal house on important family occasions, such as weddings, birth rites and most importantly ancestor anniversaries (see also Malarney 2002:161, Luong 1984:301). Failure to meet her responsibilities towards living and dead kin is considered equally unfilial behavior (*bất hiếu or bất nghĩa*) as in the case of sons.

Hence, death does not denigrate the intimacy and close affinities between children and parents or grandparents. Kin of the first and second ascending or descending generation are reckoned as intimates, that is ‘people of like body’, on either side of kinship, both maternal and paternal. In the context of the house, genealogical proximity is of primary significance overriding differences between different sides, between maternal and paternal kin. Indeed, it is the advent of the next generation that brings about a shift in emphasis from intimate bilateral relations to unilineal connections. The advent of the third in order descending generation spells the transformation of parents (*cha mẹ*) into grandparents (*ông bà*). This transformation unravels the potential of the latter becoming great grandparents (*ky*), and hence originators of a distinct descent grouping. Thus, in this context, the differentiation between maternal and paternal sides becomes more pronounced, as apparent in kinship terminology that clearly distinguishes between paternal (*ông bà nội*) and maternal

grandparents (*ông bà ngoại*). Here, the evocative terms *nội* (inner) and *ngoại* (external), marks the disparity between the two sides and their differential affiliation with the family. The advent of a new generation is here not signaled merely by means of the birth of children but most importantly with their reaching to maturity through marriage and procreation, that in turn signals the formation of a new house. Thus, genealogical difference is pivotal here for the formation of kin groupings and the articulation of affinities, marking the precedence of bilateral or unilateral connections.

This bilateral view with regard to ancestry becomes evident in marriage prohibitions. The most generic rule is the prohibition of marriage within the same *họ*, as a patriline or local lineage. In the village, locals differentiate between distinct hierarchically ordered descent groupings or *họ*. These *họ* are strictly exogamous and therefore they prescribe distinct sets of hierarchically ordered affines (e.g. Goody 1973:19). Marriage within the same *họ* (*lay cùng họ*) is the most threatening possibility as it brings disorder and confusion not only in relations among agnates but also between distinct exogamous groups. However, marriage prohibitions also apply for first cross-cousins as well as for matrilineal parallel cousins, who effectively belong to different sides and different lineages (Luong 1984:298). Tracing common originators in the second ascending generation makes such marriages incestuous. Further, as Malarney argues, marriage is ‘prohibited between people within five degrees (*nam đời*) of either cognatic or agnatic relation’ (2002:157). The *nam đời* rule or literally ‘five generations’, prescribes marriage on either side of kinship. In his ethnography of a northern Vietnamese village, he examines how the socialist state sought to regulate and transform marriage practices and wedding rituals to fit a more egalitarian ideologies and practice. According to Malarney, ‘pre-revolutionary customs’ uniformly forbade marriage within the same lineage regardless of how distant the relation and degree of descent (*ibid.*). One of the main changes, stipulated in the newly introduced ‘Marriage and Family Law’ (1959), was to allow marriage beyond the five degrees of kinship regardless of lineage affiliation.⁶ As Malarney argues such changes did not go unopposed by locals and caused open conflicts

⁶ The Law of Marriage and Family (1959) was introduced in the Democratic Republic of North Viet Nam, and took effect in central and south parts of the country after re-unification (1975).

(ibid.9). Yet beyond historical changes and the discrepancies between local and state interpretations of kinship, marriage practices reflect the significance of both sides in the formation of kin groupings as well as the scope and limits of bilateral connections.

The bilateral view of kin reckoning exceeds the confines of the house, as facets of it appear in small order descent groups, which in turn consist of several houses. In ancestral halls of small lineage sub-groups, it is often conjugal couples that are placed on altars rather than exclusively male ancestors, so connubial unions play a fundamental part in the formation of genealogies and descent groupings. Moreover, as in family rituals at the house, communal rituals in ancestral halls, far from being restricted to male descendants, encourage the participation of a wide set of kin such as the wives of these descendants, daughters and their husbands as well as daughters-in-law and thus most likely both maternal and paternal 'grandchildren' (*cháu*). The term *cháu* has manifold meanings and uses. It primarily means 'grandchild' or more generally 'descendant', and locals often refer to members of lineages and their sub-groups as *con cháu*, 'children and grandchildren'. Yet *cháu* is also extended to non-lineal kin i.e. the children of sisters and brothers, here having the meaning of 'nephew' or 'niece'. The formation of descent groupings and communal ritual practices are discussed in more detail later here. First let me very briefly consider the signification of marital unions in the context of wedding rituals.

Marriage, children and the scope of relatedness

Marriage practices in Việt Nam are subject to regional particularities and historical changes. Here I do not wish to offer a comprehensive review but merely to highlight a few focal points as regards wedding rituals in contemporary Huế. In this context, the principles of both marriage and descent emerge as equally significant and constitutive of the new conjugal unit. Marriage and descent have often been considered as lying on opposite sides of the spectrum, whereby emphasis on one or the other has come to

define the difference between distinct reckonings of kinship and relatedness. A number of studies have astutely pointed to marriage as creating both difference and relatedness. As Carsten demonstrates in the case of Malaysia, marriage is a process through which unrelated people are turned into kin. Similarly, Astuti (2000:96) notes on Madagascar that through the act of marriage people ‘become ‘different’...yet this difference is established only to be retransformed into relatedness at the next generation’, with the birth of children.

Similarly in Huế, wedding rituals signify both difference and relatedness. Yet in this context, difference is not a consequence of marriage but rather a prerequisite. Marriage can only occur between disparate kin groupings, construed as exogamous. This disparity is a prerequisite for their union. Moreover, procreation and the creation of progeny establish unity between the two families and further strengthen alliance bonds. On yet another plane, progeny and the creation of descendants also spell the distinction between maternal and paternal sides. The birth of children spells not only the transformation of spouses to parents but also the transformation of their genitors into grandparents. As explained earlier here, the advent of the generation of ‘grandparents’ brings about a distinction between paternal and maternal sides. Concisely, offspring are at the same time children to their parents and grandchildren to distinct sets of grandparents. Therefore, offspring come to embody both difference and unity between two disparate kin groupings.

The most salient characteristic of weddings in Huế is the enunciation of the two families as two distinct sides (*hai bên*). In this context, the two families are constituted as two separate houses (*nhà*): the boy’s (*nhà trai*) and the girl’s (*nhà gái*). Weddings are formulated as a series of continuous movements back and forth between these two ‘houses’, marked by ceremonial processions that signify reciprocal exchanges between the two families. Weddings are organised in two parts: a ceremony at the girl’s house (*vu quy*) and a subsequent ceremony at the boy’s house (*nhấn hôn*), where the two families entertain their respective kin. In the old days, the two occasions were organized separately whereby respective families announced the joyful event to their kin, on either side. In this context, *vu quy* preceded the wedding ritual, by a few days

or even weeks after which the actual wedding ritual (*nhấn hôn*) took place at the groom's house, often without the participation of the bride's family. Today, the two occasions are organized on the same day, with *vu quy* taking place in the morning and *nhấn hôn* following on. The two occasions are still hosted separately in respective houses, however they are marked by the presence of both families.

As the term suggests, *vu quy* is a 'stationary gathering', organized by the bride's family whereby both maternal and paternal relatives of the family gather to present their gifts to the couple. For these purposes, ancestral altars are carefully prepared as they become the focus of the event. The bride dressed in red *áo dài* (formal tunic) and yellow turban stands in front of the altar to receive gifts from her relatives in the form of money and jewelry, most notably gold. A feast often follows, whereby guests are served food and alcohol. Unlike the grand wedding feast (*nhấn hôn*) that follows at the groom's house, *vu quy* is considered a family-focused affair, marked by modesty and feelings of sadness and trepidation as the bride is soon to be parted from her family (see also Malarney 2002:162). Yet currently, *vu quy* are often ostentatious feasts, where the bride's family commits considerable resources and wealth. At the conclusion of *vu quy*, the bride's family receives the groom's family envoy who comes with gifts to take the bride to her new home.⁷ The gifts are placed before the ancestral altar, in front of which the prospective spouses kowtow, announce their forthcoming union requesting for permission and blessings. The propitiation of the ancestors in either house is an essential part of the wedding process, yet according to locals the marital union is sanctioned in front of the altar of the groom's forebears' who are thereafter become the patrilineal ancestors of the couple.

After the two houses and their representatives share tea and betel the two families jointly set out in procession to the groom's house. This procession - today most commonly by motor vehicles and preceded by hired photographers - is marked as an act of 'circuiting the bride' (*ruóc dâu*), to publicly mark her detachment from her natal house and incorporation to the new marital house. The bride's side is constituted as

⁷ In largely patrilocally based localities, the new couple most commonly stays with the groom's parents, in a purposely made room within the house. As houses become crowded by married siblings, married sons relocate with their young families in separate houses.

‘stationary’ side, set in motion by the groom’s kin group, who in turn move back and forth to incorporate the bride and establish the union. Subsequently the active side will become the male line and paternal side of the prospective family. On arrival at the house of the groom, the couple is positioned in front of the ancestral altar to kowtow while the groom’s family representative announces the marital union.

Throughout wedding rituals, in the context of *vu quy* as well as in *nhân hôn*, the two kin groupings, the girl’s and the boy’s families remain visibly separate, standing in cohorts opposite each other and accommodated at separate tables for the feast. While standing in front of ancestral altars in respective houses, the two families are positioned on either side of the altar: the groom’s family on the ‘left’ side associated with male and precedence, and the bride’s on the ‘right’, in turn associated with female and subordinate. The couple is positioned in the middle, mediating between the two sides. The distinction is further marked in feasts, at which the two kin groupings are accommodated at separate tables and according to age and genealogical order. Nonetheless, unlike ancestral anniversaries and propitiating rituals, in this context there is no gender segregation. The exchanges between the two families are coordinated by assigned mediators, who act as representatives of the respective families. Weddings and betrothals are effected by means of chosen representatives for the two families, who act as mediators and coordinators in a series of ceremonial exchanges. Mediators are often senior male kin or distant relatives who have presided over numerous weddings of children and grandchildren. In the context of *vu quy*, the two families also honour two celestial mediators, namely the ‘heavenly matchmakers’ (*ông bà tơ hồng*), a male and female spirit, who have predetermined and blessed the union. The heavenly matchmakers are propitiated in the context of *vu quy* where the bride’s family sets an outdoor makeshift shrine.⁸ Upon the arrival of the groom’s family their gifts are meticulously placed on this altar and the two male family heads share betel, areca and rice alcohol (*cau trầu rượu*) in the presence of both corporeal and non-corporeal matchmakers. As explained in chapter 4, *cau trầu rượu* are

⁸ Not all families are in favour of setting up shrines for the heavenly matchmakers. In many cases, gifts are placed instead on a table in front of the ancestral altar, in front of which family heads cordially engage.

essential gifts in matrimonial ritual exchanges, signifying the union of the couple as well as indispensable offerings in ancestral anniversaries. In either case, betel areca and alcohol are warm up gifts that seek to instigate communication and cordial encounters between disparate sides, be it prospective affines or living and dead kin.

Aside from the essential items of fresh betel and areca nut, the groom's family offers a series of gifts in the course of the wedding. As Malarney points (2002), before the 1950s a set of ceremonial meetings and exchanges preceded the wedding. Most of these preliminary exchanges have been abandoned as they fell into the 'bad customs' and 'backwards' categories.⁹ More particularly, according to Malarney (2002:159) socialist modernity has sought to abolish bridewealth (*thàch cưới*) construing it as an immoral practice, equivalent to 'selling' ones' children. *Thàch cưới*, given by the groom prior to the wedding, was the result of long and often delicate negotiations between the two families. According to Malarney (2002:160) it came in the form of a range of standardized items such as areca nuts, livestock (pigs), cooked pork, glutinous rice, tea, gold, money and cloth (see also Toan 1968:340-343). Despite the reforms, as Malarney notes, since the early 1990s wedding prestations re-emerged as essential in wedding practices (ibid. 167). Similarly in contemporary Huế, a series of essential items are an integral part of betrothals and weddings marking the series of exchanges and ceremonial encounters between the two families. Such items mark the engagement between the two sides and the gradual development of substantiated bonds.

In Huế, a series of ceremonial encounters and exchanges precede the wedding and seal the bond between the two families. Most notably, *lễ thăm* the first formal visit paid by the boy's family to the girl's house whereby the two families are formally acquainted. The boy's family carrying courteous gifts of fruits and sweet cakes – items which are often displayed on ancestral altars before being consumed - requests to set a date for the engagement (*lễ hỏi*). The girl's family returns the visit, upon invitation and reciprocates with similar gifts. The engagement takes place again at the girl's

⁹ The Law of Marriage and Family (1959) stipulated a series of changes; most notably the abolition of polygamy and the payment of bride price (see Malarney 2002:158).

house, whereby the boy and girl are pronounced as prospective spouses. Unlike the courteous introductory gifts exchanged between the two families in the context of initial encounters, the gifts proffered by the boy's family on this occasion are more substantial comparable to the gifts offered on the wedding day.

Except for warm up gifts such as betel-areca and rice alcohol, prestations here also include substantial amounts of cooked pork meat as well as 'husband and wife cakes' (*bánh phu thê*). Pork is an essential item in the context of family and ancestor propitiating rituals, marking commensality and exchanges among kin. However, the pork offered here is not consumed jointly by the two families. Instead, the pork as well as other gifts are used by the bride's family to hold a feast or distributed to relatives by way of announcing the happy event. On this occasion, the groom's house also offers a piece from a jewelry set to the bride to be, while the full set – commonly consisting of a gold necklace, earrings and bracelet - is offered on the day of the wedding. In case the marriage falls through these gifts have to be returned by the girl's family in full.

A month before the wedding, the two families meet again to agree on final wedding arrangements (*lễ thò ngôn*). On this occasion, the groom gives money to the bride to make new clothes, which she then carries with her to her new home on the day of the wedding. The suitcase with the clothes and the jewelry are the only item the bride brings along with her to her new home. The gifts ceremoniously carried by the groom's family on the wedding day sum up all the gifts offered so far by in-taking family, the groom's house. Such gifts include tea and sweet cakes, branches of fresh areca nut and betel leaves, rice alcohol, husband and wife cakes and parcels of pounded pork (*nêm, chả*) complemented with red candles, for the ancestral altar and the altar of the matchmakers.

In the context of weddings, the pork and the husband-and-wife cakes indicate the union of bride and groom and the two families. A few days after the wedding, the family of the groom along with the newly wed couple visit the bride's family with prestations, most commonly a pig's head, the most prized part of the animal. These prestations confirm the physical union of the couple. In the past, if the bride had not

provided with evidence of virginity, the pig's ear will be cut off (Malarney 2002:161). The anticipation of procreation and children are integral parts of wedding rituals. Images of hale and hearty toddlers – always in pairs of a boy and a girl – dominate wedding decorations, in either house. Similarly the presence of children is marked in processions between the two houses. In this context, the groom and the bride are always preceded by a pair of toddlers, clad in auspiciously colored red and yellow tunics and bearing red lanterns, to illumine the nuptial path. The birth of children consolidates connections and strengthens relations between the two houses, if only momentarily, as the difference is bound to reemerge in the form of grandchildren.

The difference between children and grandchildren is not only substantiated in temporal or generational terms but also in concurrent terms. Progeny are at the same time children (*con*), in relation to their parents and grandchildren (*cháu*) to grandparents as well as descendants to antecedent generations of lineal kin. Their reference and significance as either is essentially a matter of perspective. From the perspective of their parents, offspring are *con*, while from the perspective of the parents' parents they are *cháu*. Therefore, progeny encapsulate in tandem both unity and difference. In other words, *con* mark the connectivity between mother's and father's close kin, while *cháu* denote the distance between the two. *Cháu* maintain relations with grandparents as well as aunts and uncles on both sides. However they live with one set of grandparents, most commonly the paternal, while they visit the other.¹⁰ In this context, the maternal side falls outside both the house (*nhà*) and the larger family group or patrilineage (*họ*). Such distinctions become even more pronounced as children grow to maturity and marriageable age. Daughters or granddaughters are expected to leave their house in marriage, while eldest sons will inherit the main responsibility for caring for the elderly parents and paternal forbears, and younger sons will establish new houses. Thus, offspring not only create relatedness but equally bring disparity and divergence between the two sides. Further, procreation and producing offspring are the condition for the creation of relatedness

¹⁰ The distinction between the two sides persists even in the case where the couple resides at the maternal house, which was the case of my host family (see chapter 1). In these cases, relations with maternal kin are often characterized by closeness while relations with paternal kin become more formal, distant or even problematic.

based on alliance but also a precondition for relations based on descent. The existence and continuity of a descent grouping is itself contingent on the descendants marrying and procreating. Without children and thus descendants there can be no descent line, to undertake the responsibility for the care of common ancestors, ancestors become forgotten and descent groupings are disbanded or fading. Thus marriage is also a precondition for ancestorhood.

From nhà to nhà thờ: ancestral halls and the enhancement of houses

Marriage and procreation are pivotal not only in the configuration and transformation of houses but also descent groupings. They spell the creation of new households as well as the enhancement of existing ones, which in turn grow into small descent groupings. New houses are created as younger married sons leave their paternal house when it becomes ‘overcrowded’ to establish ‘separate houses’ (*nhà riêng*).¹¹ The eldest son – or in many cases the youngest – stays in the paternal house, as the custodian of ancestral assets and antecedent generations, responsibilities that he will later pass to his ‘eldest’. Hence the house is not only the milieu of bilateral connections but also the ‘basis for patrilineage segmentation’ (Luong 1984:302). As Luong astutely remarks, the house is the ‘subunit of *họ* or patrilineage’ (ibid. 297). With the advent of subsequent generations, houses fragment, disintegrate or become lineage segments. In the latter case the house (*nhà*) becomes an ancestral hall (*nhà thờ*), dedicated to the founding couple who then become originators of a lineage subgroup. *Nhà thờ*, literally ‘house of reverence’, is used to describe a series of dedicated halls, from dedicated altar rooms within houses that enshrine near generations of forbears to lineage and village temples dedicated to primordial ancestors. In any case,

¹¹ As explained in chapter 1, *nhà riêng* are dwellings established by a newly formed family, a married couple with their young children, and are erected on privately acquired land which is not part of the ancestral property.

nhà thờ are points of reference and orientation in localities, charting relations of descent and engagement with ancestral spirits at different levels.

During the course of my fieldwork, I strove to understand the differences between *nhà* and *nhà thờ* and the process through which antecedent generations of forebears were upgraded to higher ranks of ancestry, eventually becoming primordial ancestors of a local descent group or lineage. I was baffled and concerned about my understanding of distinctions between different categories of ancestors, how they were promoted from grandfathers to originators of descent groups and transferred physically or conceptually from one context to the other. Guided by my preconceptions of lineality and descent relations as linear progression, I was looking for evidence of transfer from *nhà* to *nhà thờ* that could involve transposing memorial tablets and incense burners. My conceptualization was even more puzzling to my interlocutors, who were nonetheless keen to come up with imaginative answers to such bizarre questions. Despite that I have not come across any movements or events whereby ancestors were literally transposed from one context to another. Yet, I undoubtedly witnessed the vehement renovation and enhancement of ancestral houses, whereby old structures were turned into dedicated ancestral halls, and new quarters were built adjacently for the living descendants. Out of these enhancements and renovations grew majestic ancestral altars and dedicated halls. In Việt Nam ancestral temples often grow out of houses, where the souls of the departed kin have lived and prospered. In other cases, purposely made halls are erected in ancestral plots bequeathed by the revered forbears and often in the vicinity of the house of a senior lineage member, who in turn often donates part of his ancestral land for these purposes. The fact that ancestors have inhabited the structure or the eldest descendant lived alongside was a prerequisite.

Two examples of newly founded *nhà thờ* at the village of Lương Nghi are most interesting here. A most striking case is that of an elderly man, *ông Tâm*, and his eldest son, members of the fourth in order lineage in the village. *Ông Tâm* had recently moved in with his son and his young family to a new two-storey house. Built on the same ancestral plot, the new house served as an extension of the old house, literally leaning against the lateral walls of the original structure, in turn founded and

inhabited by the elder man's parents, now deceased great grandparents. As *ông Tâm* approached the end of his ninth decade, father and son jointly undertook the task of elevating the old humble structure and turning it into a splendid *nhà thờ*. The epic task involved literally 'lifting' the old structure from the low rear grounds of the ancestral plot - where it was lurking eclipsed by the shadow of new two-storey edifice - and fitting it onto new elevated foundations on the front part of the plot. Thus a new frame for the old structure was made complete with an impressive dragon decorated roof befitting eminent ancestral halls. As *ông Tâm* explained, upon completion of the construction, the ancestral altar dedicated to the great-grandparents would be installed in the middle section along with flanking altars for their descendants.

In a different hamlet on the other side of the village, *ông Bạc* along with his married sons were seeing to the completion of a less structurally imposing but equally significant ancestral hall. *Ông Bạc* who was also a member of the fourth lineage and master of ceremonies since village rituals resumed in the early 1990s, spent a considerable part of his time around the newly constructed hall seeing to finishing touches on the altars inside as well as to the asphaltting of the road outside that separated the *nhà thờ* from the house of *ông Bạc*. The *nhà thờ* was what he and his wife called the 'origin house' (*nhà gốc*) or 'main house', the house of the paternal side where the couple has lived with their young children. The youngest out of seven brothers - all the rest of whom fought and perished in the recent war - *ông Bạc* deserted the army to return to the village and care for his bereaved parents. Fathering many children himself he later moved to a new house a few yards away. After the death of his parents, he often slept at the paternal house in order, as his wife maintained, to guard and protect it from thievery and malicious influences. Yet after collapsing with a heart attack while alone in the house, he was persuaded by his family to abandon his overnight stays. Subsequently his eldest married son went on to build a residence for his family next to the 'origin house' within the same ancestral plot. Soon after his son moved in the new house, *ông Bạc* along with the rest of his sons set out to renovate the 'origin house' and turn it into an ancestral hall. This hall enshrined his parents, paternal uncles and some of his brothers who had perished in the war while later, upon their death, *ông Bạc* and his wife would also find their place here

contributing to the enhancement of this emerging descent grouping. This newly founded ancestral hall, like others around the village, are not idle places of adulation, but rather sociable places, where fathers, sons, siblings and daughters in-law gather and interact in the context of the everyday. In this particular case, an ample extension to the hall was built as fully equipped classroom where daughters-in-law held tutoring classes for village schoolchildren.¹²

Most commonly, ancestral halls are established on the very land or structure where antecedent generations of forebears have lived, thrived and died. In *Lưỡng Nghi*, ancestral halls are most commonly found next to or in the vicinity of the house of a senior descendant, who in turn, acts as sponsor or guardian of the communal property that is the temple. That is the case of older *nhà thờ* around the village, which were purposely made as dedicated temples on lineally bequeathed land. Built during the brief booming spell of the early 1960s, today these halls stand as sub-lineage (*phái*) halls, that belong to the first (Nguyễn) and third in order lineages. Until recently, the remaining village lineages, which are thought to be less populous or dispersed, only had a lineage altar at the communal seven lineage hall.¹³ Currently a number of groupings are increasingly engaging with the establishment of new smaller order halls and thus the emergence of smaller order lineage subgroups such as *kinh* and *nhanh*. These halls emerge out of houses or on land where ancestors have lived and in some cases descendants still inhabit. In the latter case, the original structure is painstakingly renovated and turned into a shrine, dedicated to the founders and the ensuing generations, where guests and relatives are received on ritual occasions. In the case of new *nhà thờ* modest quarters are built alongside the temple to house the agnate that hence acts as guardian to the temple and his family. In many cases this is a way for a junior or less advantaged agnate to acquire a private house. Most of the newly established *nhà thờ* are of small order lineage segments, which locals often cannot clearly fit into the given categories of sub-lineage divisions. Thus, in most cases, the

¹² The ancestral hall of an eminent regent in a different locality served the descendants' professional activities, functioning as local bureau for the granddaughter's embroidery business as well as a reception for her hotelier business (see chapter 6).

¹³ The second in order lineage has no sub-lineage hall as most of its living members have fled abroad, mainly in the U.S. The few remaining descendants actively participate in communal rituals held at the temple of the seven lineages.

interested locals were keen to discuss the structural details and intricate decorations of the halls or the ancestors enshrined and their intimate relations and connections to them, but less keen to discuss how that fitted in the grand scheme of lineage subdivisions. Some more bold, like the wife of *ông* Bạc would proudly state that their new hall was like a 'private lineage hall' and equal in significance to the lineage shrine set in the communal hall of the seven village lineages.

Although ancestral halls currently grow out of past inhabited spaces there is certainly a difference in escalation between *nhà* and *nhà thờ* and a marked difference in relations with the enshrined dead. This escalation is physically manifest in altar arrangements as ancestral altars grow in number capacity in the context of ancestral halls. In houses, there is one ancestral altar placed in the 'middle' of the main house and forming the perceived core of the house. This middle altar enshrines antecedents of up to the second ascending generation, i.e., the generation of *ông bà cha mẹ* (parents and grandparents). Ancestral halls - either established as part of domestic space or as separate temples - enshrine antecedents beyond the second ascending generation such as *ky* (great grandfather) and *ông cáo* (great great grandfather). Ancestral halls are most commonly furnished with three distinct altars in standing order: middle (*giữa*), left (*trai*) and right (*phải*). The flanking altars accommodate succeeding generations of the founding couple who are in turn enshrined in the middle. This arrangement hinges on fundamental distinctions on the basis of generation and relations of descent and the requisite that ancestry is accommodated separately according to seniority and status in the nether realm (see chapter on funerals). Hence, originators remains in the middle, often joined by their male progeny and his spouse, through whom linear progression of the group is traced, while the grandchildren of originators and subsequent generations of progeny are placed on the left and right altars respectively. Although the 'middle' is a fixed point in space the existence and status of the spirit cohorts it enshrines are continuously changing and developing. This development is effected by means of passing generations and the growth of kin groupings through marriage and procreation. As the side altars grow in capacity, with more descending generations added in the ancestral cohorts, the

existence and status of centrally placed ancestors are enhanced. Concisely, the expansion of ancestral altars in number and capacity highlights the transformation of the house both as a structure and a kin grouping whereby *nhà* are turned into *nhà thờ* and bilaterally formed families into descent clusters.

Ancestral halls and communal anniversaries: ngày chạp and hiệp kỳ

Merging and rewriting genealogies as well as forgetting are all part of the commemorative process in Huế. Difference in scale between disparate order descent groups, and movement from lower subdivisions such as *nhánh* and *chi* to *phái* (sub-lineage), *họ* (lineage) and even supra-local clan formations (*tộc*) signify transformations in relations and ways of engagement with related dead. Such disparities are reflected in the arrangement of respective shrines as well as the ritual practices organised around them. In the context of the house, tending to departed kin is not only a case of intermittingly arranged formal rituals but also a constant occurrence, whereby incense and light are offered daily. Furthermore, in this context, all enshrined forebears have an individual censer and memorial tablet and are honoured individually in annual ancestral anniversaries (*ngày giỗ*). In turn, ancestral temples, standing as separate dedicated halls, are attended on specific calendric occasions such as the various *tết* (lunar calendar festivities), the winter solstice (*đông chi*) as well as on assigned communal rituals for the collective propitiation of all antecedents. Unlike intimate dead dwelling on house and low order altars, forebears of more distant generations enshrined in higher order halls, most commonly have ‘collective anniversaries’ (*ngày chạp*). Death anniversaries might yet occur, especially in the context of newly established *nhánh* halls, where second or third ascending generations might be placed. Nonetheless, such instances are disfavoured as they contravene the unanimity among members of the grouping that the hall purports to establish (see below here).

Ngày chạp is synonymous with collective and joint propitiation of ancestral souls, organised at all disparate levels and halls. *Chạp* is an abbreviated reference to the twelfth lunar month (*tháng chạp*), a time when locals largely engage in tending the ancestral graves and altars of both near and distant generations of antecedents, whereby one might join in clearing the graves of village and lineage founders or his *phái* and *chi* enclaves and will also duly tend to his entombed parents and grandparents. Throughout this month elders and junior members – the latter recruited to perform the menial task of weeding the graves - go around burial places to ‘tidy up the graves’ (*tảo mộ*) of antecedents. A specific day assigned within this month, *ngày chạp* is an occasion of collective worship organized separately in each respective hall and beyond the constraints of the twelfth lunar month. Each lineage and sub-group assigns a distinct date for *ngày chạp*, which most commonly is the anniversary of the most senior ancestor in the group, i.e., the founder. In the village, the anniversary of the founder of the first lineage (Nguyễn) has been assigned as *ngày chạp* whereby all seven lineages that make up the village gather to collectively propitiate the lineage founders and their sons, in turn founders of their sub-lineages (as it will be discussed later here). The founder is an emblematic figure that stands for the unity of the ancestry and group.

Ngày chạp can also be organised on the completion of a new ancestral hall, often planned to coincide either with the anniversary of the group originator or the Lunar New Year. Such was the case in the newly established *nhành* hall of the local Nguyễn lineage.¹⁴ The ritual was lead by the elderly head of the group, *ông Toan*, who was elected as head despite being a descendant of the youngest son of the originator and thus genealogically junior. In his words, the hall is dedicated to *ông cáo* (great great grandfather), placed in the middle altar, *ông bà cố* (great grandparents) and *ông bà nội*, sitting jointly on the ‘left’ altar, and *đích tôn* (eldest grandson) on the ‘right’ side.¹⁵ The hall was built on the plot owned by the sons of *đích tôn*, thus the most

¹⁴ Nguyễn is the most common family name in Việt Nam. The Nguyễn lineage in the village is entirely different from the royal Nguyễn clan, in turn examined in the following chapter. Nonetheless both claim origin from the same north central province of *Thanh Hoá*.

¹⁵ This arrangement was to be revised a few months later, as the enshrinement of *đích tôn*, was deemed as divisive and inappropriate by other members of the group. Not only because *đích tôn* was a near generation that belonged to a domestic altar but also because his placement in the hall was predicated

senior living descendants. On the right side of the elevated hall, the eldest brother built a lower lying and humble house for his family, while the front part of the plot was jointly used by the brothers as a garden plot to grow vegetables. On completion of the temple, the newly active *nhanh* organised a *ngày chap*, tending with an abundance of votive offerings and consumables to all the souls enshrined in the hall. As customary, participants came to kowtow before all three altars of the hall and seat in feast after incense had burned. Sitting arrangements revealed a clear order: the elder descendants and their wives (daughters-in-law of the revered) inside the temple, on tables leaning against the 'left' and 'right' altars respectively and the rest outside on the temple porch. This is a customary arrangement in all ritual feasts, whereby participants are accommodated according to gender, age and generational status. In this case, sitting order and positioning inside or outside the temple further signified diverse and bilateral connections between living participants and the revered dead.

In *ngày chap* and rituals at the village, lineage and sub-lineage levels partakers are patrilineal, senior descendants (above the age of sixty), excluding all others, such as junior and unmarried male members or the ones without grandchildren - who usually observe from the fringes - as well as women and multilaterally related kin. However, in the context of *nhanh*, *kinh* or even *chi* participation is more open and inclusive, counting, wives, daughters-in-law and laterally connected kin. In this case, female kin - who in the context of village and lineage rituals are restricted in preparing the offerings for the feast - were actively involved in the ritual; prostrating as wives of the descendants and thus, daughters-in-law to the paternal ancestors. Unmarried and married daughters of descendants, the latter along with their husbands and children, participated in the feast, taking their rightful place at the tables outside the temple. In the words of the elder head, this was an occasion where 'both sides' (*hai bên*) participated, both paternal and maternal kin. In this context, the narrow generational gap and proximity between antecedents and their living descendants allows a broad set of kin to be brought together. As we move up in the ranks of ancestry, descent groupings and halls, this broad encompassment ebbs away. In sub-lineage (*phái*) and

on the exclusion of other forebears who were his 'younger brothers'.. After the end of mourning for their mother the two brothers, moved their 'father' to the house, on the newly established ancestral altar alongside his wife.

lineage (*họ*) formations, the emphasis shifts to the male originator and from the conjugal union and its procreative potential to the parent-child relation, as the basis for the formation of correlations affinities. Arrangements of the altars within the hall also point to similar differences relevant to scale and rank. *Ông bà* (grandparents) and *ông bà cố* (great-grandparents) are installed on the altar as ‘husband and wife’. On the next ascending generation, male ancestors who belong to the ranks of *cáo* (high order) are enshrined as a pair of father and son. On higher levels, wives, mothers, and daughters might be excluded and multi-lateral connections severed yet the encompassing dimension of altars emerges in yet another form.

In ancestral halls, the high altar where the originator is placed stands in the middle while two flanking altars are placed to the ‘left’ and ‘right’ of it. The flanking altars are jointly dedicated to the ‘children’ and ‘grandchildren’ of the originator (left altar) and all subsequent generations (right altar). In some cases the biographies, identities and genealogical connections of these children and grandchildren are known and thus individual tablets and censers mark their presence on the altar. This is possible in lower order groupings such as *kinh* or *chi* – whereby links to the originator are more or less traceable, through known ancestors - or smaller and more cohesive *phái* (sub-lineage). But most commonly, in higher order halls, (*chi*, *phái* and *họ*), where many generations have elapsed, individual links in the chain of descent are compromised, lost or forgotten. In this context, only originators (*thủy tổ*) have individual tablets and censers on the middle altar while ensuing generations rest jointly on flanking altars furnished with ‘communal censers’ (*bát nhang chung*). Thus communal censers are shared among cohorts of ancestral souls, some of which escape the obscurity of joint censers as they are reinstated as founders and forerunners of subsequent order groups and thus individually enshrined in respective halls. Others though might be forgotten, their identities and fate only dimly recalled.

Hence, in many *phái* halls around the village, lateral altars are also furnished with additional communal censers, shared among less known ancestors whose identities have been compromised by the lack of children or recorded genealogies and thus forgotten. According to active group members, such censers are indistinctly dedicated to less fortunate ancestral souls, who are ‘without known name and age’ (*tên tuổi*),

‘without children’ (*vô tử*) and concisely, ancestors whose identities somehow sank into the depths of forgetfulness (*không nhớ*). Such fate is comparable to the misfortunes of ‘lost souls’ who have gone astray (see chapter 3). Yet here, the fractional or forgotten identities of forebears do not result in their infringement or exclusion from the ranks of ancestry but rather spell their incorporation into higher order descent groups. Unlike house and small order groupings, populous *phái* and *ho* groups are fittingly equipped to deal with ambiguous dead and even dispel their plights. Their ability to appease mislaid spirits of forerunners and lift them from the depths of forgetfulness is predicated upon the merits of their magnitude and vast resources, which can be mobilized for apposite rituals. As locals often remarked in the context of funerary rituals, the more relatives gather to pray for newly or unfortunate dead, the more audible and potent their voices will sound and hence, the more compelling and effective their prayers. A Buddhist head nun offered an example to illustrate the importance of large prayer assemblies for unfortunate souls, caught up in distressing worlds. If someone is summoned by the police for an offence, the more relatives vouch for him the more his chances in atonement or release. In the context of higher order groups, it is not only the masses of living and dead members that can be mobilized but also the valuable assistance of the highest and most efficacious ranks of ancestry, the founders and originators.

Such is the case of two exceptional anniversaries, known as *hiệp kỳ*, purporting to collectively propitiate all the unidentified souls in the context of a lineage (*họ*) and a sub-lineage group (*phái*) respectively. Taking place within the same lunar year and they were the first *hiệp kỳ*, to be openly held since the advent of the revolution (1975).¹⁶ *Hiệp kỳ* which can be translated as ‘encompassing’ are remembrance rituals that reach out to all the mislaid and forgotten souls within the group, who due to unpropitious death or lack of posterity have fallen on the edges of the circumference of known ancestries. Unlike individual (*ngày kỵ*) or collective death anniversaries (*ngày chạp*), *hiệp kỳ* are performed irregularly as the identities of these ancestral souls and their all-important dates of death are unknown. In 2005, a subsequent segment of the third local lineage - which had lost many members in the first and second Indochina

¹⁶ In solar year terms, the rituals took place in 2005 and 2006 respectively.

wars - organized a grandiose *hiệp kỳ*. The ritual was organized around the newly established *phái* hall and was dedicated to all past generations of unidentified and displaced souls descended from the originator of the group (*thủy phái*). It occurred soon after the group has undertaken the construction of two lavish tombs, one for *thủy phái* and an adjacent one for his eldest son. Photos of both tombs and the widely attended *hiệp kỳ* were subsequently displayed on the lateral walls of the new hall. With the coming of the mid point (*rằm*) of the worshipful twelfth month (*chạp*), the fourth lineage held a striking *hiệp kỳ* on a grander scale, organised around the lineage shrine.¹⁷ The fourth in order lineage had many members who had perished in the recent war as well as valuable genealogical records long lost. In dealing with the masses of drifting souls of forerunners and their overwhelming plights, descendants enlist the assistance of the most eminent and powerful members in the group: the lineage founder (*thủy tổ*) and his eldest son, in turn founder of the first sub-lineage (*thủy phái*). The founder of the lineage was also one of the celebrated seven village founders (*khai canh*), and thus a notable figure and certified tutelary spirit by royal decree (sitting among the other village founders at the village temple (*đình*)). His son, also recognized by the court for his merits and contribution to the establishment of the village, was enshrined in the dedicated hall of the first *phái*. The two primordial souls are evoked not only on the basis of their lofty rank and pre-eminence in realm of spirits - and thus their power and efficacy - but also as the primordial pair of father and son, from whom all subsequent generations have descended. Thus they are the most fitting candidates for the task of recognizing, addressing mislaid ancestral souls and mediating between them and their worshipful living descendants.

The occasion spanned three distinct sacred sites and shrines: the high altar of the consecrated village council at the communal temple (*đình*), the lineage and sub-lineage halls. This altar as well as a series of essential ritual items was borrowed from the *đình*, such as the wooden phoenixes and ceremonial weapons flanking the altar - indispensable auxiliaries of high altars dedicated to high-ranking mandarins and court approved spirits - and the palanquin used to transport tutelary spirits in the village

¹⁷ The first (*mong môt*) and the fifteenth (*rằm*) of each lunar month correspond to the waning and waxing phases of the moon, a time when locals tend to all spirits, both of human and heavenly origin and in an array of contexts including houses, ancestral halls, pagodas and sidewalks (see chapter 1).

grand ceremony. The ritual began with the preparing of altars and decorating of the lineage temple (*nha tho ho*), with red and yellow banners discernibly announcing the event, to all visible and invisible by-passers. Then participants walked to the sub-lineage hall, on the other edge of the hamlet, to ceremoniously evoke the spirit of *thuy phái*. His 'Excellency' (*ngai*) was then transported back to the lineage hall, in a stately procession, carrying his censer and royal certificates on a red lacquered palanquin. As the distinguished father and son are joined, participants resumed rituals for the propitiation of less recognized kin. The form and sequence of the ritual was comparable to regular worship for lineage and village founders held at this very lineage temple – part of the communal seven lineage temple - and the adjacent *dinh*. However, this ritual sought to propitiate less known and familiar forerunners and thus the focus shifted from the high indoor altars and the sanctified interior to the temple yard outdoors, where forgotten souls were likely to wander off. The main altar was placed in the middle of the ample yard - covered with a makeshift roof for the purposes - aligned with the high altar indoors, in turn dedicated to the primordial ancestor and his sons. After tending to the plighted souls with copious offerings in show of care and support, the distinguished ancestors were reverently sent off, and their censers and titles were returned to their rightful place. Fifteen days later, they would be evoked again, this time in celebration of the Lunar New Year with ancestral worship.

What becomes apparent in these *hiệp kỳ* is that despite their fragmentary and severed biographies, forgotten and ambiguous forerunners form an integral part of populous and active lineage and sub-lineage groups. And thus in this context, the forgotten are an integral part of genealogical formations, celebrated ancestries and the commemorative process. As shown in chapter 3, care for unrelated lost souls and unfortunate dead is among the primary tasks and responsibilities that define local descent groups and communities as much as the care for well-known ancestors. The village and lineage as ritual communities are defined by their ability to care for the welfare of both distinguished ancestries and ambiguous, forgotten or even unrelated spirits. The latter are not only a constant threat but also a positive affirmation of their existence, scale and capacities. Furthermore, communal censers and anniversaries

signify the encompassment of forgotten ancestors and missing links in defined genealogies and thus disremembering as integral part of the commemorative process. Missing links and disremembering is in many cases due to the lack or loss of concise genealogical records. After all, historically it was only elite and noble lines that kept detailed genealogical records and commissioned writings of historical annals. Therefore, remembering is not an all-encompassing process that stretches perpetually or incorporates indistinguishably. Rather it is a process of ranking, elimination and exclusion, whereby preeminence and distinction are essential criteria in determining membership and inclusion. Even when genealogies are known and well-recorded as in the case of royal Nguyễn clan, it is the most eminent members of the line, the members of the clan that became kings that are individually enshrined and propitiated in individual anniversaries (see next chapter). Even so, the anniversary dedicated to the first Nguyễn king (Gia Long) is an occasion for the collective remembrance of all subsequent generations of kings, who have descended from Gia Long. As discussed earlier here, generational and relational proximity are pivotal in the context of the house, while preeminence becomes relevant in the case of higher order groups and particularly at the lineage level. This is evident in the communal temple of the seven village lineages, dedicated exclusively to the founders of the village and the local lineages.

Elder and younger brothers: local lineages and hierarchy

The temple of the seven lineages (*nhà thờ bảy họ*) - according to locals the oldest standing ancestral hall in the locality – is today the focus of village ritual and religious activities. It houses the souls of the village founding settlers, the founders of the seven local lineages. It is situated alongside the village communal temple (*đình*), which has historically been the sacred and administrative core of the village - sheltering the assembly of court decreed tutelary spirits and the acting village council of notables. Aligned with the ‘feudal past’, many *đình* around the country came under fire in the

course of the early socialist reform and became a major target for the revolutionary anti-superstition campaign. In this context, *đình* were ravaged, desecralised, turned into granaries and later into ‘cultural centers’ for local communities (see Malarney 2002). Surviving major structural damage, the village *đình* was added in 1993 to the list of cultural monuments (*di tích văn hoá*) and proclaimed a Ho Chi Minh monument related to his early childhood, and therefore came under the management of the homonymous museum in Huế (see chapter 7). But while today the *đình* is attended in ritual only on the grand village occasion of the ‘autumn sacrifice’ (*Le Thu Te*), performed roughly every three years, the seven lineage hall opens its doors on a series of occasions marking the lunar annual cycle, such as the lunar New Year, on certain *rằm* (lunar midmonth), on other occasions that mark the agricultural cycle such as the winter solstice (*đông chí*), as well as anniversaries dedicated to individual lineage founders.¹⁸ Today all these have become occasions to propitiate and commemorate the seven distinguished founders and their meritorious feats in establishing the local lineages and the village.

The ornate hall is built in the outstanding style of *nhà rường* (kingpost house), which is distinctively associated with the Nguyễn dynasty and imperial Huế. Unique in its size and magnitude within the province, it is arranged in seven compartments (*gian*), separated by means of a row of kingposts.¹⁹ Locals take pride in the distinctiveness of the hall and point to its similarities with the temple of the Nguyễn kings in the imperial citadel in Huế. As leading and active members of the lineages remark, the hall has been fashioned after the renowned royal temple, more particularly duplicating the arrangement and order of the altars. Each of the seven compartments has one high altar, a red lacquered golden gilded altar - fit for kings and high ranking mandarins - where lineage founders are placed in a prescribed order. This is the order whereby a mid point is appointed as the highest ranking, while left and right sides

¹⁸ The village autumn sacrifice resumed only recently (2000) after decades of disruption due to war and as a result of the state’s anti-superstition campaigns. Since then it has been performed once every three years (2003 and 2006). The ritual is organized over the course of three days, whereby villagers first duly propitiated the village sacred council (*Hoi Dong*) at the *đình* and then turn to the adjacent temple of the seven lineages (*nhà thờ bay họ*) to propitiate lineage founders.

¹⁹ In the neighbouring village each lineage has a separate hall while in other localities around the province there might be a communal hall for three or four local lineages.

assign subsequent ranks (see chapter 1). In the middle compartment of the hall stands the altar of the founder of the first local lineage while to its 'left' – from the perspective of the most senior enshrined ancestor - is the altar of the second in order lineage and to its 'right' the third lineage. Subsequent in order lineages are placed by alternating movement to the left and right sides expanding outwards from the appointed centre, and in a manner such that lower in order lineages are found to the 'right side' of their seniors and to the 'left' of their subordinates.

This order of lineages is associated with the order in which they first arrived in the locality and progressively established the village. The founding of the village is situated historically in the late 15th century (circa 1471), a time when the Đại Việt kingdom was expanding southwards breaching into the territories of the kingdom of Champa, eventually leading to their demise of the latter (see introduction). The year 1471 was the year of the decisive battle, whereby the Viet gave the final blow to the Chams. In the following years the Viet tried to consolidate the newly acquired territories by setting up 'colonies of soldiers-turned-farmers' (Guillon 2001:20). The founders of the local lineages are described as distinguished mandarins and 'generals' that came and 'opened fresh ground' (*khai khẩn*), hence contributing to the establishment of Vietnamese settlements and villages. Thus all lineage founders are commonly referred to as *khai canh* (settlers, founders). The first to arrive in the locality was the founder of the local Nguyen lineage, then, the others came later, in the above mentioned order. He is described as a distinguished courtier, a man of titles and prowess that has performed the most meritorious feat (*công đức*) of all in the locality: first breaking into fresh ground and opening the way for the establishment of the village. Holding the highest merit and rank among the founding settlers and first in the order of local lineages, his is not only centrally placed in the communal hall but also at the village *đình* as member of the consecrated council along with other tutelary spirits.

The other founders (*khai canh*) that arrived later expanded the settlement by means of setting up new hamlets and thus also hold merit (*công đức*) with the village; nonetheless their meritorious contributions are lesser in significance and valor. This order of merit signifies the order of seniority among lineages. Like the Nguyễn founder, they have been awarded honorary titles by successive Nguyễn kings and

some appointed as guardian spirits of specific hamlets (*phuong*), where many of their descendants are congregated. This is the case for the founder of the fifth lineage who is enshrined in a dedicated temple in the village's northern hamlet and stands as the hamlet's guardian spirit. This order of merit, whereby dignified men are celebrated for their noble acts for the 'greater good of the community', posthumously awarded with titles and royal certificates, is closely associated with the organization of the imperial courts. More particularly, the Nguyen court was very active in awarding such tutelary certificates in villages until its fall in the mid-twentieth century.

Aside from this order of merit, the hierarchical order of lineages and their standing in the village is reflected in their magnitude, the number of lineage subdivisions and their active populace who contribute and participate in communal rituals organised at the locality. The last in order lineage, has a marginal presence in village rituals with only a handful of elders attending. Villagers pointed out that the seventh lineage did not have ancestral halls – other than this lineage altar – or active sub-branches because it was only a 'small lineage', with limited number of descendants, resources and scope. The limited scope of descendants and resources was both a sign and the effect of their pettiness (see also Errington 1983). All these become apparent in communal rituals organised at the hall, where participating descendants stand and prostrate themselves before their own lineage altar. In every ritual occasion, participants kowtow simultaneously to their own lineage founder, under the directions of the appointed master of ceremonies who in turn, always stands in front of the altar of the most senior ancestor, the founder of the local Nguyễn lineage. The only exception is the village autumn sacrifice, at which all gathered participants of different lineages prostrate themselves to all village spirits and all *khai cảnh* interchangeably in order of their rank. In the context of this grand ritual, tutelary spirits from all different corners of the village are gathered to be collectively propitiated, over the course of three days. First villagers gather all tutelary spirits at the *đình*, and the consecrated council is duly propitiated, sacrificing a golden male cattle. Each spirit is transferred separately, in flamboyant parade and on a royal palanquin that makes countless rounds moving back and forth to the *đình*, until all spirits have been assembled. Subsequently, the acting

ceremonial council of the seven lineages attends to the needs of the seven founders with sacrifice of piglets.

In the pre-revolutionary context, the village was united around the *đình*, the abode of local tutelary spirits. Today, the village as a ritual community is unified around the most senior ancestor in the locality, the Nguyen founder, who is often described as *anh cả* (the eldest of all brothers). In Việt Nam, children and siblings are clearly positioned in an order based on gender, age, and birth order. Thus in Huế, they distinguish between the first born child (*con so*) and the rest of subsequent birth order (*con ra*). The eldest child is also called *đệ nhất*, (first born) and the second (*đệ nhì*) while the eldest son is also called *con ca*. Similarly, siblings are differentiated as *anh* (older brother), *chị* (older sister) and *em* (younger siblings). As apparent from the latter term, the emphasis is on the hierarchy based on age and birth order rather than gender difference, as younger sisters and brothers are grouped together. Siblingship denotes a set of hierarchical relations rather than one of similarity or equality. Parents have different expectations of younger and older siblings. Older children are expected to protect and constantly care for their younger siblings, feeding them, scolding them and monitoring their behavior and progress. Using the term *anh cả* to refer to the Nguyen founder and *em* as a collective reference to the rest of the founders, locals put the emphasis on the hierarchical disparity among the founders rather than their confluence. Relations between or within lineages, are not described in terms of 'brotherhood' as in the case of some Chinese villages (Watson 1985). Parity and equality in Huế are expressed using the term 'classmates' that denotes same, parallel generations, while siblings and in particular 'brothers' denote hierarchy.

In Việt Nam, relations within lineages and their various sub-divisions as well as among different lineages are not perceived or described in terms of siblingship but rather in terms of different or common ancestry. Relations of descent are explicated in terms of the father-son pairs. Locals often explained the formation and intricate divisions within lineages by reference to this pivotal relation. Thus, for example a lineage founder is the 'father' and his 'sons' are the sub-lineage divisions, whereby the eldest spells the formation of the first in order sub-lineage (*phái nhất*), the second of the second order sub-lineage (*phái nhì*) and so on. In the words of an elder - who has

served as a long standing village head in the pre-revolutionary administration - *chi* sub-division (next in order after *phái*) starts with the birth of the son of the sub-lineage founder (*thầy phái*), while *kinh* (the next in order sub-division) starts with the son of the founder of *chi*.

Conclusion

In her influential study on Chinese kinship and class formation, Rubie Watson (1985:4) argues that ‘despite the amount of research that has been done on Chinese lineage - and given the class-based nature of Chinese society - the relationship between class and system of descent has remained largely unexplored’. Watson’s Marxist analysis draws attention to the intricate links between kinship, economic division and inequality. Yet she contrasts kinship and class, pointing to how lineage ideas of brotherhood, sharing and cooperation have obscured inequalities among agnates. In Việt Nam and more particularly in Huế, disparity, and marked hierarchy are integral parts of the process of forming relations of kinship and descent. It is precisely hierarchical differences that bring together agnates forming a context within which kin identify their place in the group while recognizing and accounting for the rank and standing of others. Disparity in terms of gender, age and generation defines relations within a series of contexts, from houses to lineage and clan groupings whereby kin and agnates are defined as ‘parent’ and ‘child’, ‘older’ and ‘younger’ sibling, ‘genitor’ and ‘descendant’. Thus, inequality among agnates or brothers is not a paradox of kinship but the basis for forming such relations and descent groupings.

The transformative process whereby bilateral relations are transposed into unilateral connections is neither instantaneous nor unequivocal. Furthermore, bilateral connections with kin persist beyond death. Lower order altars enshrine ancestral couples rather than male forbears and thus often entail the participation of ‘both sides’ of kin, the maternal and the paternal. Conversely, it is in higher order altars and halls that male forebears are enshrined as originators of a descent grouping or lineage. In

rituals locals often engage with dead kin with whom they are lineally or nonlinearly related. Such encompassing relational cycles suggest a broader and more inclusive reckoning of kinship and relatedness, punctuated as much by duties of propitiation as by exchange of valuables and blessings. This reckoning in the context of Việt Nam, suggest a new reading of the so called 'two sides of kinship', one that is not predicated upon an emphasis on either cognatic or unilateral reckonings of kinship but rather hinges on the symbiosis of two ontologically different sides of kin, namely the dead and the living.

Chapter 6

A former imperial capital in the present: Huế, former emperors and extraordinary ancestors

'For the state they are past emperors for us they are family ancestors'

(Guardian at a royal family gravesite)

Former emperors as exceptional dead

During my fieldwork as I began looking into Hue's royal past and its pertinence in the present I was introduced to a Vietnamese fellow researcher, *chị* Loan, who was herself conducting research on a similar topic.¹ *Chị* Loan was a senior affiliate at the Huế monument Conservation Center (HMCC) which manages the former imperial sites and coordinates research and restoration projects, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. As she explained, her research examined 'royal rituals' in a comparative perspective and more particularly between two significant periods: before the fall of the monarchy (before 1945), and from 1989 onwards, when rituals for former kings resumed in royal temples after decades of disruption. Her main research question, as she put it, was why these formerly 'state rituals', which had been the 'basis of the monarchy's legitimacy' were revived in the context of *đổi mới* reforms.² More particularly, why and how had such rituals recently moved from a 'private' context, conducted by descendants in houses and former princely estates after the fall of the monarchy, to an 'open' and 'public' domain reclaiming the citadel and royal tombs as ancestral sites.

This chapter takes a similar interest on the current surge in ritual practices pertaining to former kings and members of the Nguyễn dynasty, who ruled the country for more than a century (1802-1945) with Huế as the capital. However, I do not

¹ As noted in the introduction, throughout the thesis I use the appropriate personal pronouns when referring to my Vietnamese friends and informants. *Chị* means 'older sister'.

² Her research was conducted in affiliation with a foreign University and funded by the Rockefeller Trust.

emphasise distinctions such as ‘state’ and ‘family’, ‘public’ and ‘private’, which contemporary studies of Việt Nam have dwelled upon. Rather than examining practices relating to former kings as ritualized re-inventions associated with shifts in political economy I look into these practices as efforts in reinstating forebears in apposite realms and re-establishing connections with highly potent ancestral spirits.

A series of contemporary anthropological studies of Việt Nam have been largely concerned with changes during the country’s recent history, shifts in political economy and their impact on ritual practices. Such studies have been concerned with ‘how war, revolution and reform’ have shaped commemoration practices and ritual engagement with the dead, be it kin and intimates or the imagined ancestry of the nation (Jellema 2007:467). In this context, state control over sacred space and ritual practices has been the main analytical focus and rituals have been examined in terms of hegemony and resistance, empowerment and contestation (Endres 1998, 2001; Malarney 2002, 2007; Phạm 2005). Malarney has extensively fathomed the effects of both socialist modernity (1996, 2002) and post-socialist reforms (2003, 2007) on local ritual practices. In his influential ethnography of a northern village (2002) he examines the vigorous state efforts to transform the meaning and practice of funerals and weddings during the early stages of socialist reform. Malarney argues about the partial success of this project and the ‘limits of state functionalism’ and conversely points to ‘multivocality’ in the late socialist context (1996). Further studies have pointed to a rift between ‘state’ and ‘family’ practices, between state efforts to secularise and simplify ritual practices, divesting them of mystical, supernatural and agonistic aspects and local practices, which in turn accounted for moral obligations towards the dead. This distinction between ‘state’ and ‘family’ practices, politically savvy ‘officials’ and ordinary ‘locals’ has been further highlighted in the post-socialist context.³

A series of studies, undertaken mainly in the North and South, have drawn attention to the weakening of official control and an ensuing resurgence in commemoration practices as a result of *đổi mới* policies. Anthropological as well as

³ In examining ‘cultural change’ in contemporary Việt Nam, Malarney (2002) draws a clear distinction between ‘pre-reform’ (1954-1986) and post-reform era (1986 onwards). The former is closely associated with extensive state control over cultural practices, the latter with increasing ‘liberalization’ and a popular surge in ritual practices.

historical studies have pointed to a ‘ritual resurgence’ sweeping across the country (Tai 2001). This resurgence has been identified in a range of contexts, such as popular ‘festivals’ (Malarney 2007; Taylor 2004), communal rituals in rural localities (Kleinen 1999; Endres 1998, 2001) and family practices (Luong 2003; Kwon 2006, 2008). Counter posed to the socialist state’s efforts to control rituals and commemoration practices the surge in ritual practices has been described as an unprecedented and unplanned phenomenon; a spontaneous movement comparable to the rise of a civil society. Delving into this heaving ritual economy and crowded landscape of memory, such studies have highlighted incongruities between state-sponsored worldly memorials and highly mystical remembrance rituals in familial contexts. Examining official memorials in honor of ‘martyrs’ and war heroes who have ‘sacrificed’ their lives for the ‘fatherland’, Malarney (2001), points to the insufficiency of such memorial sessions, which falling short of the respective families’ expectations are followed by privately held rituals.

Anthropological as well as historical studies have further examined state commemoration projects involving the glorification of heroic dead and historical personas on the basis of their ardent patriotism and revolutionary spirit, and the makings of party and national ancestries (Tai 1998; Giebel 1995). Most prominent among state glorified personas is Hồ Chí Minh, the paramount revolutionary hero and ancestor extraordinaire of modern Việt Nam.⁴ Pointing to a ‘selective redemption of the past’ (Marr 1981:285), these studies have alluded to the exclusion of a series of dead who do not fall within the categories of patriotic or loyal citizens. Former soldiers that fell fighting for the defeated side are a prime example of this exclusion. In this context, the rigid criteria applied by and the eliminatory effects of state commemoration practices whereby only particular sets of dead are remembered for their sacrifices and contribution towards protecting the nation, are opposed to the inclusive and encompassing effects of familial or civic practices whereby the previously excluded dead are indeed remembered as kin and forebears.

⁴ This list includes generals who in the course of the country’s early history have repelled foreign invaders, such as Tran Hung Dao, who defeated the Mongols, the Trung sisters who led the first rebellion against the Chinese, as well as the Hung kings who proclaimed the first autonomous Việt realm (see Malarney 2003:241).

Exploring the space between ‘ancestor worship and hero worship’, Kwon (2006:5) focuses on a set of displaced dead and their resettlement in the economy of memory. His study centers on the commemoration of victims of civilian massacres *vis a vis* the state commemoration of heroic dead and the return of the former into the realm of memory in the context of domestic rituals. Kwon’s study sets out to dispel a number of rigid distinctions such as between combatants and civilians, ghostly entities and ancestors. However, it pivots on distinctions between state and family practices, compelled and voluntary, public and private, all of which are made to correspond to the difference between state-promoted heroes and family dead. Furthermore, focusing on war dead the study effectively collapses the categories of ominous and violent death or more specifically war death, and the analysis of cosmology remains bound to a war-centered perspective. More so, the emphasis is on a specific war, the ‘American war’ as it is officially known in Việt Nam and the dead this conflict has produced. In this sense a series of interrelated and volatile conflicts have been excluded.⁵ Yet the multitudes of ambiguous dead and unsanctified spirits in contemporary Việt Nam suggest far more wide-ranging and manifold sets of ‘exempted’ or disregarded dead.

Here I move away from the categories of both heroic and excluded dead as they highlighted in the above mentioned studies, as well as from the legacy of the cold war which has dominated analysis of commemoration practices in contemporary Việt Nam. Instead I focus on Huế and its distinctive set of extraordinary dead, namely the Nguyễn kings. Ruling the country for over a century (1802-1945), and contributing to the formation of elaborate spirit censuses, the Nguyễn kings are not only part of the historical, political and cultural context of the locality but of the country at large. This distinctive set of dead is unique and extraordinary for a number of reasons. Firstly, forming the navel of the imperial polity they have themselves been involved in the project of ‘selective redemption’ of the past, by means of glorifying specific sets of dead and spirits and eliminating others. As Do (2003) and Dror (2007) suggest, the

⁵ To my interlocutors, many of whom have served consecutively in French and American led forces, the two Indo-china wars are not unrelated. If we were to examine Vietnamese history through the lens of recent wars then a series of conflicts should be acknowledged, not least the first Indochina war and anti-colonial struggle, the Japanese occupation and its thousands of civilian victims, as well as the most recent conflicts with the Khmer rouge in Cambodia and the ensuing clash with Chinese forces in late 1970s.

practice of endorsing or excluding spirits and the cult of historical figures, fabled heroes and efficacious divinities have historically been a state project in Việt Nam. Looking into Vietnamese religious practices Do points out that marshaling ‘supernatural practices’ has been a key concern for successive dynasties through the centuries, serving as a means to consolidate monarchic power (2003:3). Further, in her historical study Dror (2007) looks into the cult of a potent female spirit, known as Princess Liễu Hạnh, from the 15th century to the present. She shows that through the centuries, shifts in power and efforts in legitimizing new regimes were coupled with concerted efforts to produce official censuses and systematic registers for spirits. The practice of composing spirit censuses and compiling biographies of heroic dead peaked under the reign of the Nguyễn dynasty, whereby ‘writing gods’ became comparable to ‘writing history’ (ibid. 55). Successive Nguyễn kings were concerned with ranking deities and conferring posthumous titles to mandarins, nobles and illustrious royals.⁶ More particularly, kings Minh Mạng (1819-1841) and Tự Đức (1847-1883) who reigned over an expanding and flourishing Đại Việt empire, were greatly preoccupied with the nomination and promotion of august deities as well as the elimination of ‘impure deities’ (ibid.56).⁷ Upon their death, eminent members of the court were designated as tutelary spirits and village protective deities. At the same time, the dynasty elevated their forefathers construing them as part of an exalted ancestry, whose magnificent tombs and dedicated temples and inscribed their presence and greatness onto the capital’s landscape.

Formerly the centre of the polity, divinised and living members of the Nguyễn line have both been pushed aside by the rising tide of the revolution. After the abdication of the last emperor Bảo Đại in favor of the ‘August revolution’ (1945) former emperors, regents and mandarins were associated with the ‘feudal’ and colonial regime and dubious imperial interests. They were construed as ‘unpatriotic’ and pushed to the ideological margins of the emerging revolutionary state. This was in contrast to their previous elevated position which was sustained in the context of the

⁶ The famous Nguyen code (article 141) stipulates the distinguished scholars, loyal subjects and spirits to whom one is allowed and required to offer sacrifices, while it renders punishable the act of sacrificing to spirits not included in the register (Dror 2007:41).

⁷ Minh Mạng is the most illustrious among the Nguyen kings as he expanded the country to its southern most territories, annexing and consolidating the remaining Cham and Khmer inhabited regions.

post-imperial polity. After the fall of the dynasty (1945) as well as in the context of the Southern Republic (1954-1975) former royals and distinguished courtiers remained part of the ruling elite and maintained their status as eminent citizens. It was not the fall of the dynasty but rather the advent of the revolution that brought about their demise. Running the full course of citizenship, from illustrious rulers to distinguished and later disloyal citizens, members of the Nguyễn line fit uneasily in bipolar schemas and reductions such as 'state' and 'people'.

In the course of their shifting fortunes what was pivotal for the Nguyễn line was its ancestral affairs and enacted relations between noble forefathers and descendants. These relations were central to the establishment of the dynasty. As noted earlier, constructing and preserving dedicated tombs and temples for noble forefathers was a primary concern for successive kings.⁸ After the fall of the dynasty, members of the Nguyễn line, most eminent among them the last king Bảo Đại and his empress mother, have acted as keen guardians of the royal sites, tombs and the cult of their noble ancestors.⁹ After the revolution and the reunification of the country (1975) these very sites and practices became a target for the new government. The newly established state set out to defile royal temples, dismantle shrines and banish rituals pertaining to former kings and further eliminate kings from official annals and public memory.¹⁰ Today, former Nguyễn kings are gallantly re-instated in memory as extraordinary ancestors, who have a rightful place in both domestic shrines of former stately houses and princely estates and dedicated temples within the former citadel. In the course of their eventful posterity, they have been both 'exceptional' and 'exempted' dead; they have been both exalted as divine forefathers by their sovereign descendents, and marginalized as unworthy and contemptible monarchs by the early socialist reform.

Here I examine their shifting fates and re-instatement as both noble ancestors and potent spirits that fit in the history of the locality and nation. This account is less

⁸ The Nguyễn rule is largely considered by historians as the high point of neo-Confucianism (see Marr 1985; Woodside 1988). See also Dutton (2006) who argues instead about the strong Confucianist influences of the Tay Son regime.

⁹ The empress has been highly active in these affairs, especially as her son was in exile in France. For these purposes she set up an office at the center of Hue city and liaised with international institutions for the preservation of the relics.

¹⁰ As Nguyễn (1995:123) remarks, 'Ha Noi historians' were highly prejudiced against the Nguyễn kings and as a result they have been neglected and excluded from history books.

concerned with the re-instatement of past kings as an instance of ‘ritualized re-invention’ that acquires its relevance and primary significance in the context of local politics (Salemink 2007:559). Examining the newly invented Hué festival held biennially since 2000 within the walls of the former citadel, Salemink looks upon this artistic event as a case of ‘political ritual’ that ‘serves state interests’ (ibid. 560).¹¹ He explores the ‘political effects’ of artistic and ritualized performances of the festival and their contribution to the formation of national identity (ibid.). There are certainly many strands involved in the re-emergence of noble ancestry at the core of the former polity and political dimensions are more than relevant here. Yet, the propitiation of former kings and ancestor commemoration practices at large cannot be merely reduced to politically- or economically-motivated ritualized events. Rituals pertaining to former kings do not seek to re-instate them to their former glory and grandeur as potent sovereigns. Rather, such rituals seek to induce former royals as extraordinary ancestors and highly efficacious spirits and re-establish their connections with living descendants (see also chapter 4). In this context their magnificence lies not only in their status as sovereigns but primarily in their makings as exceptional and potent ancestry. After all in life many of the Nguyễn emperors were divested of their powers, denigrated and ridiculed while many suffered an ignominious death.

In ideal representations emperors were cosmically central and the navel of the polity, a bridge between this heaven and earth, this world and the other. Yet in the course of their reign many Nguyễn emperors were politically de-centered and disempowered. The founder of the dynasty, emperor Gia Long (1802-20) as well as his successors Minh Mang (1820-1841) and Tự Đức (1847-1883) all reigned over an expanding and flourishing empire.¹² Yet the rest of the thirteen emperors have been implicated with the rapacious project of colonialism, which eventually reduced them into a ‘puppet regime’, as current official accounts often refer to them. Within this context, the emperors were nominal rulers of the realm but their powers were severely curtailed by colonial administration. As Chapuis (2000: 27) notes in his historical

¹¹ The Hué festival is a performing arts event that entails the participation of local and foreign troupes. Starting as a Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, today the festival is international in scope and according to Salemink comparable to the Avignon and Edinburgh festivals (2007:559).

¹² The third king Thiệu Trị reigned for a few years in between (1841-47) but his reign is considered rather inconsequential.

study, king Thánh Thai (1889-1907) was considered by many a deluded eccentric, and was forced to abdicate in favor of his son Duy Tân (1907-1916). His son had no better fortune and eventually both father and son were relegated to the rank of duke and prince respectively and deported by the French to *Là Reunion*. Similarly, king Dục Đức (July-Oct 1883) was among other kings whose reign was short lived and plagued by scheming and court machinations. Deposing the legitimate successor to the throne, king Kiến Phúc (1883) he was eventually sentenced to death by the court on the grounds that he defied the will of his deceased uncle king Tự Đức (ibid. 15).

The years between 1883 and 1884 were the most turbulent of the Nguyễn rule as the French were annexing further territories moving from their established colony of Cochinchina, in the southern Mekong Delta, to the conquest of Tonkin in the Northern Red river delta. King Hiệp Hòa (1883), the most disregarded of the Nguyễn kings in both historical and genealogical annals was under pressure from the French to sign the ‘Harmand treaty’ soon after his enthronement, which ceded the province of Bình Thuận to the French and gave them control over Tonkin (ibid. 16, 68). As a result Hiệp Hòa was arrested by his acting regent Tôn Thất Tuyet for plotting with the French and executed along with all his supporters (ibid. 17). Tôn Thất Tuyet and the successor to the throne Hàm Nghi (1884-1885) have gone down in official annals as ‘patriotic’ citizens who led the anti-colonial movement known as *Cánh Vương* (support the king). Hàm Nghi is said to have fled into the mountains of the province to organise the resistance movement against the French and he was eventually captured and replaced by Đồng Khánh. Today pictures of Ham Nghi in humble civilian gear are prominently displayed in the opening sections of Hồ Chí Minh museums around the country. The co-existence of Hồ Chí Minh and Hàm Nghi in museums is justified in official narratives on the basis of their shared revolutionary fervor. Furthermore, the two were of comparable origins and upbringing. The mother of Hàm Nghi was a commoner and like young Hồ the king was raised in a ‘humble household’ in the northern barracks of the citadel (ibid. 17). In this ambiguous pantheon of kings, Bảo Đại, the last emperor remains the most dubious and controversial king of all. After his abdication, he returned to public office leading the alternative government supported by the French during the Franco-Vietnamese conflict. Later ousted by Ngô Đình

Diem, he returned to France where he stayed in self-imposed exile until his death reigning over the exile Vietnamese communities of France and the US.¹³ Thus, political absenteeism, corruption and misconduct are rife in the political biographies of the Nguyễn emperors, regarded by many as nothing more than ‘salaried employees’ of the French (Chapuis 2000:27).¹⁴

The imperial heritage

The construction of the imperial citadel began soon after the first Nguyễn king and founder of the royal line, Gia Long, ascended the throne. Successive kings contributed to its enhancement and improvement adding more buildings and dedicated ancestral temples within the fort as well as majestic tombs for their genitors on the citadel’s periphery. Today the imperial design of the capital and royal structures mark the city’s landscape, with the citadel reigning over the urban landscape and the royal tombs as marking lusciously green outskirts. These structures came under fire more than once in recent history, most notably in the aftermath of the fall of the dynasty (1945) as well as later with the fall of the Southern Republic (1975) when power balance and state structures shifted.¹⁵ With the fall of the dynasty the royal council hall, *Tôn Nhân Phu* (the hall of the noble) came under fire by the Việt Minh. The hall, which was the sacrosanct seat of the clan and hub of royal ancestral affairs, was burned down to the ground and operations of the council were interrupted as the first Indochina war took hold. With the end of the war (1954) the council resurfaced and resumed its filial affairs under the auspices of eminent royals, such as former king Bảo Đại and his mother who in turn, remained active in ancestral affairs until her death (1980). After his abdication Bảo Đại returned to the political scene of the country serving briefly as

¹³ For more on the referendum to depose Bảo Đại as head of State see Jacobs (2004) and Chapman (2005).

¹⁴ See also Tran (2005) that examines the fate of an exiled Nguyen prince.

¹⁵ Major structural damages in the citadel were caused during the so called ‘American war’, and the ensuing ‘battle for Huế’ (1968) as opposing forces engaged in battle within the citadel walls (see also introduction).

a premier (1949) in the alternative government supported by the French and later chief of state (*quốc trưởng*) during the turbulent years of the Franco-Vietnamese war (1949-1955).¹⁶ During these years he remained active and involved in the clan's filial affairs undertaking responsibilities as head of the royal clan (*trưởng dòng họ*). According to royal descendants, in the period between 1945 and 1975 the filial affairs of the clan and the council's operations were sustained by eminent royals and descendants. They cared for royal relics as both ancestral and national heritage sites, tending to the preservation of ancestral tombs and temples palaces as well as to the accessibility of the former citadel to the wider public. Despite the momentous fall of the monarchy and the devastation of the noble hall, the narratives of royal descendants construe the period between 1945 and 1954 as a 'temporary interruption'. In contrast, they mark the 'liberation' of the south and re-unification of the country under a revolutionary government (1975) as a sharp break with the past. This break is marked as regards both the country's and the clan's history. Current leading members of the clan stress that 'after that there was no more worship' (*không cúng nữa*), no open commemoration and propitiation for the royal ancestry.

After the 'liberation of the south' (1975) the newly established revolutionary government engaged in a vigorous campaign that sought to defile dedicated altars and temples, desecrate tombs and sacred sites and disallow all ritual activities associated with the former dynasty and the 'feudal past'. Dedicated temples and sacred structures within the citadel were a primary target. Such structures were ravaged, burned down or turned into warehouses and granaries albeit not for prized crops such as rice but most evocatively for secondary, less valued harvests such as potato and cassava. Communal halls and village temples, many established and sanctified during the monarchy, received similar treatment (see Malarney 2002). This strategic move sought to force the royal clan and their supporting leagues of spirits to the margins of social and political life, afflicting the well being of both ancestors and descendants at once. The campaign did not only seek to disband acting members of the royal council and

¹⁶ Based in France, in 1972 he appealed for 'national reconciliation' to which the northern Democratic Republic of Việt Nam responded with a dispatched envoy that engaged in discussions. After 1975, as many of the former elite fled the country and settled in the U.S. and France, Bảo Đại 'reigned' over the overseas communities. See the official website of the 'Nguyễn Family' created by royals in exile www.vcml.com

marginalize noble elites. It further sought to render them disempowered by means of afflicting the fates of their noble ancestries and severing the relations between munificent ancestral spirits and blessed descendants. Desecrating the resting places of former kings was an effective means of banishing the divinised souls of former sovereigns into less privileged afterworlds or even ghostly existence. The current surge in propitiating rituals, enacted by royal descendants seeks to appease the souls of disengaged forbears, re-instate them as benevolent and highly efficacious spirits.

Since 1989 when *đổi mới* reforms began to take effect in Huế, the previously disbanded ‘Council of the Royal Family’ reassembled, and petitioned for permission to conduct rituals for the kings within the citadel. Since then, the council has been highly active in organising rituals, re-writing genealogical records and restoring the clan’s past. This move was in line with parallel endeavours pursued by a series of other descent groups across the country. Furthermore, it was facilitated by the increasing appreciation and recognition of the former royal sites as ‘cultural heritage’ of national as well as international significance and the subsequent commitment of official institutions to due restoration. In 1993, UNESCO added the Huế imperial enclosure and royal tombs to its list of ‘world heritage sites’. Soon after, the citadel and some of the royal tombs opened their gates to foreign and domestic visitors. As the royal complex developed into a keen tourist attraction the preservation and restoration of the ‘royal monument complex’ became a foremost concern for local authorities. Today, there are a number of ‘cultural and historical heritage sites’ (*di tích văn hoá lịch sử*) around the country as well as around Huế and both national and local lists of monuments are continuously expanding.

The Huế monument complex was the first site in the country to receive recognition as international recognition. The first sites to be added in the nomination list – submitted to UNESCO by the Vietnamese government in 1979 - were the ‘great enclosure’ (*Đại Nội*), and the ‘purple city’ or inner part of the citadel (*Kinh Thành*) as well as three out of numerous royal tombs.¹⁷ Although the royal complex has captured the fascination of the visiting UNESCO envoy as early as 1981, it was only formally recognized as part of the national heritage much later (1997). Between 1996 and 1998

¹⁷ See HMCC published newsletter 2004.

a series of other sites around Huế were also inscribed on this list, including further royal tombs, the temple of literature (*Văn Miếu*) where mandarins were trained, relevant pagodas (*Thiên Mu*) as well as the *Nam Giao* esplanade, where kings made sacrifices to Heaven and Earth. This recognition of royal relics as heritage sites is solely on the basis of their ‘fine architecture’ and ‘artistic significance’ (HMCC 2004:9), while historical references and the existence and significance of former kings are played down in both national and international narratives. Today, the royal monument complex is counted among five other ‘world heritage sites’ and numerous other ‘national treasures’ across the country, valued on the basis of their ‘natural beauty’ and cultural significance. The number of such sites is ever increasing as the government is eagerly filing more claims to UNESCO.¹⁸

In the past decade, the ‘Huế monument complex’, as it is formally known, has been a site of rigorous archeological research and restoration work, and has emerged as the city’s greatest cultural asset, around which a booming tourism industry has been developed. The descendants of kings and eminent royals have been an integral part of this restoration and preservation project. Intimately acquainted with the royal past, versed in Sino-Vietnamese script – the official script of the Nguyễn court – and with valuable records and archival material in their disposal, the royal descendants have become indispensable in researching, reading and decoding the imperial past. Some of them are today employed or casually cooperate with the Huế monuments Conservation Centre (HMCC), while others have become independent experts and historians specializing in the imperial past. Among them an illustrious historian, *ông* Lôi who has published several relevant articles and books. *Ông* Lôi is not of noble descent himself but is married to a descendant of an eminent princess. Sitting on a former princely estate, his house was built in the 1920s by the ‘maternal grandfather’ (wife’s father), who was a mandarin at the court. Today, the ‘abode of the princess’ – as it is marked on the gates – has been painstakingly restored and enhanced on the basis of the principles of *phong thủy* (*feng shui*) or ‘wind and water, the geomantic principles

¹⁸ In 2003 the court music (*nha nhạc* or *nha cung đình*) was added to the UNESCO heritage list as a ‘masterpiece of oral and intangible heritage of humanity’ and it is now celebrated as the ‘traditional Hue music’. In 2005, the HMCC appealed for a second inscription of the Huế complex on the world heritage list to include the ‘banks of the *Hương* river and its surroundings’ (HMCC 2004:35).

which are distinctive of royal structures. The gates of the house remain open to visitors and *ông Lôi* often welcomes groups of university students as well as foreign visitors for tours organized by upmarket travel bureaus. The family altar and the history of enshrined house members, most notably the maternal grandfather in his capacity as an eminent member of the Nguyễn court, form the main attractions in the course of such tours.

Bringing back the ashes

The Huế historian was not the only one to open the gates of his house to interested visitors. A number of descendants of the former noble and mandarinal elite have been engaged in restoring ancestral houses, refurbishing altars and majestic gardens and opening their doors to domestic and foreign visitors. These majestic kingpost houses (*nhà rường*) were previously exclusively the abodes of high ranking mandarins and nobles, with their ironwood pillars and imposing roof marking the official grade and status of the proprietor. Distracting attention from their stately semantics, today these houses have been reassigned by the authorities as ‘garden houses’, drawing attention to their ample and elaborately formed gardens. These so called garden plots were actually part of the land assigned to mandarins and officials upon their official appointment or promotion, and thus, were part of the privileges and favours bestowed by the king. These garden houses have largely survived the socialist reform and ensuing requisition of land as ancestral housing plots. Today, these garden houses feature in tourist brochures as one of the province’s unique attractions. Currently, many of these houses are turned into ancestral halls, with the original structure exclusively dedicated to the distinguished founder of the house. As noted in chapters 1, the enhancement of houses and their transformation into sacred structures is not only restricted to noble residences but applies to all ancestral houses, which grow into composite sacred structures with the passing of generations. In this context, the

original structure erected by the revered forebears, is dutifully returned as inhabiting space to ancestors, while living progeny move to newly built and derivative parts of the house.

In the case of former stately houses such as *nhà rường*, ancestral altars enshrine spirits with both a familial and stately past. Hence, former royals and nobles are pertinent to both family and national genealogies. Furthermore, what is striking about the current surge in rituals for members of the nobility is that they pertain not only to former kings but also to less eminent members of the noble elite, such as former mandarins and petty courtiers. Like many others, they have been displaced during raging conflicts and turmoil and eventually fled war ravaged Huế for the safety of Sài Gòn or foreign countries. Currently, many deceased members of noble elites who lived their final years and died in the US or France are being returned to family burial sites and duly reinstated on family altars. The homecoming of the remains of a father of noble descent, who was a junior descendant of a distinguished regent, presents a most interesting case.

The father, *ông Ly*, lived in the States with his wife and two sons along with a plethora of other kin who formed an influential enclave within the Vietnamese community in California. Upon their death *ông Ly* and his youngest son, were returned to their native commune in the outskirts of Huế. The father died in 2004 at the 'venerable age' of 91 while his son, troubled and depressed by his marriage breakdown, died under dubious circumstances the year before (2003). A year after the father's death the surviving son cremated the remains of his father and younger brother and repatriated their ashes burying them in the family gravesite alongside other members of the noble lineage. The deceased father and son were not counted among eminent royals or distinguished nobles and in terms of genealogy they were only 'junior' descendants of the regent. *Ông Ly* was the youngest son of the fourth in order wife of the regent and therefore of subordinate status among the populous group of descendants. Yet today, the house where the regent visited his subordinate wife has been turned into a lavish ancestral hall dedicated to the regent and *ông Ly*'s older brother. This house is identified by proprietors as the 'house of the paternal grandmother', the subordinate yet 'favourite' wife of the regent. This structure is not

a permanent residence anymore but rather stands as a dedicated hall. Recently renovated and sumptuously decorated the centrally placed altar in the hall is dedicated to the regent, the ‘paternal grandfather’, as the siblings refer to him. The hall forms the core of a structural complex that shelters the lucrative business ventures of *ông Ly*’s eldest daughter, *bà Tri*. An embroidery workshop and a local motel have been developed around the hall while inside the hall itself a reception desk serves both the embroidery and lodging businesses.

The homecoming and due burial of the remains of the noble descendants were organized by *bà Tri* and her younger brother who carried back the ashes of his father from the United States. The ceremonial burial of the ashes took place on the day of completion of one year since the father’s death, albeit not in terms of lunar dates as habitually but rather in solar. Relatives from Hué and Sài Gòn gathered around the altar of the regent for the occasion. In front of this altar, the hosts have set up a small makeshift shrine to hold the silver plated box with the ashes and the photo of the deceased father and son. The ancestral altar was furnished for the occasion adding a Photoshop-enhanced portrait of the regent in impressive gold-laden official attire and a set of opulent lamps. Both shrines were further furnished with ritual offerings as well as gifts carried by participants. Alongside essential ritual articles such as candles, incense, betel and rice alcohol the hosts have added on the altar baskets of flowers or fruit and luxurious sweet cakes donated by absent and present relatives. The gathered crowds included the wife of *ông Ly* who came with her son from the States, his elderly siblings, young nieces and nephews as well as dignitaries from the neighbouring village to which the regent and his descendants have acted as benefactors. Participants paid their respects to the shrines and called upon the soul of the regent before departing on their way to the graveyard. The ashes were carefully encased and carried to the burial site by the surviving son, who as the chief mourner was clad in white mourning attire.

The private gravesite was situated on a mount in the outer suburbs of Hué, known as *Thiên Thai*, the heavenly abode for fairies and the spirits of the gifted and

exceptional.¹⁹ Before 1975 this was exclusively the burial site for distinguished members of the elite and home to a handful of pagodas that cared for their propitious afterlife and impressive tombs. The elaborate dragon-adorned tombs of royalty, high ranking mandarins and monks, are scattered all over this mount, spreading all the way down to the sacrificial esplanade of *Nam Giao* (see above).²⁰ This mount as well as others around Hué, have long been established as selected places where notable mandarins retiring from public office found refuge in old age. In preparation for a peaceful and propitious death they bought land here and assigned a plot for their burial. Today, this mount is described by Hué historians specialising in the royal past as a natural ‘protective screen’ (*bình phong*) shielding the imperial citadel from malevolent influences. In retirement, the regent has bought an ample piece of land and founded a Buddhist sanctuary where he retreated during the final years of his life. He designated a plot of land as a burial site for him and his three wives. The fourth wife was buried separately on a neighbouring plot, which is now a family cemetery for her kin and descendants. The graves for the deceased father and his son were constructed in this family cemetery, now standing opposite a small female pagoda still sponsored by the family.

Initially, the pagoda was a Buddhist sanctuary established by the regent in the 1920s. Later after his death and as the monk who has served in the sanctuary attracted disciples, the sanctuary grew into a male pagoda. After 1975 it was turned into a female pagoda ‘open to all’, a strategy widely employed by many elite families in order to evade appropriation of ancestral plots and property. In 2003 the family funded a major renovation project at the pagoda rebuilding the main hall as well as the ‘back room’ where many of the family’s ancestry are duly placed. Pagodas around Hué consist of two interconnected parts, the ‘front hall’ and the ‘back room’. The latter is dedicated to family kin, most commonly those who died an unfulfilling or untimely death or died under dubious circumstances. Since the family-sponsored pagoda was turned into a female religious institution open to the public, separate altars for

¹⁹ *Thiên* means heavenly, *thai*, as in *khoan thai*, means peaceful mind. The term *khoan* is used to refer to Buddhist novices (male and female) and thus, the ones who are initiated and commit to pious existence.

²⁰ The last sacrifice attended by an emperor, but conducted ‘by a prince on behalf of the injured emperor Bao Dai’, was in 1942 (Heritage 2003: 21).

deceased members of the parish were added in the back room alongside the altars dedicated to the family's ancestry. After the burial father and son, who died troubled and in exile, were duly emplaced on these dedicated altars alongside other childless or troubled members of the descent group. Before the ritual emplacement of the photos and memorial tablets of the deceased on the dedicated altar, Buddhist monks hired from a neighbouring pagoda recited prayers for the two souls.

Earlier in the same year *bà* Tri visited the tomb of her paternal grandfather, the regent, as part of the preparations for his annual anniversary. On the sideline of the lavish anniversary, *bà* Tri gathered a number of female relatives and dear friends from Sà Gòn and California to partake in a pleasurable expedition to renowned historical sites around Huế. A tribute visit to the tomb of the regent was at the heart of this expedition. The itinerary also included a visit to the citadel as well as pilgrimages to temples and shrines of both Daoist and Buddhist female divinities, such as *Thân Mẫu* (revered mother) at the city's renowned *Hôn Chen* temple, which also hosts an array of heavenly princesses and mandarins, all renowned for their divine influence. The temple was founded by royals, who deeply revered the female deity *Thân Mẫu*, to the point that a certain king is said to have proclaimed he was her younger brother. Carrying fruits and flowers and incense for the deity, the female pilgrims prayed in front of her altar before moving to other sacred sites where potent spirits resided, namely the royal tombs.

Stately tombs and potent spirits

The citadel and the royal tombs are considered a unique instance of what today local historians and international experts call 'landscape architecture'. This architectural style distinctive of the Nguyễn reign meticulously incorporates natural elements and cosmological principles in the design and layout of built structures (see Phan 2002). Contemporary Vietnamese experts suggest that the former capital was built according to the geomantic principles of *feng shui* or *phong thủy* in Vietnamese (wind and water)

and the theory of Yi, which dictate a balance between the three elements of the cosmos namely heaven, earth and humans (see Phan 2002:335).²¹ The capital was designed on a north-south axis with the city's Perfume River (*sông Hương*) cutting right across it. The citadel, where the sovereign rules and resides is positioned on the north bank while the resting places of past kings and noble forebears are situated south of the river. Scattered over a scenic hilly terrain to the south-west of the city, the royal tombs are situated on the land previously designated as the 'abode of spirits and nature' (ibid: 361). The lands upon which the royal tombs rest are designated as the place where 'rivers and mounts assemble'. Rivers and mountains are considered the most favorable natural and cosmic elements and the couplet is often used to sum up the blessed land of the country. The land where a king is interred is called *vàn niên cat đđia* which can be translated as 'land of eternal benediction' (see Mai 1993). Backed by propitious mounts and filled with sources of vitality, such as water concourses and blessed trees, the ground where a king is emplaced is the land of countless and ever-lasting blessings, a source of prosperity and happiness for all future generations (ibid. 148). Within this propitious setting kings, men of heavenly 'gift and talent' (*tai*), find eternal peace (*yên binh*).

The royal tombs are intricately formed complexes including not only the elaborately designed burial site for the king and his first wife but also dedicated temples, pavilions, lake formations and lotus ponds, all surrounded in by luscious woodlands. Constructed as miniature models of the country and cosmos the tombs of kings are carefully furnished with water features and planted with trees. Pines trees (*thông*) are the most apposite for stately tombs, their semantics associated with intellect, refinement, perfection and longevity, all qualities of sages, mandarins and kings (Mai 1993:170). Moreover, their thin straight trunks stand as connections between heaven and earth, this world and the other, thus forming a path to lead the soul of gifted dead.

²¹ According to Yi theory or more accurately in Vietnamese *dich ly*, the cosmic balance depends on the interaction between the two elemental forces of *âm* and *đương* where the former stands for *yin*, female, lunar, the world of the dead and *đương* for *yang*, male, solar, the world of the living (see also Phan Thuan An 2001).

Planned by the kings themselves during their lifetime and completed or improved by their heir to the throne, the royal tombs were the result of careful premeditation, protracted efforts and laborious work. On their ascent to the throne the Nguyễn kings were engaged in enhancing ancestral sites, improving tombs of their forefathers and adding to dedicated temples. They were also preoccupied with their own entombment and appropriate placement. The search for an apposite burial site and the sophisticated design of tombs were challenging tasks assigned to prominent ministers and able high officials, who in turn were rewarded for their successful endeavours with further promotions and riches, or else punished and expelled. Some locals claim that the tomb of king Minh Mang was the most laborious and protracted project taking more than twelve years to complete (see also Mai 1993). The planning and construction of royal tombs required not only the work of officials of great talent but also commitment of considerable public resources and wealth. Funded by the treasury and coordinated by the Ministry of Public Works, the tomb of Minh Mang mobilized scores of workers and imperial soldiers. For the construction of the tomb materials were assembled from other provinces of the realm including marble from the royal clan's native province (Thành Hoá) and precious iron wood from the neighbouring province of Nghe An. As the country's funds and resources were committed to the construction of royal tombs, such projects were effectively 'national' in scope and significance (ibid: 170). The construction of a mausoleum for Hồ Chi Minh was an equally momentous project that took years to design and complete (1969-1975) and involved using materials sourced from all around the war ravaged country. In Huế, the revolutionary clandestine networks assembled ironwood and marble from the highland regions of the province and send them to Hà Nội. For the construction of the mausoleum marble was also sourced from the caves outside Đà Nẵng which was at the time an enemy stronghold and major military station (see chapter 7). Writing about the tomb of Minh Mang, Mai remarks that to 'construct the tomb of a sovereign is to construct the country' (1993:170). The placement of the embalmed body of Hồ Chi Minh at the heart of the capital Hà Nội is as much the epitome and embodiment of the socialist state as the tomb of Minh Mang, according to Mai, is the 'personification of the consecrated monarchy' (ibid.).

Both royal tombs and the mausoleum of Hồ Chi Minh today receive droves of visitors flocking in from all over the country as well as abroad. According to official records most visitors to the royal tombs are domestic while foreigners account only for a third of the visitors. Since the mid 1990s, tours to internationally acclaimed ‘heritage sites’ and ‘beauty spots’ around the country have increased dramatically. Domestic visitors to the royal tombs and sites include eager sightseers coming from neighboring or remote provinces, honeymooners and young couples from North and South as well as descendants of the former elite living in Sài Gòn or abroad. Such visitors come to the royal sites not only to acquaint themselves with what is considered to be part of the national ‘history and culture’ (*lịch sử văn hoá*) but most importantly to immerse themselves in auspicious settings blessed with the benediction of efficacious spirits and extraordinary dead. The rising tides of visitors have been boosted by growing prosperity in the late socialist context as well as the increasing popularity of leisure travel. Families who prosper running small businesses and commercial ventures often take up trips to renowned places around the country. On their visit to the citadel and royal tombs, these families often dress up in replica royal robes and mandarin outfits hired on site and pose for pictures posturing as sovereigns seated on thrones.

Apart from fanciful and aspiring visitors from other localities that come to the citadel and tombs in search of blessings, visitors to the tombs include local pilgrims. These pilgrims do not include only descendants of the former elite but a range of locals in quest of blessings and favors granted by efficacious deities and spirits. Most interestingly, pilgrims include locals working in government offices and local administration, petty as well as high ranking officials. Slipping quietly among the lively crowds of tourists, pilgrims come to the temples situated in tomb enclosures to pray to illustrious and potent kings of the past. Such was the case of a young official from the provincial office of foreign affairs, who had been assigned as my facilitator on my arrival to Huế. In one of my visits to the tomb of Minh Mang I came across him as he bowed deferentially before the altar of king. The most illustrious and widely celebrated of Nguyễn kings for expanding the kingdom and forming a prosperous empire, Minh Mang is considered an efficacious divinity to whom locals often appeal for assistance with regard to jobs and promotions. Embarrassed to be caught in an act

which was marked in official narratives as pertaining to the ‘feudal’ past the pilgrim made a swift exit upon our encounter. Months later he was making preparations for his wedding as his long awaited promotion in the foreign office was finally approved.

Apart from the tomb of Minh Mang the tomb of Tự Đức, the king portrayed as a keen lyricist with a refined temperament, is also popular with pilgrims and visitors. Other tombs despite being prominent in the list of HMCC and tourist operators are less popular with local pilgrims, most notably the tomb of king Khai Định. Khai Định reigned over the final stages of the country’s complete surrender to the French and his tomb is portrayed in tourist brochures as a unique example of the ‘fusion’ between French and ‘traditional’ architecture. Further tombs fall completely outside the visitors beaten track, most notably the tomb of Gia Long. The tomb has been kept closed since its official recognition as a world heritage site in 1993. The first Nguyễn king and founder of the royal line, Gia Long is entombed on the ‘highest ground’, according to local accounts. However, *Gia Long* is inscribed in the black books of official history as he ascended the throne by overthrowing the Tây Sơn rebels with the help of French frigates.²² The revolutionary state has consistently promoted this rebellion, which is said to have been undertaken by a band of brothers from the North, as its definitive precursor. Ill-fitting to revolutionary precepts, *Gia Long* is despised by fervent revolutionaries for his close alliances with foreign forces. He is accused for stirring French interests towards the country as he claimed the throne with the support of the French and Catholic missions.²³

Other kings, who reigned briefly and died without descendants, have no royal tombs or dedicated temples in Huế. Most notably, kings Hiệp Hòa and Kiến Phúc, who reigned only briefly during turbulent years (1883-1884) and died unmarried without offspring to erect magnificent tombs and dedicated temples. Their unfulfilling death, without descendants or crown has rendered them marginal and dubious in both history and genealogical records. Hiệp Hòa has come to form a most indicative example of a degraded king, overthrown only a few days after his dubious coronation.

²² For parallels drawn between the Tây Sơn rebellion that unified the kingdom (1785) and the revolution that re-unified the country in 1975 see Nguyễn (1995).

²³ Gia Long spent part of his childhood in France handed by his father to the French as a token of mutual trust. Unlike Gia Long, his son who succeeded him in the throne, Minh Mang, banned Christianity in the kingdom and fiercely pursued Catholic missions.

The particulars of his internment remain a mystery to this day. Seldom and epigrammatically mentioned in history books and records, he has been also excluded from the clan's published genealogical records.

Other kings who have conversely been identified as 'patriotic' in official narratives have been nonetheless neglected by the state as their tombs have fallen out of the list of national monuments. However, these kings are cared for by descendants who have undertaken their due placement in privately constructed 'family' burial sites. As noted earlier, kings Thánh Thai and Duy Tân - father and son respectively - were expelled by the French on account of their anti-colonial actions. After more than thirty years in exile, Thánh Thai eventually returned to Sài Gòn (1947) where he died (1955) and was hastily buried. Unlike the father, the son never made it back to the country alive. In 2001 descendants of the two kings living in Huế or abroad organized the transfer of the remains of Thánh Thai to Huế, where he was placed in a newly constructed tomb. The tomb for Thánh Thai was constructed next to a similar tomb made for his son more than a decade earlier (1987). Whether the remains of Duy Tân have been located and repatriated is still unclear and descendants offered conflicting and vague explanations, yet what they readily stress is that 'father and son' have eventually been placed side by side. The two tombs were the centerpiece of an ample 'family' gravesite made and maintained by descendants. The gravesite included ordinary graves of members of the particular royal branch among them the graves of wives and children of the two kings.

Unlike the tombs of illustrious kings, which are majestic complexes situated within luscious enclosures that contain dedicated temples lakes, ponds and gardens, the tombs of these two kings are humble in comparison. Comparable to the graves of commoners, these tombs are simple in design and rather unassuming. Moreover, the gravesite is situated away from the auspicious and serene settings of the city's outskirts, where other kings are entombed, located amidst the city's heaving urban landscape. Located in a hectic neighbourhood in the southern suburbs of Huế, the fenced gravesite is engulfed by the mundane pulsation of everyday life surrounded by humble houses, lines of drying laundry and busy streets. Sitting on a former princely estate the gravesite is in the vicinity of Long An temple, which was built by Thánh

Thai soon after he ascended the throne (1899). The temple was dedicated to his father king Dục Đức, whose equally unassuming tomb is situated in the temple courtyard. Today, the temple holds three main altars dedicated to the three related kings, described by descendants as 'paternal grandfather' (Dục Đức), 'father' (Thánh Thai) and 'grandson' (Duy Tân). Unlike most kings, who are enshrined in a dedicated temple within the citadel, these three kings are separately placed in this temple because they died without a crown, either deposed or even suffering a humiliating relegation to subordinate ranks (see earlier here). According to royal descendants, if a sovereign is deposed before passing away and therefore does not die the death of a king he is not a king in posterity. The ambiguity surrounding Long An temple due to its association with tainted and degraded kings, rendered it an appropriate place for placing all Nguyen kings during the defiling campaign after 1975. The revolutionary administration chose this as a most suitable place to depose memorial tablets of kings and ritual paraphernalia stripped from royal altars and temples. This strategic move contributed to further degradation of the royal ancestry. Since 1989, the tablets and related objects that evaded destruction or decay were gradually restored in their rightful places and were returned into royal temples (see later here). Long An temple has since been added to the list of relics (1997) and opened to the public. Although the gravesite is also nominally under state management, it is neither a listed heritage site nor open to the public and the state has not committed funds towards its restoration.

The gravesite is maintained and cared for by descendants of the particular royal branch who describe it as a 'family' site. The graveyard is funded by descendants who live overseas and cared for by residual relatives, who are concerned with day to day maintenance and construction of new graves. Like other ordinary burial sites around the province the graveyard is not only used for the interment of dead kin but also for growing trees or crops. In villages around the province, graves sites which often come with patchy plots attached to them, the land around the graves is used as gardening plots for growing vegetables, such as corn, maize, lettuce and greens while small fishing ponds might also be created in the vicinity. In this case the ample plot was used for growing palm trees and decorative plants channeled in to local or southern markets. The guardian, who took to both mundane and filial affairs in the site, lived at

the edge of the enclosure in a newly built house funded by the royal branch. Warily unlocking the padlocked gate the guardian welcomed me in and later explained: 'these are the graves of our ancestors; still as ever the site is controlled by the state. The state will not give any money for their maintenance and restoration of these tombs. For the state the entombed are nobody but to us they are family ancestors'.

Restoring altars and writing genealogies

As explained earlier, the munificent existence of past emperors as highly potent and efficacious spirits was assailed more than once in recent history. Most notably in 1945 and again in 1975 when royal temples and sacred sites came under fire. In 1988, with the advent of a 'new era' and a 'new state', as friends and informants put it, the royal clan council was given official permission to regroup and openly resume filial affairs. Divested of its glorious stately past and far-reaching influence the council regrouped under a new innocuous name changing from 'council of nobles' (*Tôn Nhân Phu*) to 'Council of the Nguyễn Clan' (*Hội Đông Tri Sư Nguyễn Phúc Tộc*). No longer part of the state apparatus and elite institutions the council also redefined its purposes. Aligned with the rejuvenation and pursuits of numerous ordinary descent groupings and clans across the country, the council re-emerged as the safe keeper of age-old 'family traditions', albeit with regards to a very exceptional 'family'. Accordingly, one of the primary tasks of the council was to restore its ancestry in dedicated temples and compose genealogies.

In 1995 a group of distinguished descendants compiled the genealogical records of the royal clan (*thế pha*) and published them as such for the first time.²⁴ The list of authors included a number of *Tôn Thất* and *Vinh* names, the former denoting descent from the Nguyễn Lords - the predecessors of the Nguyễn kings - while the latter denotes descendants of the sixth generation of king Minh Mang. The editors were Tôn

²⁴ *Thế pha* is a term used exclusively for noble genealogies as opposed to *gia pha*, that marks non-noble lines.

Thất Hanh the elected new head of the council and ‘master Vinh’, formerly a teacher of Han-Viet and currently employed at the HMCC for the translation of dynastic texts. The authors compiled a series of court documents, including ‘family’ records as well as rare documents and biographies solicited by the Nguyễn dynasty. The published records draw the genealogical map of the clan whereby the history of the descent group is reckoned through the life histories of its exemplary ancestors. Compiling genealogies by way of recounting the biographies of illustrious members and their noble accomplishments is common among noble and ordinary descent groupings alike. The published records of the royal line recount the lives, reign, proliferation and death of their distinguished ancestry, noting their names, titles and positions as well as wives offspring and illustrious tombs erected by filial descendants. The book is divided into three separate but consistent parts, unraveling the long line of descent in three distinct groups. The first part is dedicated to the ‘primordial ancestors’ (*thủy tổ*) who originated from the North and as members of the gentry have served in successive Viet courts. The second part is about the Nguyễn lords (*vuông chúa*) who were settled and ruled over the southern part of the Viet kingdom (1525-1777). The last part recounts the line of Nguyễn emperors (*hoàng đế*) who reigned over a unified country (1802-1945). Former sovereigns are not counted in order of their reign – as common in historical annals - but instead in genealogical order, arranged in a neat line of successive generations. The account starts with the apical ancestor Nguyễn Bặc (924-979), who has been assigned as such by authoring descendants on account of his exceptional ‘talent’ (*tai ba*) and distinction in renowned Viet courts, namely under the much celebrated king Đinh Thiên Hoàng.

In the prologue of the book, the editors note that the published records are presented as a means of educating future generations of descendants (*con cháu*) (Vinh *et al.* 1995:5). This statement is both particular and national in scope, including in the future generations both members of the particular clan (*gia tộc*) and the nation (*quốc gia*). The genealogy spans ‘more than a thousand years of history’ from Nguyễn Bặc in the 10th century to the last crowned member of the clan, king Bảo Đại (*ibid.*). The 10th century stands as a landmark in current Vietnamese annals, marking the end of ‘thousand years of Chinese domination’ and the beginning of an ‘independent’ Viet

kingdom (see also Chanh 1993). As explained earlier, Bảo Đại remains today the most controversial among Nguyễn kings, partly because of his involvement in the post-imperial political scene. Although he has been persistently excluded from official historical accounts he is included in the clan's genealogical records, as the last in the line of kings. Spanning ten centuries of Vietnamese history, from 10th to the 20th century, and recounting these history through the 'biographies of the people of the clan', their 'formidable feats' and 'great accomplishments' (*công lao to lớn*) that have benefited the country and nation, the records effectively align the history of the clan with the history of the country. Royal descendants often remark that the dynasty had contributed considerably in the formation and development of the country by means of expanding and consolidating the kingdom and creating a prospering realm. The feats of the illustrious ancestors include protecting the country from foreign invaders such as the Chinese and the Mongols, expanding the territory and breaking into new land, annexing Cham and Khmer lands, and creating the conditions for prosperous livelihoods. The records measure not only the depths of Vietnamese history but also the breadth and length of the territory, which has expanded during the Nguyen reign, accounting for the take over of Thang Long (present day Hà Nội) in the north to the 'southwards advance' and the conquest of the Mekong delta and *Ca Mau* in the utmost south.

By the authors' admission, bringing into light the genealogical records of the clan became essential following a momentous event: the return and re-installment of memorial tablets of kings (*long vị*) and their noble ancestry back into the dedicated temples in the citadel. Soon after regrouping the council organised the ceremonial homecoming of the tablets (1989). This was an unprecedented event that marked the first post-war open ritual for Nguyễn rulers within the bounds of the citadel. The ritual circuiting of the kings' tablets (*lễ cung nghinh long vị kiết thánh*) involved the participation of large numbers of descendants. The gathered participants moved in procession around the citadel as a means of encompassing all the different sides of the former imperial realm before moving outside the fort walls to announce the return of the kings to the city's populace. As a leading participant explained while going through snapshots from the ritual, 'we took the tablets outside the citadel so that the

people of Huế would know'. The ritual homecoming of the kings drew together disparate royal branches, who gathered to clean and carry out rudimentary repairs inside the derelict temples, prepare altars and arrange ritual paraphernalia. After the ritual, the tablets and ritual paraphernalia were provisionally placed at *Trieu Mieu*, the 'temple of forerunners'. The temple was originally dedicated to the father of the first Nguyen Lord and therefore the most senior ancestor enshrined in the citadel.²⁵ As the citadel and the tombs were pronounced as 'world heritage sites' and restoration commenced the tablets of the royal ancestry were transferred to their respective temples.

As marked in historical narratives the numerous temples within the citadel erected by successive kings were destroyed 'by war'. Today only four dedicated temples remain within the citadel. Flanking the main palace (*Thai Hoa*) the four temples are orderly arranged to the 'left' and 'right' side of the enthroned sovereign.²⁶ On the 'left' is a pair of temples designated as *Thái miếu* and *Triệu miếu*, which are dedicated to the most senior generations enshrined in the citadel. The former is dedicated to Nguyễn Lords while the latter is for the parents of the first Lord. To the 'right' is *Thế Tổ miếu* and *Hung miếu*, the former dedicated to past kings and latter to the parents of the first emperor. *Thai miếu*, dedicated to the Nguyễn Lords and their spouses was originally built in 1804, soon after the first Nguyễn king ascended the throne. Destroyed during the recent war it was rebuilt by descendants in 1971. Today, *Thái miếu* and *Triệu miếu* stand almost dilapidated, unfurnished and unused by descendants. In contrast *Hung miếu*, situated on the other side of the citadel, has been partially restored and now holds a main altar dedicated to the mother and father of the first Nguyễn emperor. To date (2006), the only fully restored temple is *Thế Tổ miếu* which enshrines past kings. The impressive red lacquered and gilded temple with its commanding pillars and dragon adorned roof has been meticulously restored and forms the main attraction within the citadel as well as a hub for the clan's ritual activities.

²⁵ *Trieu mieu* was the first temple where minor reparations were carried out (1983-85) however since it has been neglected and the temple of kings has become the focus.

²⁶ As explained in chapter 1, left and right sides are reckoned from the perspective of the appointed sovereign centre, in this case from the perspective of the enthroned king and thus from inside the citadel looking outwards.

The long temple is divided into distinct yet interconnected compartments sheltering separate high altars, one for each king. The auspiciously gilded altars are furnished with Photoshop-enhanced images of past kings, many of them clad in yellow gold robes and seated on thrones. The altars are arranged in a clearly perceptible order. Forming a row, the altars are ordered by the usual means of designating a consecrated centre as the highest point and then moving into a subsequent order moving from left to right in alternate mode. In this case, the first Nguyễn king Gia Long is the assigned sacrosanct centre with his altar designated as the center point of the row and the highest point in the temple. The rest of the altars are arranged around this centre on a left-to-right order, marking in space genealogical proximity and rank in relation to the founder of the royal line.

Not all thirteen past emperors have a place in this dedicated hall. The last emperor Bảo Đại, who died in France in 1997, is yet to be enshrined here. Preceding generations of kings have also been denied a place here in certain historical contexts. Explaining the inconsistency between the number of altars and the number of kings, descendants offered a range of explanations. According to some explanations, the temple was built in the early 19th century and was arranged in ten different compartments and therefore had the capacity to hold a corresponding number of dedicated altars. Others based their explanations on changing historical and political conditions offering the example of the three ‘patriotic’ kings, namely Hàm Nghi, Duy Tân and Thánh Thai. Scorned by the French for their subversive attitude, the three kings were banned from the royal temple and could not be worshipped openly during colonial times (1884-1954). In 1959, the head of the Southern Republic celebrated the kings as ‘patriotic’ and outstanding heroes and placed them in the temple of kings. Today, their names and patriotism are marked on a marble stele next to the temple’s entrance yet Thánh Thai and Duy Tân are enshrined separately in Long An temple (see earlier).

The manifold anniversaries of kings

After the return of the kings' tablets to the citadel temples a series of rituals have been organized at the restored temple of the kings by the royal clan. By the time of my fieldwork, the council had instituted a number of communal anniversaries (*hiệp kỳ*) as well as individual ancestor anniversaries (*ngày giỗ*) for prominent members of the line (see chapters 5 & 4 respectively). A *hiệp kỳ* was annually organized for all the Nguyễn Lords at the dedicated temple of *Thái miếu* on the third day of the sixth lunar month (3/6). This date was the ancestor anniversary of the first Lord Nguyễn Hoàng, who is effectively the founder of the line of the Nguyễn lords. As habitual in Huế, the anniversary of the founder of a line serves as an occasion for commemorating all the generations that have emanated from this apical ancestor. Individual ancestor anniversaries are also held for the genitors of the first Lord, at their dedicated temple *Triệu miếu*. This occasion takes place on the anniversary of the father of Nguyễn Hoàng (19/5) yet honours both mother and father. Similarly, an anniversary is held for the parents of the first Nguyễn king at the dedicated temple of *Hung miếu* on the date of the anniversary of the father (10/9). According to descendants, the first anniversary for the lords and the parents of the first lord were held in 2002 while the following year they held the first anniversary for the father of the first king.

The most significant event organized by the council is the anniversary of the first Nguyễn king, Gia Long as the founder of the royal line. This is the most illustrious and widely attended event on the council's ritual calendar. As the founder of the royal line, Gia Long is the focus of the temple of kings as well as of the council's cultic activities. His anniversary (19/12 lunar date), is marked as an occasion for the collective propitiation of all Nguyễn kings. According to participants, the first ritual of this kind ever held at *Thế miếu* was in the year 2000. I joined the ritual organized six years later in the lunar year of the rooster (2006). This occasion was more lavish and exceptional than the preceding ones as the temple's restoration had just been completed. The occasion drew together all disparate sides and branches of the royal line. Unlike ancestor propitiation rituals held in ordinary lineage halls, which preclude women and children, this occasion entailed the participation of male and female, older

and younger generations of the kings' descendants. However, women and children as well as unmarried men stood on the 'right' section of the temple while the council's representatives, all senior male members were gathered to the 'left'.

For this occasion the council representatives, all dressed in ceremonial tunics and turbans, gathered at the temple early in the morning to polish and prepare the altars. Each altar was tended by descendants of the particular king and with offerings carried from home for the occasion. The ritual began with the representatives of each royal branch standing in front of respective altars. In coordinated moves, the representatives prostrated before the altars several times calling upon the souls of the kings. Following the protocol of court audiences, the kings were first addressed by means of a formal announcement scripted in Han-Viet and vociferously pronounced by descendants dressed in the gear of 'Confucian scholars' (*giap su*). The 'scholars' also coordinated the moves of the prostrating participants by means of repeating loudly the orders given by the elected head of the council, who in turn stood and prostrated before the altar of Gia Long. In this formidable and impressive ritual the sequence was also punctuated by the appeasing sounds of court music played by an appropriately dressed band as well as the rhythmic sounds of drums and gongs. Music and gongs marked meaningful intervals whereby kowtows were followed by the pouring of rice wine in cups and serving food on dishes placed on the altar and then deep prostration by way of inviting the kings to enjoy the offerings.

As habitual, the occasion opened with the arranging of an assortment of offerings on altars and concluded with the ceremonial burning of the formal written announcement as well as an array of votive items at the temple yard. Before burning the votive items the representatives, accompanied by the Confucian scholars and the music band followed by the rest of the participants, marched in a solemn procession around the ample courtyard. Then standing before the dynastic urn situated in an outer corner of the yard they burned the items in a prescribed order: first the written prayer addressed to the kings, then the bundles of votive gold and silver, accompanied as usual by white writing paper for scholars, and eventually votive clothes such as *áo binh*. As explained in chapter 3, *áo binh*, which literally means 'imperial soldiers' tunic', are habitually burned for lost souls and errant spirits. As in other occasions, the

burning of *áo bình* was complemented here with the essential set offered to ghostly entities that is, lumps of unrefined sugar, salt and rice grain (see chapter 3). After that, the participants sat to a meal inside the temple, consuming the ritual offerings.

As noted in chapter 4, differences in offerings mark disparities between deities and human spirits, divinities of heavenly essence and lowly spirits that are highly depended on their earthly needs. The offerings presented here on the kings' altars were comparable to those offered to pure and higher entities like Buddha. Unlike other anniversaries and propitiating rituals, food offerings did not include an assortment of cooked dishes and meat but instead only basic offerings of fruit, flowers and incense, accompanied by superior glutinous rice (*nép*) and vegetarian snacks. Such offerings highlight both the elevated status of these extraordinary ancestors and their distance from surviving descendants. This distance can be attributed to many reasons, not least to the disparity in rank and position between crowned dead kin and disparaged descendants or the generational distance between them. Distance and disengagement from surviving kin could also have been brought about by historical events that prohibited the performance of due rituals for former sovereigns and has subsequently affected their fate and welfare in posterity.

Further ambiguities involved in the ritual engagement with past kings can be observed in the disparities between food and votive offerings. The two appear to be inconsistent, as food offerings are suitable for higher spirits and votive items are rather appropriate for ghostly entities. This discrepancy reveals uncertainties about the fate and posterity of these extraordinary dead, who have been both exceptional and exempted. As mentioned in another chapter, locals admit that propitiating rituals are necessary because the fate of the dead remains unknown. In this case, the kings who in the past occupied the core of the polity enthroned and enshrined in the imperial citadel, have been subsequently expelled from their realm and even treated as outcasts in the course of recent history. Therefore they have been both dignified and stately dead as well as recluses. Their collective propitiation in this instance further highlights such uncertainties about their fate and posterity. The occasion stands both as *ngày giỗ* or ancestor anniversary for the founder of the line as well as *hiệp kỳ* concerned with the propitiation of neglected, less known or unfamiliar ancestral souls (see chapter 5).

Aside from this anniversary communally organized by the council, individual anniversaries for kings are also held at *Thế miếu*. These anniversaries for individual kings are organised separately by distinct branches of the royal line which trace direct descent from the particular king. For example in the year of the rat (2006), a few days after the communal anniversary at *Thế miếu* the descendants of king Minh Mang gathered before his altar to hold an individual anniversary for the king (27/12). As participants explained, unlike ordinary people kings have more than one anniversary (*ngày giỗ*) within the lunar annual cycle. As leading members of the council explained, kings have two main anniversaries organized by descendants: one held by the whole clan at *Thế miếu* and one held 'privately' by the particular royal branch in a former royal residence that holds a dedicated shine. This applies in the case of prolific kings, who have died as dignified sovereigns and produced numerous offspring, thus ensuring the continuation of the line. Such is the case with kings Minh Mang and Gia Long. On the other hand, childless kings like Tự Đức who died without offspring leaving the throne to his nephew, have only one anniversary. This is undertaken by 'surrogate' descendants at *Thế miếu* temple and in the context of the ritual for the communal propitiation of kings.

Furthermore, kings who are yet to be enshrined at *Thế miếu*, like Bảo Đại, have privately held anniversaries in a former royal residence where his mother lived as well as in certain associated pagodas. According to active members of the clan Bảo Đại has a dedicated shine and thus an anniversary in a pagoda in the neighbouring province of Quảng Nam, which he founded while he was still in office as head of state. The city of Huế is engulfed by pagodas founded and sponsored by Nguyễn kings and royalties. Today, these pagodas still shelter and care for members of the line who died in ambiguous circumstances, their descendants often dispersed or killed as they were fleeing hostilities. These pagodas shelter and care for the providence of a number of ambiguous dead, including members of the former noble elite. Such is the case of a pagoda in Huế, where anniversaries are held for king Thieu Tri and his immediate family. According to residing monks, the pagoda was previously the noble residence of the king's maternal grandfather, and thus the place where the king was born. In their words, this was the place where Thieu Tri had his 'umbilical cord cut and his

placenta buried' (*cắt chôn nhau cắt rốn*). Later the residence became the seat of the council of Buddhist studies in Annam while today it is counted among many 'national pagodas' around the country. The pagoda is foremost a worshipping hall dedicated to Thieu Tri and his relatives. Unlike other pagodas where the 'front room' is exclusively dedicated to Buddhist deities, here the main hall is also furnished with two shrines on either side of the centrally placed Buddhist divinities: one dedicated to Thieu Tri and his wife and the other to his parents.

This particular pagoda is also a gathering place for descendants who live nearby. Each year, a handful of descendants along with their daughters, sons and grandchildren gather here to mark the start of Lunar New Year (*Tết Nguyên Đán*) by raising the *Tết* pole in the pagoda's garden. According to participants, the practice of hoisting the pole was introduced by king Minh Mang, who decided that all state affairs should cease during the lunar New Year celebrations, between the 27th of the twelfth and the 7th of the first lunar months. For these purposes, all imperial stamps used for such affairs were placed in a box and hung on the high pole. Today, the practice of hoisting the pole has been increasingly embraced as a 'traditional' custom in a number of localities around the province including the village of Lưỡng Nghi.²⁷ Today the practice has acquired a new meaning and significance. Today instead of royal seals locals put rudimentary offerings in a small box; most commonly rice grains, betel and areca portions and rice alcohol. These offerings are meant for wandering spirits and ghostly entities that roam the locality. As locals and royal participants alike explained, the pole offerings seek to dispel malevolent influences and appeal for a peaceful year ahead. In the village, locals seek to dispel errant spirits that roam the specific locality while in the case of royal descendants, who raise the pole in a national pagoda, the practice has a much wider scope and significance. As participants explained by means of hoisting the pole 'we pray for peace and tranquility not only here in Huế but across the country'. In this case a small family gathering acquires significance that extends beyond the bounds of particular descent groupings and genealogical connections.

²⁷ In the village, the council of the seven local lineages raises the *Tết* pole at the courtyard of the village temple.

Conclusion

The Nguyễn kings are extraordinary dead for a number of reasons. First and foremost, they are extraordinary and exceptional because they fit both in familial and stately contexts. They are propitiated by descendants as well as by other beneficiaries who do not bear any genealogical connection to the kings. Furthermore, propitiation rituals enacted by their very own descendants are two-fold. They are acted out both in both familial contexts, as in the case of privately organized anniversaries in houses, and in stately domains, i.e., the citadel. In these contexts, former kings are construed as both forebears of a particular descent sub-group and members of a sovereign clan, and therefore both as family and stately ancestors. Their making into extraordinarily potent spirits is contingent on their constitution as both and therefore on their due placement in both familial and imperial contexts. Without descendants and due propitiation fitting royalty they are bound to exist as disengaged spirits, detached from former realms and subjects. Through magnificent tombs, noble genealogies and pertinent rituals involving a wide range of subjects formerly denigrated kings become potent and highly efficacious spirits. Without majestic temples and tombs and large numbers of supporters the kings are like any other ancestral spirit and thus of limited influence and consequence. Their return to the core of the former imperial polity is only one part of their making into extraordinary dead albeit a crucial one. Their return to the citadel is not merely a symbolic act with political implications but a due return to familiar domains. The citadel is the context in which past kings, lived, thrived and died, therefore their enshrinement has to take place in these very settings. As explained in chapter 1, dedicated ancestral altars must be set up in settings which are familiar to the evoked spirits or else they are considered inconsequential. Before the resurgence of royal rituals, kings may have been covertly commemorated in the context of houses and dedicated temples. Yet this arrangement fell short of the requirements for appropriate propitiating practices.

Before the fall of the dynasty, the citadel was both the familial and stately domain for Nguyễn kings: the place where their wives and offspring lived and forebears enshrined, as well as the realm of their state affairs. After the fall of the dynasty (1945)

the citadel was no longer the navel of the polity or the domain of past sovereigns. Yet former rulers continued to be present in familiar domains, supported by their thriving descendants who were part of the new elites. In this context, members of the royalty remained active in both public and private domains, engaging and leading developments in the political scene while at the same time attending to ancestral affairs. In 1975, with yet another shift in state and political structures there was a sharp break with this thriving past as political and familial fates of the noble elite were equally afflicted. As the imperial past came under fire the ancestral royal tombs and temples were desecrated, defiled and became inaccessible to all. Today the citadel falls very much into the sphere of influence of the state constituted and re-constituted as part of the national and international heritage. The reconstitution of the citadel as a stately domain of national and international interest is precisely what allows and calls for the return of the kings.

In her seminal study Errington (1989) suggests that in the social geography of Southeast Asian realms, persons, genealogies and polities are not distinct domains, as often suggested in western epistemologies, but rather part of the same social fabric. As she exemplifies, power and authority can be understood by looking into the local ideas about cosmic potency and its sources. She shows how politically influential groupings are formed around potent persons who have access to sources of power, and by means of establishing kinship connections, effectively collapsing the categories of kin and followers. In this context, the influence of nobles is contingent on their access to ancestral potency, which is in turn a political advantage. Here I examined former kings, their rise and fall as extraordinary ancestral spirits. Such explorations have served to map out the changing realm of kinship as well as the workings of power and authority. I have engaged with this case of exemplary dead and the ritual revival pertaining to former kings in contemporary Hue. Yet this has not been an exploration into the 'politics of culture' or the relations between state and society (Endres 1998; Kleinen 1999; Malarney 2007). Many contemporary studies have focused on the ritual revival and the surge in village and family rituals as a fertile field to explore 'state-society relations' (Endres 2001:71). Here I have sought to destabilize such distinctions by pointing to the constitution of past kings as both potent sovereigns and efficacious

ancestral souls. Former kings are extraordinary ancestral spirits not in and of themselves, but because they are constituted as exceptional dead who bear significance to their particular descent grouping, clan and the nation.

Chapter 7

The unending death of an immortal: the state commemoration of Hồ Chí Minh

'Our province is proud to be the place where President Hồ Chí Minh has lived in his youth. Thereupon, his image, name, age and related monuments, help us preserve the memory of him from this generation to the next'. (National Liberation Front of South Viet Nam, 1969)

Official hagiographies

To outsiders and inquisitive visitors, what locals in Lương Nghi stress about their village is that Hồ Chí Minh, most commonly referred to as 'uncle Hồ', lived there.¹ In late nineteenth century, uncle Hồ left his native village in the north central province of Nghệ An and moved with his family to the royal capital of Huế. Following his father, a Confucian scholar who came to the village to teach, he arrived at the village in 1898 and stayed there until 1900. Today, the house where they lived as well as a number of sites at the heart of the village, including the communal temple (*đình*), the shrine of a female protective spirit (*Âm Bà*), the river washing point (*bên đà*), where 'he studied, played and bathed' have been shaped into a commemorative complex (Hồ Chí Minh Museum publication 2001). This monument complex expounds his life and childhood years to a handful of domestic and foreign visitors. This is how I came to locate the village and choose it as my main fieldwork site.

I was steered to the village by a local self-made tourist guide hired in Huế who took the liberty of introducing it to me – a foreigner and unacquainted tourist – as the 'village of uncle Hồ'. Best known in the city by the name of its prospering local market Lương Nghi lies a few kilometres east of the former royal capital. The road from Huế to the village spans the remains of estates of former elite families and uncrowned princes of the Nguyễn dynasty. On this road, between the city and

¹ Although formally addressed as 'President' Hồ Chí Minh, serving as such in the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam from 1945 until his death (1969), he is most commonly referred to as *Bác*

the village lies a hamlet that is still dominated by the house and dedicated hall of a former regent. Formerly a rural retreat for mandarins and court officials today this hamlet is administratively incorporated to Huế as a city suburb. What was salvaged of these estates from the socialist reform of the South and the subsequent requisition of land is today painstakingly turned into lavish ancestral halls commemorating the distinguished ancestors. Moving away from Huế and the village the same road leads to a small fishing port, from where many joined the boat exodus that followed the ‘spring victory’ of 1975. Today the port town is known for the incoming remittances from overseas Vietnamese - a ‘Western Union’ branch features prominently in the centre of the desolate town - and its profligate ancestral tombs framing the main road. These newly constructed tombs are funded by those who made it overseas and crafted by their residual relatives. This road has been recently renamed to Nguyễn Sinh Cung, the name by which uncle Hồ was known in his childhood, but locals in surrounding villages as well as in the city most commonly refer to this road as the ‘way to the sea’.

Hồ Chí Minh (1890-1969) the paramount hero of the Vietnamese revolution was born in Kim Lien village in Nghệ An province. Impartibly linked with the memory of uncle Hồ, today this province is construed in official historic narratives as a land that fostered ‘many patriotic movements against French colonialism’ (Mai Luan 2005:3). In such narratives he is identified as the son of a ‘patriotic Confucian scholar’, Nguyễn Sinh Sắc. His father is described as a virtuous and talented man of humble origins, striving to grasp the ‘Ethics of Man’, nonetheless not for the sake of a mandarin title (Trinh 2003:12, 24.). Nguyễn Sinh Sắc is portrayed as the first man in his small native village to achieve the dignified grade of *cu nhân* (first rank laureate) in the inter-provincial examinations for the civil service. Despite this worthy achievement he declined official placement in the ‘feudal’ bureaucracy and instead further pursued his studies aiming for the title of *thiên sĩ*, the highest level in Confucian education. To this end, in 1895 he took his wife and two sons to the royal capital of Huế and sat for the imperial examinations. In 1898, after failing twice in the examinations, he came to Lưỡng Nghi to teach upon the invitation of a wealthy farmer. The farmer offered lodging to the scholar and his two sons while his mother stayed in Huế. According to official narratives,

Hồ. *Bác* as a kinship term means ‘paternal uncle’ who is more specifically an older sibling of the

in the village young Nguyễn Sinh Cung (alias Hồ Chí Minh) lived with his father and older brother in a 'simple house' and attended classes at the local school where his father was teaching. Such accounts further stress that while in the village Cung studied for the first time *chữ Hán* (Sino-Vietnamese script) and Chinese classics starting with the Analects of Confucius. In official biographies Hồ is presented as a man who was both refined and versed in classic texts and a 'simple' man who grew up alongside local people. Two years later (1900) his father took an official assignment in a different province and Nguyễn Sinh Cung left the village to join his mother in Huế. In 1901 his mother died after giving birth to his younger sibling. Young Cung is said to have been left on his own to care for his newborn brother who being born in dire poverty and having sucked 'cold milk' from his deceased mother's breast, died soon after (Mai Luan 2005: 18).² Upon this tragic event, his father returned to Huế only to take young Cung and the rest of the family back to their native province of Nghệ An. Five years later (1906), the family returned to Huế where his father assumed an important position at the court, serving in the Ministry of Rites. Official accounts maintain that the father who had previously refused to take office in the imperial civil service and has led a simple life as a 'teacher' took the post only because he was forced by the court.³

Hồ Chí Minh returned to Huế as a juvenile and with a new name, Nguyễn Tất Thành, which means 'he who will surely succeed'. This new name was given to him by his father at the age of eleven to mark the end of his childhood and the passage to a new phase in his life. During his stay in Huế Nguyễn Tất Thành completed his primary education in a Franco-Vietnamese school where he was taught French and the new official script *quốc ngữ*.⁴ He then entered the prestigious National Academy (*Quốc Học*), where he is said to have liaised with 'patriotic teachers' and clandestine anti-French groups and took active part in popular protests. Official biographies place Thành as a foremost figure in popular uprisings such as the protests against heavy taxation (1908), which was dealt with brutal force on the part of the French and ended in bloodshed, and stress the effects of these events in shaping his patriotism. As Trinh notes, 'in his homeland and in

father.

² See also *Vietnam Courier* (1976).

³ See also Duiker (2000), who notes that his father risked being branded a rebel if he did otherwise.

Huế uncle Hồ witnessed many unfair doings and the suffering of his people', adding that such sufferings forged his determination to eliminate injustice and free his fellow countrymen from foreign yoke (2003: 55). Soon after the bloody uprising (1909), young Hồ left Huế never to return. Heading south, he embarked on a long voyage into the country and further beyond seeking a 'way to national salvation' (Trinh 2003: 12, 24). His quest brought him to Sài Gòn, the trade and commercial hub of French Indochina, where he boarded a French merchant ship working as a kitchen hand under the pseudonym of *Ba*.⁵ He arrived in Paris as Nguyễn Ai Quốc (Nguyễn the patriot), where he wrote anti-colonial editorials and became the co-founder of the French Communist party and later the first Vietnamese agent in the Comintern (Soviet Union, 1926). Using the pseudonyms *Vuong* or *Lien* later he organised revolutionary operations in Thailand and China, and on this account he was imprisoned in Hong Kong. Eventually taking the name Hồ Chí Minh, meaning in Sino-Vietnamese the one who enlightens, he founded the Indochinese Communist Party (1930) in China and later became first president of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (1945). In the context of his state-glorified career and political legacy, Hồ Chí Minh stands not only as the first but further as the eternal 'President' of the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam. Through countless hagiographic accounts, memorials and tributes he has come to be promoted and construed as the revered 'image of the nation'.⁶

During my fieldwork, I came across this hagiographical account of his life time and again, inscribed in a series of biographical works and museum publications, on commemorative plaques and ceremonies, recited in by museum staff and officials in commemoration sites across the country and in Huế.⁷ The 'telling life' of uncle Hồ as well as other eminent revolutionaries are currently promoted by the state as historiographical accounts of twentieth century Viet Nam'. In these historiographies the country's revolutionary past is presented through unfolding the

⁴ *Quốc ngữ* is the Vietnamese script based on the romanised alphabet, which was devised by the Jesuit missionary Alexander des Rhodes. Introduced in schools in the early twentieth century it replaced the Sino-Vietnamese script, which in turn was the official script of the Nguyễn court.

⁵ Hồ Chí Minh is said to have assumed many names and pseudonyms in the course of his long life. See Duiker (2000), *Vietnam Courier* (1981).

⁶ 'President Ho Chi Minh, the image of the nation', extract from Pham Van Dong's book *Ho Chi Minh thought will light or path forever*, published in the party newspaper on the 115th anniversary of Ho Chi Minh's birth (Nhân Dân, 11 May 2005).

life span of its leader and mastermind. Sponsored by state agencies and authored by historians or ‘comrades’ who had the fortune to work with him, these biographical accounts are written in literary form, yet presented as ‘hard facts’ compiled by means of ‘scientific research’. As Giebel suggests writing about another eminent revolutionary, Tôn Đức Thanh, these ‘highly didactic’ biographical accounts meticulously steer away from ambiguities and historical complexities.⁸ This is apparent for example in official accounts about uncle Hồ’s father. His father is depicted as a ‘Confucian scholar’ with strong patriotic leanings rather than a graduate of the court bureaucracy examinations who came to Huế to assume an official position and further his career in the civil service. In this story, his overarching virtues of ‘simplicity’ and ‘humility’ have defeated the purposes of a ‘corrupted’ regime, elevating him to a worthy ancestor of a ‘proletarian’ hero. Hồ himself, as the son of a court official, studied at the National Academy, which was exclusive to sons of royalties and mandarins. The history of the Academy stands as a telling example of the historical complexities and the ambiguities involved in the biographies of revolutionary heroes. Founded by an Nguyễn emperor (1893) and decreed by Résidant Supérieur de l’ Indochine (1896), the Academy is still identified both in Viet Nam and abroad as a ‘school for the gifted’.⁹ On the centenary of Hồ Chi Minh’s birth (1990) the school was proclaimed a historic and cultural monument (*di tích lịch sử-văn hoá*) by the Ministry of Culture and a statue of Nguyễn Tất Thành was erected in the school yard. Today fully renovated, the school operates as a high school in the mornings and a most sought-after foreign language learning centre in the evenings. Hanging above the blackboards, the words and bright example of Hồ Chi Minh fill up the dim classrooms reading as follows: study, fight and work after the example of Hồ Chi Minh the great.

As Tai (1995: 274) remarks, the ‘monumentalising project’ focusing on the life, persona, revolutionary career and political legacy of Hồ Chi Minh started long before his death. As early as the 1940s and 1950s Hồ is said to have written two

⁷ Many books examining Hồ Chi Minh’s life and political career have been written by an array of local and foreign scholars, most eminent among them Lacouture’s account (1968). See also Duiker (2000), Nguyen (1971), Trần (2003), Trinh (2003).

⁸ Tôn Đức Thanh served as vice-president under Ho Chi Minh and later became the longest serving president of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam (1969-1986).

⁹ University of Queensland advertisement for scholarships to Vietnamese graduates of the National Academy (posted 15/08/06).

‘self-congratulatory autobiographies’ under pseudonyms.¹⁰ At the same time, state agencies of the newly founded Democratic Republic took on the reverential task of restoring his natal house in Kim Lien, so that he could visit after decades of absence (1947). After his death (1969) the revolutionary state instigated a process of making memorial sites out of the places where he lived, worked or made public appearances rallying the people to the revolutionary cause. As Tai remarks, today, ‘there is hardly a Vietnamese town without some memorial to Hồ Chí Minh’ (ibid. 273).¹¹ The first monuments were established soon after the ‘spring victory’ of 1975 and mainly within the bounds of the former Democratic Republic. Most of these monuments were related to Hồ Chí Minh’s political career and more particularly his life and activities as the first President of the Republic. The mausoleum of Hồ Chí Minh in Hà Nội, remains today the principal monument. The grandiose mausoleum was inaugurated in 1975, six years after his death 919690. Situated in the historic Bà Đình square from where Hồ read the Declaration of Independence in 1945, today the mausoleum forms the core of the capital’s administrative core around which the offices of the Party, the Presidential palace and a cenotaph for fallen revolutionary soldiers are found. Other key monuments include the secret base of the DRV government in exile in the northern mountains of Pac Bo and the house in Hà Nội where Hồ Chí Minh wrote the ‘Appeal for Nation-wide Resistance’ and led the ‘August Revolution’ (1945).

In the years following ‘reunification’ (1975) the monumentalising project methodically spread to the ‘liberated’ south. In its southwards movement the state-instigated commemoration project is evocative of the so called ‘Hồ Chí Minh campaign’ (1975) whereby Northern Vietnamese forces gradually encroached in the territories of the Southern Republic, leading eventually to its fall.¹² This commemorative project sought to recount and to reconstitute a number of southern provinces as the place where Hồ lived, visited or ‘held longingly in his memory’.

¹⁰ The first entitled ‘Stories of President’s Ho active life’ was written under the name Tran Dan Tien and first published in 1948. The true identity of the author was uncovered accidentally in a book written by Ha Minh Duc ‘Literary works of President Ho Chi Minh’ (1985), where he notes that Tran Dan Tien was a pen name of Ho Chi Minh (see Phong 1989).

¹¹ In 1997, there were 663 recorded Hồ Chí Minh vestiges and memorial sites in 32 locations spread across the country (Hồ Chí Minh Museum 1997:7). In Thừa Thiên Huế province 11 monuments were identified in 1997 (ibid, p.22), while in 2001 the number increased to 20 (Hồ Chí Minh Museum 2001:14).

¹² It is also evocative of the southbound advancement of Dai Viet kingdom, earlier in the country’s history which is known as the ‘pacification of the south’.

The south central city of Phan Thiet is now construed as the place where he and his father taught and where the grave of the latter lies. Sài Gòn, the capital of the Southern Republic, was renamed to Hồ Chí Minh city and is today promoted in official narratives as the place from where he embarked to seek a 'way to national salvation'. On this imaginary map, the North stands as the place that dearly holds the memory of Hồ Chí Minh as 'President' while the South 'longingly remembers' (*nhớ thương*) the beloved 'uncle'.

Lying south of the 17th parallel, that demarcated the borders between DRVN in the north and the American backed government in the south, Huế, the long standing seat of the Nguyễn dynasty and site of major battles and conflict during the 'American war', is constituted as the place that formed the persona of uncle Hồ nurturing his anti-colonialist fervour, abhorrence for the imperialists and committed patriotism. After reunification, provincial authorities embarked on a crucial mission to locate, restore and preserve Hồ Chí Minh related sites. As a female senior staff at the local Hồ Chí Minh museum explained, 'in 1975 we were still at war, after the end of the war in 1977 we started systematic research and gathered evidence about his life in Huế in order to recover Hồ Chí Minh related sites. Today, the physical and symbolic landscape of Huế is ingrained with the youth of uncle Hồ.

Under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Information and loyal to their sacred mission, local cadres 'recovered' and developed a number of such memorial sites and created what today is specified as the 'fundamental system of monuments' in the province. Upon the suggestion of local authorities the Ministry of Culture declared four of the Hồ Chí Minh related relics in the province 'historic and cultural monuments' adding them to the diverse list of 'national heritage sites', which also includes royal tombs, temples and the former imperial citadel (see chapter 6). The establishment of the Hồ Chí Minh museum in the city and the memorial complex in Lũng Nghi village were essential in creating this 'system of monuments' and developing the commemoration project in the province. The house in the village, where uncle Hồ has lived, was the first monument in the province to be located and decreed. The house and surrounding land were reclaimed from the proprietors by the district cultural office in 1978. A year later (1979), the first Hồ Chí Minh commemorating exhibition was launched in the city and all relevant sites came under its management. Inaugurated on the national day

(2nd of September) that celebrates the Declaration of Independence (1945), the exhibition displayed ‘images and representations of Hồ Chí Minh’s life and career as well as the ‘people’s undertakings in fulfilling his wishes and carrying out his Testament’. In 1980, the exhibition was renamed as the Hồ Chí Minh museum of Bình Trị Thiên province, in turn a short-lived enlarged administrative unit that grouped together three distinct provinces, namely Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên. In 1989, as renovation policies that marked a shift to market economy started to take hold in the area, Bình Trị Thiên disintegrated forming again three distinct provinces and Huế became the capital of the Thừa Thiên Huế province.¹³ The centennial of Hồ Chí Minh’s birth (1990) brought about rejuvenation with regard to the commemoration project across the country. A series of new Hồ Chí Minh sites were inaugurated and existing ones were upgraded while a UNESCO-sponsored conference was organised in Hà Nội celebrating Hồ as a ‘Vietnamese hero of national liberation and great man of culture’. The same year, the local museum in Huế renewed its commitment to its mission to fulfil its ‘educational and political task by shedding light on to the life and revolutionary career of President Hồ Chí Minh’ and proclaimed the house in the village a ‘historic and cultural monument’.

In the context of the state-sponsored commemoration project, the village is closely associated with the name and age of Nguyễn Sinh Cung and is construed as the place of uncle Hồ’s ‘innocent childhood’. As a female museum employee who is of noble descent explained, it is the place where he ‘came to live with his family when his father was not yet a mandarin’. On the other hand, the urban complex of Huế is celebrated as the place where Nguyễn Tất Thành, coming of age, was educated in renowned schools and developed into a fervent young patriot. The significance of the village as an imaginary landscape of Hồ Chí Minh’s youth rests with what is commonly now referred to as the ‘house of uncle Hồ’. The house in the village is one among a plethora of houses around the country where Hồ Chí Minh is said to have lived and which have been identified and restored as memorial sites. One of these houses is the house in Huế, where he briefly stayed with his mother. Located at the northern barracks of the former citadel, this house is known as the ‘house on number 112 Mai Thuc Loan Street’ and it has been

¹³ Before 1975 Huế was part of Thừa Thiên province. In 1979 it became part of Bình Trị Thiên and

recently reclaimed from its proprietors and turned into a heritage site. The house has been recreated as a 'traditional' dwelling and an altar for his mother has been installed at its very core. Despite the efforts of the museum and its recognition as a historical and cultural site, uncertainty about the authenticity of the house as a monument and the accuracy of the location still interfere with its status as a relic. What is more telling is the explanation of the female museum employee serving on site at the house in Hue, when I asked her why the house in the village was more important as a memorial site. 'The house in the village was easy to locate because people there remember that 'uncle Ho lived there with his father' while the house on Mai Thuc Loan Street is the place where he lived with his mother'.

The state sponsored commemoration project of Hồ Chí Minh is neither unswerving nor homogenous across the Vietnamese spatial and temporal landscape. As Giebel points out (1995), the 'telling life' of eminent revolutionary Ton Duc Thang promoted as the Party's imagined ancestry has been invested with different meanings at different turns within the party's history. In the case of Hồ Chí Minh the ubiquity of his cult is subject to the assignment of different meanings, where Hồ can be the object of cult or the painful reminder of an oppressive regime (Tai 1995: 247).

In her keen discussion, Tai points to the multivocality and incongruities entailed in the state cult of Hồ Chí Minh. Huế, the seat of the French-supported dynasty and later American-lead forces stronghold, could add considerably to this discussion. Here I do not examine such contradictions or multivocalities in the context of a clear distinction between state and local practices. Rather I focus on the ambiguities and complexities involved in the state-promoted memorial projects and highlight their cultural embeddedness. The complexities involved in this memorial project point not only to ambiguities but further to the entanglements between family histories, local practices and state policies. The chapter does not offer a comprehensive account of the commemoration project centring on Ho Chi Minh, be it on national or provincial level. Rather it seeks to explore some of the complexities, ambiguities and incongruities involved in the state-sponsored cult of Hồ Chí Minh and his promotion as a benevolent avuncular figure and national ancestor. It proceeds to do so by means of focusing on a specific locality, the

village of Lũông Nghi and exploring the establishment of the memorial complex at the village's sacred core. Such an exploration acquires added meaning within the context of major economic shifts brought about by renovation policies and the ensuing surge in ancestral practices, whereby locals with diverse political backgrounds call upon and engage with ancestors of different generations, spanning the country's recent as well as earlier histories.

The 'house of uncle Hồ'

The commemoration complex of Hồ Chí Minh in the locality has been developed around the sacred and administrative hub of the village, the 'eastern hamlet'. The eastern hamlet is mainly populated by the members - both living and dead - of the village's first in order lineage. The ancestral houses and prominent ancestral halls of the lineage's sub-groups mark the landscape of the hamlet. Within this structural complex, the village communal temple (*đình*), the adjoined hall of the seven founding lineages (*nhà thờ bảy họ*), the busy market next to the temples and the rivulet right opposite, all form the long-standing sacred core of the village. This complex reflects the old saying, 'communal temple, banyan tree and water', which points to the close and the close association and co-existence of markets, waterways and temples, brought together through ritual practices. 'Before the revolution', as villagers put it, communal temples were the sacred as well as administrative core of the village, where the village council of notables would convene on village affairs and propitiate village tutelary spirits. 'After the revolution', the geomantically auspicious land behind the *đình*, painstakingly formed into a mound, was levelled to build the new administrative centre, the People's Committee. In 1996, the *đình* was proclaimed a historical and cultural heritage site. The recognition was on account of its architectural value, built in 'traditional' *nhà rường* style, distinctive of the Nguyễn dynasty as well as on account of its significance featuring in the childhood of uncle Hồ. Upon its official recognition the temple came under the management of the Hồ Chí Minh museum of Thừa Thiên Huế. Today, a tablet hung inside the temple marks it as a 'typical

monument commemorating Uncle Hồ's youth in the province' (HCM Museum 2001:55).

The focal point of the memorial complex in the village is the house where uncle Hồ lived with his father and older brother, known among villagers as the 'house of uncle Hồ'. Since its designation as a historic-cultural monument (1990), the museum and local cadres initiated several projects in order to enhance and develop the memorial complex in the locality. Such projects included renaming the road, erecting a memorial stele at the village entrance, landscaping the area around the house and even building a new exhibition hall in the vicinity.¹⁴ As part of these projects a section of the river side road was paved forming a clear path leading from the *đình* up straight to the house of uncle Hồ. The paving of the road was intended to make the commemoration house more accessible to visitors but as locals commented, 'the state only partially paved the road stopping in front of uncle Hồ's house' while the remaining part of the road and subsequently the other half of the hamlet were left with a muddy path that remained out of reach during the rainy season. Paving the road had a greater impact on the village landscape as it integrated the house of uncle Hồ into the sacred structural complex of the village.

In the village, houses and ancestral halls are points of orientation. Villagers navigate themselves within the hamlet and map out the village landscape using ancestral houses, inhabited by both living and the dead members of the kin group, as points of reference. Houses bear names, the names of their male founders with whose destiny the house and those inhabiting it are tied (see chapter 1). Villagers often enquired about my whereabouts and recorded my movement around the village in terms of the houses and ancestral halls I visited. Furthermore, I was associated with the house of my foster family, which was known by the name of its deceased founder, the maternal grandfather. In official narratives the house is cautiously designated as 'commemoration house' (*nhà lưu niệm*) but locals unmistakably refer to it as *nhà bác Hồ* (the house of uncle Hồ). In Vietnamese narratives about the nation and the state the house (*nhà*) emerges as a potent

¹⁴ The imposing memorial stele featuring a gigantic torch – as a symbol of the revolution – at the village entrance reads: 'The village ...is honoured and proud to be the place that has embraced and fostered the childhood of President Ho Chi Minh, during the years he came to here to live and study along with his father and older brother (1898-1900). This place bears the marks of deeply felt sentiments attached to many prominent monuments, like the village communal temple, the commemoration house, the river washing, the temple of Âm Bà; all valuable heritage shielding the cadres, the party and the people in the province'.

symbol, whether talking about ruling clans and former dynasties (*nhà Nguyễn*) or the revolutionary state (*nhà nước*). The words of Hồ Chí Minh, often now recited in public speeches, express his vision and longing for a ‘reunited’ Việt Nam in a similar way: undoubtedly, there will soon come the day when North and South will make up one house’ (*cùng một nhà*).

According to museum sources, the house belonged to a wealthy villager named Nguyễn Sĩ Đò, a wealthy farmer, who was however illiterate and therefore unable to teach his three sons. A friend and official at the Ministry of Justice introduced him to a bright Confucian scholar who was the father of Uncle Hồ. Faced with difficulties and seeking a way to support his family, uncle Hồ’s father accepted the invitation and came to the village to teach. Nguyễn Sĩ Đò offered a house for the scholar and his two sons to stay (HCM museum 2001:41-2). After the house came under the management of the museum, it was razed to the ground and restored in its ‘original form’ as it was while uncle Hồ lived there (*ibid.* 45). The restored house is today described in official narratives as a ‘simple thatched roof house’ yet its design is rather evocative of the structural style of ‘three compartments and a double roof’ (*ba gian hai mái*) (*ibid.*: 37). The structure of ‘three compartments and a double roof’ evokes the noble houses of the royal and mandarin elite, namely *nhà rường* (see chapter 1). The dominant feature of such houses is a set of sizeable upright pillars tied to an elaborate truss of beams supporting an impressive tile roof. The pillars are made of enduring iron wood and the number of pillars and subsequent size of the roof are demonstrative of the standing and status of the proprietor. Developed and glorified under the reign of the Nguyễn dynasty, this structural design is today celebrated as the ‘traditional architectural style’ of Huế traced in ancestral houses and family or communal temples. To my friends and informants, the structural design of *nhà rường* represents the quintessential house of Huế. The house of uncle Hồ in the village was modelled upon the restoration of his natal house in Nghệ An province. Bearing a striking similarity, the two houses are modest in size while the thatched roof is the dominant feature. With the thatched roof as the most striking feature, the houses bear resemblance with ‘simple folk houses’ rather than houses of the ‘feudal elite’. Inside the house objects used by uncle Hồ and his father are on display. ‘In the middle was a wooden settee, where the father of uncle Hồ was teaching, on the left a small desk, where he placed books, ink pots and brushes used in his literary career. In a corner

of the house, a wooden divan stands as the place where Cung (alias Hồ Chi Minh) and his older brother slept and studied (ibid. 37).

The commemoration house is under the constant care of an elderly couple who cook their meals and take lodge in the house. The caretaker, is a member of the first local lineage who attends rituals at his lineage sub-branch ancestral hall (*nhà thờ phái*) but hardly ever participates in the communal lineage or village rituals. He has worked as a caretaker for more than twenty years. As he explained, 'I have been minding the house since it was bought by the state to make a memorial site', adding that the state paid him meagre wages. In my frequent visits to the site, the caretaker modestly professed that he 'knew little about the house' and that museum staff, often young history graduates, 'know better'. Yet he turned out to be more than a caretaker. A neighbour previously living next to the commemoration house, he was well-acquainted with the family of the proprietor Nguyễn Sĩ Do. In a rare interview a few days before my departure he told me the few things he knew about the house. 'This was the house of Nguyễn Sĩ Do. He had three sons, Nguyễn Sĩ Kinh, Nguyễn Sĩ Mai and Nguyễn Sĩ Khuyen. I knew the family because one of his grandsons of the paternal side was my teacher. After he died his eldest son lived here'. The caretaker took me at the back of the house and pointing to a neat bamboo tree line, which he has reverently been maintaining for the past twenty years, he said: the land behind these trees belonged to the second son, the rest of land and the house on the front belonged to the first son. According to the caretaker, while Nguyễn Sĩ Do was still alive his land was plentiful and 'wide', stretching all around the commemoration site beyond the neighbouring ancestral hall. This ancestral hall is where he is now enshrined among other eminent ancestors of the particular lineage branch. When the state bought the house to make a memorial site, the family land was divided and the plot of land around the commemoration house was clearly fenced. Today, a tall green hedge clearly marks the entrance and limits of the plot all around the commemoration house. The caretaker explained that 'the state made this hedge to clearly separate the house from the ancestral hall and divide the land'. Within the limits of the hedge an elaborate garden has been recreated to simulate the living conditions of uncle Hồ. These conditions are often described in relevant publication as an 'atmosphere which was 'fresh and pure' and the 'garden covered with flowers and fruits all year round' (HCM museum 2001: 43).

The descendants of Nguyễn Sĩ Do are said to have ‘dispersed in the four corners of the earth’ (*tu phuong*), living in Australia, the United States and other localities around the country. The museum and its staff, deny their existence or presence in the specific locality altogether. As staff working on site stressed there were no male descendants from the paternal side left in the village thus, the family did not exist anymore. The only existing descendant acknowledged by the museum was an elderly woman, who recently donated a few items - writing utensils like ink pots and pillows - used by the father of uncle HỒ which are now on display at the commemoration house. The house of a direct male descendant from the paternal side lies disregarded behind the commemoration house. Established by the third son of Nguyễn Sĩ Do and inhabited by the ‘third generation descendant of the paternal side’ and his family, the house was restored and extended a few years ago (1998). The position where the original structure stood was made into an ancestral hall dedicated to the founder of the house, the great grandfather of the current proprietor. By the admission of senior museum staff, in creating the ‘fundamental system of monuments, people had to move out and compensated to go and live elsewhere’. The museum stresses that the house had fallen to the maternal side, either inhabited by ‘daughters’ at the time or altogether uninhabited and instead turned into an ancestral hall for the family’s maternal side. This association of the house with the maternal side was meant to convey that the house and the kin grouping it belonged to had fallen into disarray and the line of descent and inheritance have been disrupted long before it was taken over by the state. In the context of a formal celebration on site, a member of staff explained that the house was previously managed by female relatives of the family and it was a place where the maternal grandparents, the parents of Nguyễn Sĩ Do’s wife, were enshrined.

Such ambiguities with regard to the ownership of the house and the fates of its inhabitants have led to the construction of a new memorial hall in 2005 right next to ‘uncle HỒ’s house’. This new hall was exclusively dedicated to uncle HỒ and a relevant was set up at the centre of the hall. Yet the construction of this new hall involved yet another story of displacement. On the land next to the house of uncle HỒ, stood the house of the caretaker. Recounting the story of the making of the new memorial hall, he explained that initially he resisted pressure to sell off his land for the purposes. In his words, ‘it was a good plot of land, favourably located next to the river. But the state wanted to buy the land to make a memorial site. The

villagers advised me that living in front of a heritage site, would be ominous as I wouldn't be able to go about my business, so I sold the land and bought some land near the city'. In this case, the displacement did not entail the dispersion of a family as his numerous children and grandchildren were settled already in different places around the village or in Hué. The reasons for making the new exhibition hall are vague and unpronounced by its sponsors. However, what many locals read into this is a muted acknowledgement that the house did not belong to uncle Hò and his family as well as a possibility of returning the house to its rightful owners. In the words of a young female student, who often visited uncle Hò's house as part of the school curricula, 'this house belongs to another family'.

In stark contrast to the adjacent house of uncle Hò and its 'traditional' features, the new exhibition hall is modern and simple in design with no regional and historic references. Unlike the former which is laden with ambiguities, the new 'supplemental exhibition hall' is indisputably dedicated to Hò Chi Minh. An imposing altar at the centre of the hall with a golden statue of Hò Chi Minh and the national red flag with the yellow star hanging on the background, form the dominant features of the exhibition. A year after its inauguration and in the context of preparations for the new lunar year celebrations the golden bust was replaced by a life-like golden figure of Hò sitting on a presidential chair. A big bronze-coloured urn modelled after the renowned dynastic urns at the royal citadel was added in front of the altar to serve as an incense holder. Installing dedicated altars or arresting golden statues of Hò Chi Minh is an integral part of the commemoration project around the country. With the requisition of the house the altar in Nguyễn Sĩ Do's house became somehow 'inactive', as descendants left the house. Issues of who was or wasn't enshrined here remain a point of dispute and confusion. Despite that, Hò could not have been enshrined in this context, as only members of the founding family and its descending generations could ever be placed there. On my first visit to the house as a tourist, a black and white photo of uncle Hò's father, was hanging on the wall behind the altar. With the inauguration of the new exhibition hall the father was 'transferred' to the house in Mai Thúc Loan street and placed on the altar alongside the mother, so that the 'father and mother could be under the same roof'.

Since its inauguration, on the seventy fifth anniversary of the foundation of the Communist party (2005), the new 'complimentary exhibition' has become the

focus of commemoration practices in the complex. The exhibition is said to offer additional information about the life of uncle Hò in the village. However, the exhibition offers a brief historical tour around the village elaborately intertwining the origins and foundation of the village five centuries ago with the living days and memory of uncle Hò in the locality. The exhibition was put together with the cooperation of eminent village elders versed in the history of the village and locality. The opening section displays the honorific decrees bestowed upon the original founders by later Nguyễn kings, for the meritorious work of ‘breaking new ground’ (*khai canh*) and establishing the village. This section lists eminent ancestors of the seven clans and includes the photo of the statue of the first founder, previously worshipped as tutelary spirit at the communal village temple. A ‘map of the village’ sketches out the ‘relics and typical cultural structures’ emplacing the house and other relics of uncle Hò as integral part of the cultural and historic landscape alongside the People’s Committee, the pagoda, the communal temple and eminent ancestral halls. The exhibition also displays images of the village in the beginning of the 20th century simulating the era of the youth of uncle Hò. The exhibition concludes with the certificate of the house as a historic and cultural monument and a list that chronicles its construction while accounting in detail for the public funds committed in the project.

In May we all come back to visit uncle Hò¹⁵

The house of uncle Hò in the village is a place of pilgrimage for many. Since its restoration and especially after the house was proclaimed a historic-cultural monument (1990), visits have been organised for schools, youth camps, civil servants and government officials. Formal visits and ceremonies to commemoration sites around Hué are organised by the local museum on important national anniversaries, such as the national day of independence (2/9), the anniversary of Hò Chi Minh’s birth (19/5), the anniversary of the foundation of Vietnamese Communist Party (3/2), as well as for the foundation of People’s Army

and the day of war martyrs and invalids (27/7). Unlike ancestral anniversaries and pertinent rituals that chronicle the lunar annual cycle, these occasions are marked in solar calendar terms. On the occasion of the anniversary of the foundation of the Communist Party, a formal ceremony is organised at the museum in Huế, with the participation of members of civil and military authorities in the province. In Lữong Nghi, commune and district officials, youth representatives and local schools mark the occasion at the house of uncle HỒ.

On the 75th anniversary of the foundation of the Party (2005) the museum inaugurated the new exhibition hall at the village dedicated to uncle HỒ. A year later, on the eve of the 76th anniversary, I woke up to the jumbled sound of drums loosely bashed by primary school pupils returning from formal celebrations organised at the house and new hall of uncle HỒ. The following morning, a group of pupils from the local high school paid a formal visit to the founder of the Party. Escorted by the school headmaster and a female teacher the pupils cheerily riding their bicycles crossed the village main bridge, went past the village communal temple and ancestral hall of the seven lineages heading further east to the house of uncle HỒ. They parked their bicycles outside the neighbouring ancestral hall of a lineage branch and moved into the courtyard of the exhibition hall. They were all dressed in formal attire: the girls in crisp white *áo dài* carrying bouquets and fresh fruits for the altar and the boys in plain tailored trousers, white shirt and neat haircuts carrying the incense.¹⁶ The teachers entered first and solemnly ‘announced’ their visit. The headmaster lit a bunch of incense and reverently bowed before the imposing golden statue. After arranging the offerings on the altar, he instructed the pupils to enter the hall in orderly fashion and stand in neat queuing lines on either side of the altar: the boys to the ‘left’ of uncle HỒ and the girls to his ‘right’. A boy and a girl were singled out to come forward and offer fragrant incense while a professional photographer, hired for the occasion, captured the images. The group then moved to the adjacent house and repeated the pilgrimage. As the incense was burning, the pupils stood in front of the altar listening to the story of the life of uncle HỒ in this house narrated by a young

¹⁵ Title of an article included in the editorial celebrating the 116th anniversary of Ho Chi Minh’s birth (2006), *Nhân Dân* Newspaper (posted in March 2005 in www.nhandan.vn).

¹⁶ *Ao dài*, literally ‘long tunic’ is promoted as ‘traditional’ female dress. At school girls are dressed in white *áo dài* worn as uniform.

female museum employee. Before departing, the female teacher signed the book of visitors on behalf of the group.

The pupils were representative of the countless ‘nephews’ and ‘nieces’ (*cháu*) of uncle Hồ that virtually make up the nation. Such visits and respect paid by his *cháu* is an integral of state affairs and formal conducts. Despite his death Hồ Chi Minh remains a key state figure in the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Government officials and party cadres, most eminent among his *cháu*, come to pay their respects to the President and ‘report on their feats’ (*báo công*) and commitment in carrying out his Testament and fulfilling his wishes, on several occasions. Paying a visit and their respects to the President in local memorial sites across the country is often part and parcel of formal visits whereby officials attend to state affairs. Likewise, foreign delegates and premiers from ‘fraternal countries’ visiting the capital, are taken to the mausoleum of Hồ Chi Minh.¹⁷ In celebrating the 115th birth anniversary of Hồ, the party secretary Nông Đức Mạnh, who is alleged to be the illegitimate child of unmarried Hồ, paid his respects to Hồ Chi Minh’s shrine at the presidential palace (Duiker 2000:575).

Aside from such government approved commemoration practice the museum in Huế also holds a death anniversary for uncle Ho’s mother. The anniversary takes place at the house of Mai Thuc Loan Street where she briefly lived and died (1901). Upon her death, the body was buried on a mound in the outskirts of Huế. Two decades later (1922) her daughter and older sister of Hồ is said to have returned here to unearthed the remains and take them to her native Nghe An province. The original grave was never dismantled and on the centennial of Hồ provincial authorities ‘restored’ the grave and erected a memorial stele on site. The explanation for this restoration offered by a museum employee is rather telling. As she put it, ‘we made this stele in loving memory of the soul of uncle Hồ’s mother. Although there is no grave here anymore her venerated soul (*hương hồn*) has dissolved in this very land’.

¹⁷ On the first post-war visit of an American Defence Secretary (2004), Rumsfeld was taken instead to the temple of Literature in the capital. In 2000, Clinton as the first visiting president since the war, was received in Ho Chi Minh city and did not set foot in the capital.

The birth of uncle Hồ on the 19th of May 1898 is the most important event in the state almanac, second only to the national day of independence.¹⁸ The occasion is marked annually with local events organised across the country throughout the month of May. The birth anniversary is also marked with editorials in the party newspaper and relevant book publications. On the 115th anniversary his native province of Nghệ An became the focus of celebrations with a series of celebratory events organised within the province. Further provincial authorities in Nghệ An cooperated with the counterparts in Hue to hold a joint celebration, as both provinces were associated with the birth and childhood of uncle Hồ. The celebration was organised in the city as well as in the village of Lữơng Nghi where participating officials made a pilgrimage. The state tourism bureaus of Nghệ An and Huế co-organised a festival with the evocative caption marking uncle Ho's move from his native village to Lữơng Nghi. As part of the festival, officials made a pilgrimage at the house of uncle Ho in the village. Well-covered by local media, the event was exclusive to a handful of high ranking officials including the chairmen of the respective provincial committees while gathered crowds - including myself - were kept at bay by local policemen. The pilgrimage opened with a parade whereby representatives of youth and local highland groups carried a banner depicting Hồ as an orchestra conductor, marched through the village.

'Hồ Chi Minh lives forever in our cause'

As mentioned previously in this chapter, the village communal temple (*đình*) has been appropriated by local authorities as a Hồ Chi Minh related memorial site. It was precisely this appropriation that enabled village rituals to resume after decades of disruption due to war and subsequent efforts of the revolutionary state to 'abolish superstition'. The first post-war grand ritual at the *đình* was *Lễ Thu Tế*, the 'autumn sacrifice', which was organised in 1998. On this occasion, local officials from the commune People's Committee came to kowtow at the altar of the consecrated Village council dressed in simple gear of trousers and shirt (see

¹⁸ The birth of a few other eminent revolutionaries is also celebrated on a smaller scale, such as Pham Van Dong and Ton Duc Thang, The former was the longest serving prime minister under the presidency of Ho Chi Minh.

chapter 5). The officials paid their respects under the watchful eye of village elders and the council of seven clans who were clad in 'traditional' tunics and turbans. By the time I was doing fieldwork in the locality (2006), the autumn worship was referred to as a long-standing 'village tradition' and integral part of 'Vietnamese culture'.

As part of the autumn sacrifice, all tutelary guardian spirits of the locality, decreed by royal edict of the Nguyễn court and scattered in individual temples around the village, were ritually 'retrieved' and gathered at the *đình*, where they were collectively propitiated. The distinguished spirits included both genies of heavenly origin and divinised mortals, all of whom have acted as local benefactors. As part of the village sacrifice, villagers also held a separate ritual in honour of the village and lineage founders at the adjacent temple of the seven lineages. On the sidelines of these rituals a selected group of participants, comprising the seven elected lineage heads and village master of ceremonies, paid their respects to uncle Hồ. Leading the dispatched group was *ông Xuân*, a member of the second in order local lineage. *Ông Xuân* was among the handful of lineage members that remained in the locality, most of them having fled to the U.S. A former serviceman in the US-lead forces himself, he now prospered as a tourist guide 'specialising' in tours to major battlefields and military stations situated in the province. On an interval between rituals, after all members of the consecrated council were retrieved in early morning rounds and before resuming for the main ritual, the delegation paid a visit to uncle Hồ's new memorial hall. Unlike other honoured spirits that were carried to the village temple in royal palanquin and with the sounds of traditional music, uncle Ho was honoured separately and solemnly in his own hall.

The delegates walked silently to the new exhibition hall clutching their tunics in one hand and incense on the other. On arrival, *ông Xuân* offered the first piece of incense and the rest of delegates took their turn. None of the participants ever offered an explanation on the pilgrimage and relevant questions put them in a discomfited position. Further, in countless discussions about the other realm and the plethora of divinities and protective spirits Hồ never became relevant. Although in response to my questions villagers cautiously identified him as a divinity of human origins (*nhân thành*), they did not include him in the local pantheon of tutelary spirits, dominated by the founders of the seven lineages as village founders. As we silently made our way back to the *đình* to resume rituals,

ông Xuân, keen to explain the nature of the village ritual exclaimed, ‘this is the village ritual. We sacrifice and make offerings to our ancestors, because our ancestors were mandarins’.

The inevitable question ‘is *Hồ Chi Minh* our guardian spirit’, posed by Malarney (1998, 2002) and others still persists. The question is relevant here as well as in numerous other contexts where commemoration practices and cultic activities center on *Hồ*. Malarney (2002) examines the desecration of communal village temples and the interruption of pertinent rituals as a result of the socialist campaign against superstitious practices. Focusing on the current ‘ritual revival’ as a result of market reforms, he argues that the re-opening of the village temple in a commune on the outskirts of Hà Nội in the early 1990s was associated with the enforced enshrinement of *Hồ Chi Minh* at the temple. In this arbitrary process of redefining sacred space and practices, *Hồ Chi Minh* was briefly promoted as a village guardian spirit on the basis that ‘no person in Viet Nam had greater meritorious work with the people than *Hồ*’ (ibid: 201). By the mid-nineties and in a climate of heated debate, the administration ordered the removal of *Hồ*’s bust from the temple and banned all cultic activities devoted to *Hồ*.

Cultic activities related to *Hồ* were also banned in several other northern localities, as they were found to contradict the secular premises upon which the commemoration of uncle Ho was based. As Malarney among others observes the emergence of relevant cultic practices centering on *Hồ Chi Minh* and other eminent revolutionaries, corresponds to a number of vibrant cults of historic figures in Việt Nam. Among the venerated hero spirits are leaders who rebelled against Chinese domination like the Trung Sisters (died in 43 A. D.), repelled attacks from foreign aggressors such as Chinese and Mongols like Ly Thuong Kiet (1030-1105), Tran Hung Dao (12205-1300), and Le Loi (1384-1433). These historic figures are placed in shrines all over Viet Nam. As Giebel remarks (1995), the ‘museum-shrine’ of Ton Duc Thang in his birthplace is grafted on to similar long standing religious practices that bestow supernatural powers onto Việt Nam’s geography – its mountains, waters and earth – as well as its historical landscape. These heroes act as guardian spirits who watch over the nation’s affairs.

Inclusion in and exclusion from national and local pantheons has historically been part and parcel of state building in Việt Nam (see chapter 6). In his analysis of ‘Vietnamese supernaturalism’, Do suggests that spirit cults and popular

supernatural practices marshalled by the court were part of ‘threat-neutralising strategies’ aiming to consolidate villages and legitimise monarchic power (2003: 3). In the museum of Hồ Chí Minh museum in the homonymous city, Hồ is consigned to the pantheon of great Vietnamese leaders. The pantheon includes a long list of divinised leaders starting with the Hung Kings - the founders of the independent Đại Việt kingdom – and finishing with Hồ Chí Minh, the founder of the Democratic Republic. This list is framed by the Declaration of Independence pronounced by Hồ Chí Minh in 1945 and a photo featuring a sprightly Hồ standing on the steps of the Hung kings’ temple, situated in a northern locality. This particular museum further builds upon the deification of Hồ with a comprehensive presentation of shrines and temples dedicated to Hồ made by ‘heroic mothers’ and local residents, in Southern Viet Nam. In an oversized map of South Việt Nam, the shines are marked in red luminous dots, highlighting a high concentration in provinces that previously formed the context of raging conflicts.

If the life, persona and career of Hồ Chí Minh are glorified in the context of a state-instigated cult, his death sets him apart from the spiritual world of heavenly entities and venerated human spirits. In a ‘country of memory’ (Tai 2001), where the spirits of dead kin and deified forerunners including the Nguyễn kings, are ritually evoked as present and active entities uncle Hồ is commemorated as a national ancestor. However, remembered by the living as a historic figure he remains alien among the efficacious family dead, as he has become disengaged from his family ancestry. Hồ as well as all of his siblings died unmarried and without known descendants. Unlike ancestral souls who are cared for by descendants, his commemoration has been exclusively undertaken by the state while the possibility of surviving relatives remains obscure. Furthermore, while family ancestors are propitiated in periodic rituals timed according to the lunar calendar, uncle Hồ is trapped in the allusions of a secularised solar calendar. Moreover, he is the only Vietnamese dead, without an ancestor anniversary. Instead the state vigorously celebrates his birth which is at odds with local cosmologies and bounds him as a spirit to many unduly returns.

Hồ Chí Minh died on the meaningful date of the 2nd of September (1969), which marks the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence that Hồ himself read in front of the crowds of thousands. To avoid association of the national day with sorrow and loss at a time when the revolution was far from fulfilling its aims,

the party concealed his death and announced the September the 3rd as the official date of death. The 'secret' was kept among a handful of senior state figures until 1990, when changes in economy and the political scene gathered pace and the 'old guard' of statesmen associated with Hồ Chí Minh's leadership were swept from power. On the occasion of Hồ Chí Minh's centenary state agencies eventually announced the 2nd of September as the actual date of death.

To further add to the dissonances involved in his commemoration, Hồ Chí Minh is the only forebear with a body still intact. Enshrined in a mausoleum, his embalmed body lies in state, meticulously placed on a wooden divan. Lying there under the stunned gaze of scores of visitors, it is as if he is still alive. In his written testament Hồ has made provisions for his death requesting for a humble funeral, so that people's time and money as well as precious farmland were not wasted. He also asked for his body to be cremated, urging for incineration to be adopted as general practice. Ignoring his wishes party members proceeded with their plans - which they secretly made long before his death - to preserve his body (Duiker 2000:566). The project for the preservation of the body and the construction of the mausoleum was carried out with Soviet aid by experts who overseen the preservation of Lenin's body and the construction of his depository (see Ba 2005). According to official sources, the entire people contributed to the making of the mausoleum, with precious materials dispatched from many parts of the country, especially the South, at the time ravaged by war and conflict (see also chapter 6). The main materials, lustrous marble and ironwood were quarried at the Marble Mountains of Đà Nẵng and extracted from the central highland regions respectively, where major enemy stations were based.

Ponderous in style and with an imposing presence, the mausoleum was intended to reflect the shape of a lotus flower. In Viet Nam reflections of lotus flower rising from the primeval mud, have historically been associated with the birth of Buddha and thus the image bears a reference to enlightened existence and propitious posterity. In the case of Hồ Chí Minh, the questions about his status as a dead and his posthumous fate arise ever more pressing in the post-socialist context and as the state-sponsored cult intensifies. With his death being unending because he died unmarried and without descendants, and his embalmed body lying in state, the posterity of uncle Hồ is imbued with ambiguities. His promotion as a benevolent 'national uncle' rather than a prolific ancestral spirit further adds to the

uncertainties and ambiguities regarding his death and fate in posterity. Such uncertainties afflict his post-death existence which is rather incongruous with the posthumous existence of ancestral spirits.

Epilogue

In the current literature on Việt Nam ritual revival and resurgence in commemoration practices have become somewhat of a truism. A series of studies has pointed to the proliferation and intensification of ritual and religious practices in contemporary Việt Nam, particularly since the introduction of *đổi mới* reforms in 1986. This surge has attracted intensive scholarly interest among foreign researchers and has become the main object of plenty of ethnographic and historical studies (Dror 2004; Tai 2001; Taylor 2008). In this burgeoning literature, the commemoration fever and surge in other worldly presences have been closely associated with post-socialist transition, the emerging market, and the ensuing economic liberalisation. More particularly, anthropological studies have been largely concerned with momentous events in the course of the country's recent history, historic shifts in political economy and their impact on memory, kinship and ritual practices (Endres 2001; Jellema 2007; Kleinen 1999; Kwon 2006; 2008; Luong 1993; 2003; Malarney 2002; 2007; Taylor 2004a). Such studies have been mainly concerned with how war, revolution and market reforms have shaped commemoration practices and ritual engagement with the dead.

In his well known study of a northern Vietnamese village, Malarney (2002) examines the impact of socialist modernity on ritual practices, its limited success in reform, and current dynamics towards the re-emergence of ritual as the prime site for the articulation of the post-socialist social. Similarly, Endres examines the 'failures and attainments' of socialist reform in a northern village and the 'local dynamics of negotiating and re-structuring ritual space' in the late-socialist context (2001:70). Other studies undertaken in southern localities have pointed to the increasing importance of the transition to market economy as the latter has markedly contributed to a heightened sense of enchantment and an intensification of popular pilgrimages (Taylor 2008; Lê 2007). Other enchanted vehicles such as spectres and ghosts have further served anthropologists with a focus so as to discuss and analyse the articulations of economic anxieties, past animosities, and current efforts in reconciliation (Kwon 2006; 2008; Leshkowits 2008). In a similar guise, the surge in contemporary medium practices has been mostly understood in relation to the contemporary pursuits and economic anxieties of the living as well as in terms of their therapeutic effects and their consequences for individual

emancipation (Endres 2007; Fejstald 2006; Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2006, 2008, Norton 2006).

My own study has examined the proliferation of ritual practices pertaining to the dead not only as symptomatic of shifting histories, changing political projects and uncertain transitions. Primarily, the present study has pointed to spirit related practices as intense and intensive efforts at re-establishing connections and perpetuating relations between the living and the dead. It has thus added ontology to economy, and existential questions to historical ones. Without losing sight of current economic and political developments, the study has set these practices within the context of a distinct cosmology and a distinctive realisation of kinship which include other-worldly entities as integral presences in the unfolding of the social. Far from accounting for spiritual entities as spectres which are furnished by the memories, anxieties and desires of the living, the study has recounted spiritual entities as active in the actualisation of relations. While a number of recent studies have been primarily concerned with how the living come into terms with the memory and trauma of war or with the challenges of liberal economics, my central concern has been to identify why and in what ways scores of related and unrelated dead come to be pertinent, significant and extant beings in contemporary Việt Nam.

In my area of fieldwork, the sacred landscape is inhabited by multitudes of dead including celebrated revolutionary heroes, proverbial forebears, anonymous ghostly entities, and illustrious kings of the past. In this heaving ritual economy, enshrined and errant spirits do not always fit easily into the dichotomies the Western epistemological tradition privileges. Contrary to common suggestions, distinctions such as those between the state and the family, the public and the private, the local and the national, are as much inappropriate as imported. Many of the studies mentioned above have used extensively such distinctions to analyse their findings and have subsequently interpreted the surge in ritual practices in terms of state hegemony and popular resistance, empowerment and contestation. Delving into the crowded landscape of memory, such studies have highlighted incongruities between state-sponsored worldly memorials and family-focused remembrance rituals, between the selective operation of public memory that excludes those who fought against the revolutionary state and the encompassing memory of family members who emphasise the moral obligations the living have

towards all of their dead kin. Pointing to the 'selective redemption of the past' (Marr 1981:285), anthropologists as well as historians have examined the state glorification of revolutionaries and 'martyrs' (Malarney 1996; Giebel 2001; Tai 1998) and opposed it to the incorporation of the excluded dead in the communal and familial ritual space (Kwon 2006; 2008).

In Huế, the scores of ordinary and extraordinary dead and the scalarity of remembrance rituals is not easily arranged into bifurcated domains themselves bespeaking of underlying yet deep conflicts. The dead as well as the scales involved in their commemoration form complex and intertwined categories. The intensity and depth of such complexity becomes evident in the commemoration of former sovereigns and royals, the Nguyễn kings. In the course of their eventful posterity the Nguyễn kings have been both exceptional and exempted dead. Previously forming the core of the polity as divinised forefathers, they were brushed aside by the colonial powers, and later on pushed to the margins of the emerging socialist state which effected their public disremembering. The recent restoration of the former citadel performed by the synergy of the state and international institutions as a 'world heritage site' and a 'national treasure' has led to the return of past kings as extraordinary ancestors. It goes without saying that the descendants of the royal line have played a key part in this as they sought to ritually restore past kings and courtiers as both highly potent spirits and formidable ancestors. Their reinstatement has taken place in an array of contexts including royal temples and associated pagodas as well as princely estates and noble houses, all of which are scattered throughout Huế. Most importantly, this project has involved both the state and the family as key actors. While the motives each side brings to the restoration might not be symmetrical or congruent, it is through their combined efforts that the return of the kings has become possible. Studies examining the restoration of the royal complex as a popular visitors' site have stressed the political dimensions of this restitution (Johnson 2001; Salemink 2007). Yet, the surge in commemoration practices centering on past kings cannot be merely understood in terms of the 'politics' of rituals and remembrance (DiGregorio & Salmink 2007:433). Overturning such reductionist understandings, the manifold propitiation of past kings as both former sovereigns and extraordinary ancestors by descendants and non-descendants alike, hint at the cultural underpinnings of memory and the political process.

Commemorative practices as enacted in Huế defy understandings of social life that rely on compartmentalisation, clearly distinguishing between individual and central state levels. Extraordinary categories of dead call for an appreciation of kinship and politics not as separate domains but rather as mutually informing facets of social life. As Errington's (1989) seminal study suggests, persons, genealogies and politics are not distinct domains but rather part of the same social fabric. This is amply manifested in the state-sponsored cult of Hồ Chí Minh and his promotion as a benevolent avuncular figure and national ancestor. By grounding the study of the state glorification of 'uncle Hồ' in a specific locality and with respect to a specific memorial complex, my study has revealed and discussed the complexities and ambiguities involved in this monumentalising project whereby national policies, local practices, and family histories become inexorably enmeshed. Rather than simply falling into the over-used category of resistance practices, local's responses to the state-sponsored project rest on strategic silences and avoidances the theoretical value of which hinges on their analytical indeterminacy and ambiguity. These must in turn be understood within the context of specific kinship practices and cosmological understandings. The latter add further complexity by pointing to the cultural embeddedness of state commemorative projects and the portrayal of 'uncle Hồ' as a benevolent ancestral spirit. With his death being unending because he died unmarried and without descendants, and his embalmed body lying in state, the posterity of uncle Hồ is beleaguered with pervasive uncertainties. He is the only proverbial ancestor without an ancestor anniversary; at the same time, it is his birthday that is being celebrated in the state almanac. These characteristics make him ill-fitting to be a settled ancestral spirit. On account of this, he could be either cast in the spiritual census of the late socialist polity as an extremely potent spirit or grouped together with the crowds of eerie and unsettled entities.

The multitudes and diversity of dead in my area of fieldwork point not only to the intricate links and entanglements between analytically separate domains but attest to an understanding of other-worldly existence as fluid and transformable. The diversity of ancestral souls and antecedent figures evident in local idioms point to a conception of ancestorhood as a shifting and evolving state whereby forebears are transformed from intimate kin into originators of descent groupings and later on into primordial ancestral souls. This shifting posterity of forerunners is

impartibly linked with the forbearance of their living descendants and thus with the advent, growth and life cycle of subsequent generations. The birth or marriage of a child can transform a deceased 'grandfather' into a 'great grandfather' and subsequently contribute to the enhancement of the house and its development into a lineage sub-group.

This transformable posterity is neither linear nor unswerving. The passing of generations does not only enhance the existence of antecedent generations, but it can also result in the forgetting and the neglecting of forebears. Ancestral figures can become lost souls as links and communication with their living descendants are severed either due to unfortunate death or to childlessness. Thus, in specific contexts and under certain forces, ancestors can become lost souls, and vice versa. Hence, ancestors and ghosts are not opposing categories but rather transformations of each other. The non-becoming a ghost is brought about by the attentive care shown by the living who recognize a dead as a relative. The actions of living kin are the crucial dimension of posthumous identity, a case of becoming being partly determined by the agency of others located across the divide that death forms.

In Hué, posterity is characterised by a pervasive uncertainty. This uncertainty about what happens to dead kin after death and over the circumstances of their existence prompts the need for constant propitiation. Through periodic rituals, living kin seek to offer material and emotional support to deceased kin and contribute to their well being in posterity. In Hué, rituals are not offset by the economic and political anxieties of the living as a number of the above mentioned studies suggest. Nor are they prompted by unwavering beliefs that the dead can 'exert influence over the living' which underscores the need to 'turn them into allies' (DiGregorio & Salemink 2007:433), and coerce them into diffusing their blessings (Lehman 1996). Rather, ancestral rituals seek to evince and instantiate connections between kin who exist in different ontological realms. As I have argued, the dead are not simply remembered as departed, inaccessible others but rather made into present and active participants in the process of the ritual unfolding. Ancestor anniversaries do not merely seek to restore the memories of the dead among the living but rather to encourage the former to remember and engage with their living counterparts.

In general, anniversaries seek to induce the dead as both effectual and affective entities whose existence is impartibly linked with that of their living

counterparts. They do so by means of appealing to the ‘senses’ and ‘sensibilities’ of the dead through riveting feasts and copious offerings. In Việt Nam, ritual practices are firmly grounded on the practice of making appropriate offerings of food and consumables to spirits and involve commensality between dead and living kin. Despite this pervasive characteristic of Vietnamese rituals, the practice of offering food to spirits has been largely disregarded by relevant ethnographic studies. Food offerings proffered to ancestral spirits are part of symmetrical exchanges between living and dead kin. In anniversaries, the dead are invited to enjoy copious offerings, engage in commensality with their living counterparts and reciprocate in bequests by means of casting favourable influences. In this context, the dead are not passive entities but rather active participants who keenly contribute in the cycle of giving and receiving. Flows of food, valuables and blessings are continually moving between this world (*đương*) and the other world (*âm*), instantiating connections and disparities between corporeal and non-corporeal entities, between living and dead kin.

Echoing studies in other Southeast Asian societies which focus on sharing food as essential in the formation of kinship, I have examined commensality as significant in the creation of intimacy and relations among kin. In her study of a Malay fishing community, Carsten (1997) shows how relatedness is created by means of cooking and sharing food and living space. In Việt Nam, feeding and commensality among kin implicates both corporeal and non-corporeal entities. Ritual feasts and ensuing commensality transcend the divide that death forms, creating intimacy between dead and living kin. In this context, eating is construed as an essential human capacity, fundamental to human sociality, and thus underscoring the basic similarity of the living and the dead on the grounds of which exchange can proceed.

Such reciprocal exchanges between living and dead kin are more apparent in the context of the house. According to Carsten, the house is the locus where kinship and intimacy are generated. Drawing upon her work, I have examined Vietnamese houses as pivotal in the creation of intimacy. In Việt Nam, the house is an enduring locus passed down to subsequent generations. The Vietnamese house is the physical and relational context within which one is conceived and born. It is also the house which one remains attached to after death inhabiting it as a venerated ancestor. In this context, houses are the familial abode where both living

and dead kin co-habit as intimates. Ancestral altars form the perceived core of the house around which the house is unified as a grouping. Ancestral altars become the focus of the house not only in the context of life-cycle rituals but also in the context of everyday life.

To say that ancestral altars are the focal point of the house is not to say that relations of descent are predominant to the exclusion of all other relations, including relations of affinity and siblingship. As I have shown, domestic altars shelter not only agnatic forebears but also a number of close kin, including siblings, aunts and in-laws. Moreover, in certain cases domestic altars enshrine both paternal and maternal kin, resulting in 'one altar with two sides'. This arrangement of ancestral altars transcends dichotomies between seemingly incompatible principles, namely between alliance and descent. As a ritual community, the house unites within its boundaries a number of incongruent kin such as consanguines and affines. Furthermore, house gardens and yards incorporate a number of unlikely dwellers such as ambiguous kin and unrelated spirits as integral part of the domestic complex. Bilateral connections become relevant beyond the confines of the house, especially so in the context of lower order descent groupings. In the respective ancestral halls, altars enshrine ancestral conjugal couples rather than male forebears. They thus often entail the participation of both maternal and the paternal kin. Male forebears are enshrined as originators of a grouping in higher order altars, in lineage and sub-lineage halls. Hence, the transformative process whereby bilateral relations are transposed into unilateral connections is not instantaneous and realised by means of an eventual 'act of closure', i.e., death but rather effected through the passing of generations. The relational cycles of forebears and subsequent generations involve not only lineal kin and agnates but also a number of non-lineal kin. Such encompassing relational cycles suggest a broader and more inclusive conception of kinship and relatedness. This conception proposes a new reading of the so called 'two sides of kinship'; a reading that is not predicated upon an emphasis on cognatic or unilateral connections but rather hinges on the symbiosis of two ontologically different sides of kin, namely the dead and the living.

The present thesis has examined the formation of kinship from the perspective of the relations between the living and the dead. I have suggested that reciprocal exchanges between antecedent and subsequent generations in ritual as well as in

everyday contexts is pivotal for formation of kinship relations and the creation of intimacy. My study accounts for other-worldly entities, be it proverbial and sheltered ancestors or unidentified and unbounded spirits, as vigorous presences that actively contribute in the formation of kinship. This is kinship articulated not on the basis of identity but on the grounds of and because of the operation of difference, namely the difference that pertains to the ontological divide that death instantiates.



Plate 1: An old house in Hue comprised of the main hall and secondary building.



Plate 2: Ancestral altar with grandparents' portraits.



Plate 3: Funeral procession outside the cemetery.



Plate 4: Scene from the 50th day post-death ritual.



Plate 5: Releasing live creatures for the benefit of lost souls.



Plate 6: Offerings made to those lost during the siege of the citadel by the French (1885).



Plate 7: Miniature temples (*am*) in a house garden.



Plate 8: Ancestral hall.



Plate 9: Ritual held on the anniversary of Gia Long, the first Nguyễn king.



Plate 10: Burning votive offerings outside the temple of the Nguyễn kings.



Plate 11: Pupils on a visit to Hồ Chí Minh museum in Lường Nghi village.



Plate 12: Hồ Chí Minh mausoleum in Hà Nội (photo by Konstantinos Retsikas).

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