

**The Rise of the Hung Temple:  
Shifting Constructions of Place, Religion and  
Nation in Contemporary Vietnam**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis provides an ethnographic exploration of the Hung Temple in Phu Tho province, Vietnam. As a temple dedicated to the Hung Kings at a location that is promoted as a national heritage site, the Hung Temple provides the setting for different debates about ongoing cultural, political and religious transformations in contemporary Vietnam. I focus on the state-led construction of place and the associated efforts to foster nationalism, popular religiosity and a sense of shared identity amongst the Vietnamese. I especially emphasise the meanings that people produce about the Hung Temple as a historically significant location, an important work place and as a sacred site of national veneration to the ancestors that are now revered as deities. My framing of these issues is sensitive to the state's shifting relationship to religion and to ancestor worship in a period of economic and political transition. I employ practice theory in particular to illuminate the understandings and connections that different facets of society have with the Hung Temple.

The use of practice theory is important because it helps me identify how the state has constructed the Hung Temple as well as the potentially unanticipated ways that different people relate to the Hung Kings and the Temple. My approach includes attention to the ambitions of national rulers who construct an official narrative of the nation through their depiction of the Hung Temple's significance. It also includes the relationship that temple priests, administrators, and bureaucrats have with the temple complex and its surrounding landscape. My practice theory approach additionally gives attention to the people who develop their own individual practices of worship to the Hung Kings and who come to see the Hung Kings as potent deities from whom they can receive the blessings and benefits that will help improve their lives. Finally, by focusing on moments of national celebration on the Hung Kings' anniversary, I show how these different facets of society come together under the same purpose, but sometimes to different ends. In particular, I use the anniversary celebrations to underline how dynamic the relationships are that people develop with the Hung

Kings and how these relationships are not entirely determined by the state's framing of the Hung Kings. I also show how the people in attendance are not necessarily in harmony despite the state's efforts to foster a codified, communal practice at the Temple.

Through these explorations, the thesis highlights the discourses and actions of a number of social actors who participate in place-based practices at the Hung Temple. The text offers a strongly ethnographic and anthropological engagement with a prominent heritage site that adds to our understandings of the relationship between politics and religion, as well as to our understandings of how these domains impact upon the practices and identities of citizens. Ultimately, the thesis uses the case of the Hung Temple, and of the growing embrace of their ritual worship, as a way to add nuance to discussions of what it means to be Vietnamese in contemporary times.

## Thesis declaration

I, Hang Ngo, certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the *Copyright Act 1968*.

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## Glossary

<b>Vietnamese terms</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<i>‘Chim có tổ, người có tông’</i>	The birds have their nest, the people have their hometown
<i>‘Một cây làm chẳng lên non, ba cây chụm lại nên hòn núi cao’</i>	One tree cannot make a mountain; three trees united together would make a high peak
<i>‘Uống nước nhớ nguồn’</i>	[When you] drink the water remember where it comes from
<i>anh hùng</i>	heroes
<i>Bảo tàng Hùng Vương</i>	Hung Vuong Museum
<i>bánh dày</i>	round sticky rice cake
<i>bánh chưng</i>	square sticky rice cake
<i>bát bảo, chấp kích</i>	the eight types of weapons
<i>‘Cao sơn cảnh hành’</i>	‘The beautiful path to the mountain’
<i>cây hoa đại</i>	frangipani tree
<i>cây vạn tuế</i>	sago palm
<i>chữ Hán</i>	Sino Nom
<i>chữ Quốc ngữ</i>	Vietnamese alphabet
<i>chùa</i>	pagoda
<i>Chùa Thiên Quang</i>	Thien Quang pagoda
<i>chúc vắn</i>	ritual prayer
<i>Con Rồng cháu Tiên</i>	Children of the Dragon, grandchildren of the Fairy
<i>công (công lao)</i>	merit or contribution
<i>Cổng Đền</i>	Temple Gate
<i>Cột đá thề</i>	Oath stone
<i>Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam</i>	Communist Party of Vietnam
<i>đạo</i>	(to refer to religion) the way
<i>Đạo Mẫu</i>	Mother Goddess religion

<i>Đạo Rồng Tiên</i>	Dragon and Fairy Cult
<i>Đạo Tứ phủ</i>	Four Palaces Religion
<i>đền</i>	temple
<i>Đền Âu Cơ</i>	Au Co Temple
<i>Đền Giếng</i>	Water Well Temple
<i>Đền Hạ</i>	Lower Temple
<i>Đền Lạc Long Quân</i>	Lac Long Quan Temple
<i>Đền Thượng</i>	Top Temple
<i>Đền Trung</i>	Middle Temple
<i>đình</i>	communal house
<i>Đổi Mới</i>	(literally meaning: 'renovation') economic reforms initiated in Vietnam in 1986
<i>đồng bào</i>	people who come from the same womb of a mother
<i>duyên số</i>	fate
<i>Giỗ tổ Hùng Vương</i>	Hung Kings death anniversary
<i>Hát Xoan</i>	Xoan singing
<i>hầu đồng</i>	medium possession
<i>Hội Đền Hùng</i>	Hung Temple festival
<i>Hội người cao tuổi</i>	Association of the Elderly (an aged association)
<i>Hùng Vương Lăng</i>	Hung Kings Mausoleum
<i>Hùng Vương tổ miếu</i>	the temple of the ancestral Hung Kings (a title for the Middle Temple)
<i>huyện</i>	district
<i>Kính thiên linh điện</i>	the temple worships the Deity of Heaven (a title for the Top Temple)
<i>Kỳ</i>	Region
<i>làng</i>	villages
<i>lễ chung</i>	communal ritual
<i>lễ riêng</i>	personal ritual

<i>lộc vua</i>	Kings' blessed gifts
<i>Lực lượng vũ trang nhân dân</i>	People's Armed Force
<i>lưỡng long châu nguyệt</i>	two dragons moving towards a sun
<i>Mặt trận Tổ Quốc Việt Nam</i>	Vietnam Fatherland Front
<i>My Nương</i>	princess of the eighteenth Hung King
<i>Nhà Bia</i>	stele house
<i>Nhà chuông</i>	bell house
<i>'Quan trên trông xuống người ta trông vào'</i>	'Both your boss and the surrounding people evaluate your performance'
<i>Quốc giỗ</i>	(another name for the Hung Kings death anniversary) National anniversary
<i>quốc hồn</i>	the soul of the nation
<i>tam sơn cấm địa</i>	the sacred prohibited zone around the three mountains of the Hung Temple
<i>thắp hương</i>	burn the incense
<i>thầy cúng</i>	ritual specialist
<i>thầy/cô giáo</i>	male/female teacher
<i>thượng cung</i>	sanctum sanctorum room
<i>tiền dầu hương</i>	(literarily meaning: 'the money [for] light and incense') offering money
<i>tiền hành sai</i>	money paid to the temple keeper for helping with prayer recitation
<i>tiếp phúc</i>	distributing the Kings blessings
<i>tín ngưỡng</i>	belief
<i>tỉnh</i>	province
<i>tôn giáo</i>	religion
<i>Trò Trám</i>	Tro Tram performance
<i>về nguồn</i>	returning to the origin
<i>xã</i>	commune

## Ethnographic prelude

*I am at the Hung Temple on Nghia Linh Mountain in Phu Tho province, on the ninth day of the third month of the year of the snake in the lunar calendar<sup>1</sup> (18 April 2013 in the Gregorian calendar). Journalists have estimated that about one million people would be going to the Hung Temple on the next day, the Hung Kings anniversary (Nguyễn & Bùi 2013) and television news would later feature a delegation of leaders, including the Vice President of Vietnam, visiting the Temple on that anniversary day (Bản tin tối 2013a).*

*Even late in the evening before the anniversary day, the crowd of visitors at the Hung Temple Festival Centre did not seem to be diminishing. The mountain was brightly lit up like a giant candle. Lights were turned on along the paths and in and around every temple. All the gates and doors were opened. Temple management staff were present, busily walking around to guide people who were doing rituals.*



**Plate 1:** Nga (third from the left) with her family outside the Top Temple on the night before the Hung Kings death anniversary day in 2013. I am on the left hand side of the photo.

*Nga, a friend of mine who lived in a village close to the Hung Temple, led her family and friends to the Temple when it was nearly 10 pm. They were excitedly*

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<sup>1</sup> The lunar calendar is the calendar that is based on the cycle of the moon. In the Vietnamese society, the lunar Chinese calendar was adopted and popularly used until the replacement of the Gregorian calendar during the French colonialism. However, in contemporary time, the lunar calendar is still influential in the religious life of the Vietnamese.



*taking a photo as a memento in front of the Top Temple (one of a number of temples at the Hung Temple site) and invited me to join them (see Plate 1). They had just conducted a ritual to the Hung Kings inside the Temple. For Nga, it was compulsory to conduct a ritual to the Kings on the occasion of the Hung Temple festival (Hội Đền Hùng) but she often did it on the day before the official national ritual day. On that day, she explained, the Temple would be for the political leaders.*

*I had decided to stay at the Temple site as late as possible since it was the night before the anniversary day on which the national ritual would be conducted. At midnight, police started to head down from the Top Temple and to ask all the pilgrims to stop their journey up to the Temple and to go down the mountain. They were evacuating the whole mountain to prepare for the morning event. As soon as the pilgrims left, the temple keepers, guards and assistants, under the supervision of the temple managers, quickly cleaned the temples, picking up rubbish, cleaning doors, floors and steps, and removing the offerings on the altar tables. At the end, the head manager went to check every detail to make sure that the whole area was clean and tidy. This was the peak time of the year for Temple staff, requiring all their energy and concentration.*

*As no one else could go up the mountain, I walked down towards the shop of Mrs Thuong, one of my key interlocutors, to collect my bike. She greeted me and smiled. I asked her in return: 'So, were sales good today?' 'Yes!', she replied and in a happy tone continued, 'This year the anniversary day is on a Friday, but the most important day for us was actually the previous Sunday, when the biggest number of visitors came to the festival and we sold most of our goods'.*

*By 1:00 am, Nghia Linh Mountain was quiet, while not very far from its foot, on a newly built concrete square, thousands of people were eating, dancing, singing and buying souvenirs (See Plate 2). Many would stay up all night waiting for the big day to begin with the ceremony later in the morning. While I was going home, I kept thinking about my friend Nga, the temple staff and Mrs Thuong. They all saw the festival as important, but for different reasons. The many people*

*gathered there had distinct ways of engaging with the Temple site. They also had varied ways of constructing its meaning and significance.*



**Plate 2: A wave of sleepless visitors at the Hung Temple on the night before the Hung Kings' death anniversary day in 2013**

I have described the scene the night before the anniversary ceremony to encourage you to question and consider the practices of the people that interact with the Hung Temple. On the one hand, the scene suggests a huge performance run by government-employed managers and provincial officers; this performance involves state leaders and the public media. On the other hand, it highlights the dedication of individuals who connect to the site and find spiritual or material benefits from being at the Temple.

This ethnographic account offers a window into some significant practices that relate to religious revival in contemporary Vietnam. It also highlights the varied motivations, memories and experiences that bring people to this particular place.

At a broader level, this thesis examines how various historical and structural forces come together in the actions of particular people to result in the rise of the Hung Temple. It also examines how these practices contribute to understandings of Vietnam and the Vietnamese people in a time of rapid socio-cultural, religious and political transformations.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 1 The rise of the Hung Kings

This thesis provides an ethnographic exploration of the Hung Temple, on Nghia Linh Mountain in Phu Tho province, Vietnam. When using the term 'Hung Temple', I am referring to a site, which includes a number of temples, collectively known as the Hung Temple and dedicated to the ritual worship of Viet ancestors known as the Hung Kings. The Hung Temple provides the setting for different debates about ongoing cultural, political and religious transformations in contemporary Vietnam. I focus on the state-led construction of place and the associated efforts to foster nationalism and popular religiosity amongst the Vietnamese. I especially emphasise the meanings that people produce about the Hung Temple as a historically significant location, an important work place and as a sacred site of national veneration to the ancestors that are now revered as deities. These practices influence the transformation of individual identities while fostering shared notions of what it means to be Vietnamese.

### ***Studying the Hung Kings: motivations and early experiences***

My focus on the Hung Kings and the Hung Temple is motivated by a continued attempt to understand myself, where I grew up and my country. I was born in a city near the Hung Temple. In my childhood, I heard stories that the Hung Kings were our ancestors who established the first kingdom on our land, the precursor of our nation today. School, or when visiting the Temple with teachers, I was reminded that I belonged to the Viet community that originated from this place; and that people continue to worship the Kings at the Hung Temple.

My curiosity about the Hung Kings developed over my life. As a child, I often cycled around the Nghia Linh Mountain with my friends and we tried to identify the landscape that was described in stories about the Hung Kings. I climbed up the mountain to see if I could observe the river junction of the Hong and Da River that I read about in books referring to the Hung Kings. When I was at university, I learnt more about the 'ancient' history of Vietnam and wondered how our ancestors lived. Now that I have a small family I go to the Temple to perform

rituals. I wonder if the Kings listen to me and bestow their magical powers as they are said to do.

With this early exposure and inspiration, I chose to study stories about the Hung Kings through a Master's Degree thesis within the discipline of folklore studies. From this, I have come to the conclusion that villagers in Phu Tho desire to, and effectively use, the stories of the Hung Kings to construct their sense of belonging, and to draw themselves into an imagined region with a shared identity as children of the Hung Kings (Ngô 2007). I found that there were hardly any early written records of these stories and that the oral versions were systematically collected by state officials over the second half of twentieth century. This shows that the role of the Hung Kings in the history of the Viet people has become more important in recent times. The lens of folklore studies helped me to understand the significance of the Hung Kings.

Also, during that period of my research, I discovered the lively practice of the cult to the Hung Kings and how this practice was far more complex than my prior assumption that it was just a cult venerating a historical dynasty of kings. I learned that the Hung Temple plays an important role in building up the symbol of the Kings and that the Temple complex has a significant role in the work and life practices of people who relate to it. Many people go to the Temple to practice their beliefs about the Hung Kings. In recent years, the Hung Temple has become an increasingly popular destination for large numbers of visitors, not only Viet people from Phu Tho and other provinces in Vietnam but also Viet people living abroad and some foreign tourists. There is a constant flow of people going to the Temple throughout the year, but numbers increase significantly in the festival season, which starts in the last month of the old lunar year and lasts over the first three months of the following year. The peak visiting time occurs during the Hung Kings anniversary festival, which begins on the tenth day of the third month of the year in the lunar calendar and attracts very large numbers of visitors at that time. Television news reported that around one million people visited the Hung Temple during the anniversary festival in 2007 and that there were five million visitors in 2011 (Trương & Đinh 2011).

This Temple has been significant to me, to other Vietnamese and to the contemporary nation state of Vietnam in various ways. These observations motivated me to choose to study the Hung Temple for this thesis. In the following section I introduce the Hung Kings and the Hung Temple in Phu Tho, before proceeding to discuss research questions, theoretical frameworks and methods.

## **Setting the scene: the Hung Kings and the Hung Temple**

The story of the Hung Kings is popular among the Viet (Kinh) community, the major ethnic group in Vietnam, as an explanation of their origin. According to stories published in schoolbooks, there was a dragon king, Lac Long Quan, who fell in love with a fairy, Au Co. They married and she gave birth to a hundred eggs. Soon after, the hundred eggs broke and out stepped 100 sons. The sons were brought up and divided into two groups, 50 sons following the father to the coastal region while the other 50 followed the mother to the mountainous region. The eldest son stayed at Phong Chau (which is in Phu Tho province today) and set up his kingdom named Van Lang. He was called the Hung King. The kingdom was ruled by 18 generations of Hung Kings and was the first kingdom of the Viet people. The descendants of the Hung Kings built temples to worship the Kings for their achievements and contributions to Viet society. The location of the original temple to the Kings is said to be on Nghia Linh Mountain in Phu Tho province. It is because of this story that the Vietnamese often refer to themselves as the descendants of the Hung Kings, or ‘children of the dragon, grandchildren of the fairy’ (Nguyễn 2011a, pp. 5-7).<sup>2</sup>

It is hard to determine the age of oral stories about the Hung Kings, and even harder to determine when people started to practise their devotion to them. Historians have found pieces of documents written in the first millennium CE about the Hung Kings, their kingdom and their people (Nguyễn & Bui 2012; Nguyễn 2013). Some Chinese documents dating from the fifth century to the

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<sup>2</sup> This is my summarised translation of the story ‘Children of the Dragon, grandchildren of the Fairy’ (*Con Rồng cháu Tiên*) in the schoolbook for Literature (Bộ Giáo dục 2000).

fourteenth century contained pieces of information about a person who ruled the people and territory of the kingdom called Van Lang, which covers the main part of northern Vietnam today. However, the information in these texts is incomplete, disparate and even confused in some details (Taylor 1983).<sup>3</sup> Some scholars argue that these documents and the little information in them were the materials for the creation of fuller versions of the stories of the Hung Kings by Viet scholars during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries of the Viet feudal kingdoms (Kelley 2012; Nguyễn 2013)<sup>4</sup>. The stories of the Hung Kings were told in more detail in some collections of tales of the spirits of the Viet people; two of them that scholars highlight are: 'The wonderful tales of Lĩnh Nam' and 'The world of Viet spirits'.<sup>5</sup>

Then in the fifteenth century, the stories of the Hung Kings appeared for the first time in the Viet emperors' official historical records, 'The Complete Annals of Đại Việt' (*Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*). This is a historical record written by the feudal mandarins under orders from a Vietnamese feudal king, Le Thanh Tong. In this document, the Hung Kings were recorded as belonging to the 'Hong Bang era', in a patriarchal lineage linked to one of the five ancient Chinese Emperors, the Agricultural Emperor 'Shennong' (Thần Nông). These stories confirm that the Kings inherited the land and set up and ruled the kingdom over eighteen generations. There is also a reference to one of the Hung Kings being Lạc Long

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<sup>3</sup>These early texts were the writings of Chinese scholars recording their exploration of new land and people around their kingdom. Some texts were 'Notes on the water flows' (*Thuỷ Kinh Chú Sở*) and 'Description on Nam Viet' (*Nam Việt Chí*). Vietnamese scholars learnt the Chinese language and also wrote about their land. Some of their texts became early historical records of Vietnam. Examples include: 'Outline of the history of the Great Viet' (*Đại Việt Sử Lược*), and 'Outline of the history of the Viet' (*Việt Sử Lược*). Detailed discussion on these early documents can be read in (Cherry 2004; Haydon 2009; Kelley 2012; Nguyễn 2013; Pelley 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Critically, scholars argue that the characters in the story of Hong Bang Clan were created from materials in Chinese literature, such as King Kinh Duong, the grandfather of the Hung Kings (Trần 2013).

<sup>5</sup> 'The world of Viet spirits' (*Việt Điện U Linh*) was a collection of tales of spirits, edited by Ly Te Xuyen in the fourteenth century CE. This collection recorded nearly ten stories about the Hung Kings' dynasty and the Van Lang kingdom (Lý & Lê 1961). 'The wonderful tales of Lĩnh Nam' is known in Vietnamese as *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái*; this collection of tales is said to be written by Tran The Phap. In the preface, the author states that he collected the tales in the book as told to him by ordinary people in the fifteenth century. This collection includes the story 'The stories of the Hong Bang Clan' (*Hồng Bàng thị truyện*), which describes the Hung Kings' lineage (Nguyễn & Trần 2010).

Quân, the father of the Viet people (Viện Khoa học xã hội 1993). These narratives were repeated in subsequent historical records in the Le and Nguyen dynasties. (For an example, see 'The national history of the Nguyen dynasty' (*Quốc Sử quán triều Nguyễn*) (Viện Sử học 2007). Vietnamese scholars subsequently passed these traditions on into the colonial period in the early twentieth century (Nguyễn 1919; Trần 1920). As a result, these are the tales and narratives drawn upon in contemporary Vietnam.

### ***Location of the Hung Temple***

The Hung Temple is located in the Hy Cuong commune of Viet Tri city in Phu Tho province (see Figure 1). This hilly zone is 80 km from Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, and on the main road to the north-west border with China. The ethnically diverse region<sup>6</sup> is still predominantly dependent upon agriculture. Partly because of this, Phu Tho remains one of the poorest of the mountain provinces despite the modernisation evident in the rest of the country.

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<sup>6</sup>In 2000, the province had twenty-one recorded ethnicities. There is a Black Tai centre in the neighbouring Yen Bai province, a well-known Muong settlement in the Hoa Binh province and many different ethnic groups in the province of Lao Cai. However, the Viet people have long been the dominant group in Phu Tho, as recorded in the reports of local administration since the late nineteenth century (Schneider 1889 in Nguyễn 1974) to early decades of the twentieth century (Phạm 1939).



**Figure 1: Map of Vietnam with Phu Tho province shown in red**

The Hung Temple is said to be the most prominent and sacred shrine where people display their devotion to the Hung Kings. The Temple complex is situated within a large area, which includes three sacred mountains (*tam sơn cấm địa*) and surrounding land and is adjacent to the Hong River and the Da River. The main site of the Hung Temple is on Nghĩa Linh Mountain, the highest of the three peaks at 175 meters.

Nghĩa Linh Mountain has a group of religious buildings on it (see Figure 2). From the main gate at the foot of the mountain, a pathway leads to the Lower Temple. Next to this temple is a pagoda, with bell house and two Buddha towers. From here, stone steps lead up for about 700 metres to the Middle Temple near the peak of the mountain. Not far away, at the top of the path, are the Top Temple and a construction called the mausoleum of the Hung Kings. This mausoleum is believed to contain the tomb of the sixth Hung King (Vũ 2010). A descending



pathway goes through the yard of the Top Temple and weaves down through the forest on the other side of the mountain. The Water Well temple is located just behind the exit gate.

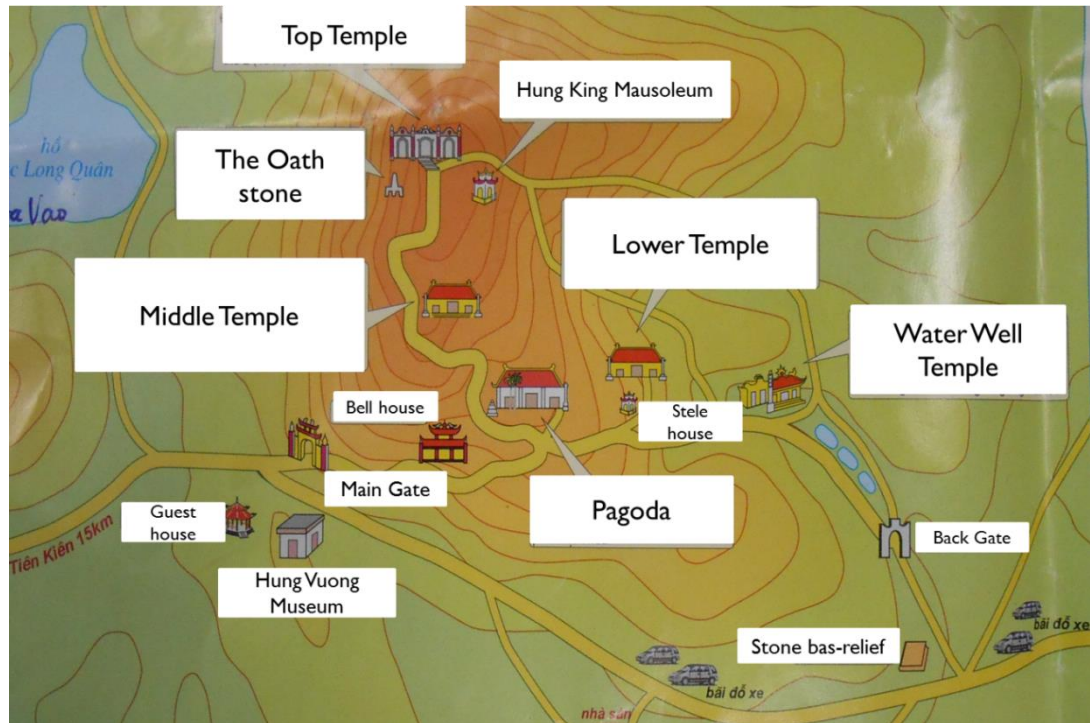


Figure 2: Map of the Hung Temple site before 1990

### ***History of the Temple site***

Based on information in a document from the thirteenth century<sup>7</sup>, scholars believe that early veneration to the Hung Kings was practised in the Hung Temple by villagers in areas around the Nghia Linh Mountain. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were written documents about the spread of the cult of the Hung Kings to northern villages of the Red River Delta, which includes what is now the Phu Tho province (Lê & Phạm 2012, p. 95). This spread, as some recent scholarship points out, was mainly the result of a top down policy of the Vietnamese feudal kings who wanted to unite and systemise the world of gods and spirits in the kingdom they ruled (Nguyễn & Bùi 2012; Tạ 2014) and especially to empower their political positions (Kelly 2012). Vietnamese feudal

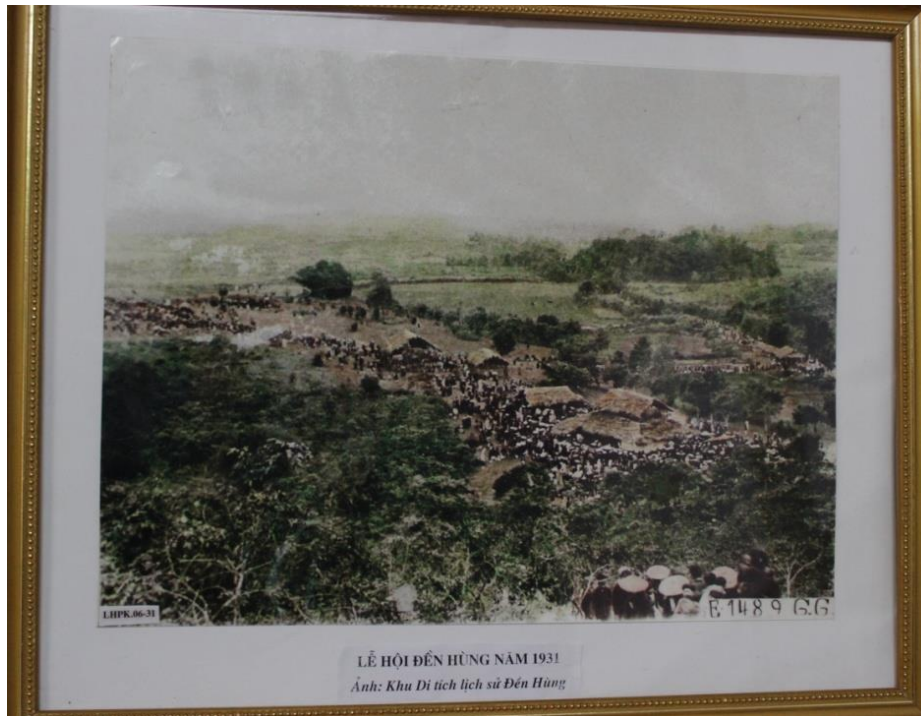
<sup>7</sup> This document is *An Nam chí* (thirteenth century). According to Ta (2014) the information in this document suggests that an early form of worshipping the Hung Kings was a cult of villages in Phong Chau [Phu Tho].

states had long preserved the texts and supported sacred temples and rituals related to the worship of the Hung Kings. By recognising the popular devotional practices and formalising the stories of the Hung Kings in the state's official records, Vietnamese feudal leaders strategically invented and interpreted the symbol of the Hung Kings as a tool to legitimise their royal authority. On the one hand, the symbol of the Hung Kings helped enhance the people's belief concerning their rulers' inherited and sacred power to lead their kingdom. On the other hand, they maintained a sacred kinship link to the powerful northern kingdom, in order to secure their position and their authoritative right to their local territory (Kelly 2012, Nguyễn 2013).

At the end of the nineteenth century, under French colonial rule, agreements between the Vietnamese feudal king and the French divided Vietnam into three regions (*ba Kỳ*). At this time, emerging generations of Vietnamese elites became increasingly active in constructing the history of the Hung Temple. Colonial historians continued to rewrite the stories of the Hung Kings in the history of the Viet kingdom (Nguyễn 1919). Some even turned the historical stories to poem in order to popularise them (Trần & Trần 1922) and make them accessible for school students (Quyển 1930). In this way, the Hung Temple festival began to become better known and started to attract more Vietnamese.

According to the text on a stone marker built in 1922 at the Top Temple, a major rebuilding of the Hung Temple occurred between 1917 and 1922. It was the result of the efforts of Phu Tho provincial leaders in bringing the site to the attention of the Nguyen King, Khai Dinh, and asking him to promote the site as the ancestral temple for the first kings in Viet imperial history. The text on the marker also explains that in 1917, the King approved an edict declaring the tenth day of the third lunar month to be the official day for state-sponsored rituals in the temples on Nghia Linh Mountain. From that time, the Hung Temple festival has attracted state leaders and it has become a major event in the northwest region of Vietnam, attended by large numbers of people (see Plate 3 for an example). Worship of the Hung Kings was not confined to the Hung Temple on Nghia Linh Mountain. An investigation, undertaken by the French School of the

Far East, EFEO (École française d'Extrême-Orient) in 1938, concluded that there were 256 places in Phu Tho Province where the Hung Kings, their generals and their family members were worshipped (Vũ 2010).



**Plate 3: The Hung Temple festival in 1931 (photo displayed at the Hung Vuong Museum)**

Some members of Vietnamese elites influenced by 'Western' (French) education commented on the renovation of the Hung Temple as evidence of the appreciation that the Vietnamese show to their national founding kings. They commented that it was more dangerous to lose the soul of the nation (*quốc hồn*) than merely to lose its independence (Duiker 1976, p. 120). Pham Quynh was typical of such thinkers. He was an active intellectual who promoted a new style of education, influenced by Western thought, to the Vietnamese people. He advocated using the notion of 'country' as a territory shared by people who talk the same language and have the same history, rather than the older notion of 'kingdom', a place inhabited by people who serve the same king. His new understanding of nation placed the Hung Kings and the Hung Temple as a symbol of a shared past that evoked emotions about the origin of the nation (Pham 1929). Pham wrote about his pilgrimage to the Hung Temple:

Coming from three different regions of the country, we visited the Hung Temple and burnt the incense to the Hung Kings. It is so touching to see the new generations of Viet elites of the Western [French] education who are now conducting the traditional ritual. The altar of the Kings is the symbol of the eternal soul of the nation (p. 118).

The changes in the discourses about nation in the writings of such colonial Vietnamese elites reflect a transition wherein Vietnamese nationalist ideas and sentiments began to be mobilised. These changes later became the founding motivation for the investment in the Hung Temple by the modern nation state, as I will explore in this thesis.

Village worship to the Hung Kings continued to be a topic of interest to Vietnamese scholars in the Independent era, which began when the first modern government was established in 1945. Folklorists collected oral and written texts about the Hung Kings, while ethnologists took photos of village temples, recorded village festivals and explored the symbolic meanings of ritual symbols and structures (Đình 1969; Hoàng 1969; Lê 2000; Ngô & Xuân 1986; Nguyễn 1971; Nguyễn 1968; Sở Văn hóa Thông tin 2001). From scholars such as these it can be concluded that the Hung Kings have long been part of the spiritual life of people in the villages around the Hung Temple area. The Hung Kings are seen as the guardians of places, crops and people's lives (Ngô & Xuân 1986). This was further confirmed by archaeological studies which positioned Phu Tho at the centre of a Van Lang kingdom in the ancient history of Vietnam (Văn 1973; Viện Khảo cổ học 1970, 1972, 1973, 1974).

### **Gaps in the research**

From the second half of the twentieth century, the Hung Temple and Phu Tho province have become a focus of academic, as well as media discussion on the historical and scientific findings of the life of early Viet inhabitants. This has involved work in archaeology, geography and culture studies, as well as in literary and other social sciences. Despite extensive studies by researchers in different fields, there is a lack of scholarship on the everyday practices of those

who interact with the Kings at the Temple and those who claim to have religious bonds with the deities.

In particular, there has been little research on the Hung Temple in Hy Cuong commune in Phu Tho province. Existing accounts are limited to the age of the buildings, the history of physical constructions and the history of the management department. There is a lack of research on the practices associated with the Temple, and especially about the factors leading to the increasing importance of the Hung Temple site. There is also a lack of investigation into how the recent building and renovation work has influenced the site's meaning and identity. Who interacts with the Temple? What motivates them? How do their practices inform their interests or experience, their sense of self or their perception of the Temple? How do these engagements with the Temple help to construct the site?

This thesis addresses these gaps by exploring the Hung Temple complex and its related practices. It discusses the rise of the Temple and how it is important for contemporary Vietnam in general and for ordinary people in particular. Within the study, I explore the political action of state agencies at the site. This involves an investigation of day-to-day practices of Temple administrators and of how people navigate the bureaucratic system for their livelihood. The study also includes an analysis of individual religious practices of people who claim a relationship with the deities and how such sacred practices are seen as still relevant to them. This study of the Hung Kings and the Hung Temple reveals something about what it means to be Vietnamese today.

I decided to engage with an anthropological approach, since its inclusive methodology is uniquely useful in unpacking the topic of the Temple and people's lives. An anthropological lens helps me to expand my folklore background by looking at present day customs, cultures and societies (Keesing 1981, pp. 2-3). Anthropological theories and methodologies help me lessen the distance between researcher and the objects of study leading to a more

comprehensive understanding of how people interact with the Hung Temple and the Hung Kings. I will now discuss how I use theories in my thesis.

### **Practice theory: a window into religious belief and place-based practices at the Hung Temple**

In this work, I am theoretically influenced by practice theory as it applies to the study of religious sites. Practice theory allows me to draw attention to the interactions of historical, institutional, cultural and personal terrains which structure religious place and their related practices. My approach draws heavily from Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1991), Sahlins (1981), Ortner (1989, 2006) and Holland (1998) and Holland and Lave (Holland & Lave 2001), among others. The frameworks they outline, and their emphases on social processes, are essential in a study of the contemporary world. As Ortner suggests, a theory of practice is 'a theory of the relationship between the structures of society and culture on the one hand, and the nature of human action on the other' (1989, p. 11).

The French scholar Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) is regarded as the father of practice theory. His theory of practice advanced and elaborated structuralism and interpretive approach to alternately move from examining agency to structure and structure to agency in the study of social change and continuity. His significant concept of *habitus* proposed a new understanding of structure, which is not constructed, objective, or abstract but is 'constituted in practice and is always oriented toward practical functions' (1990, p. 52). This spirit of practice theory sees practice as 'action considered in relation to structure... Practice emerges from structure, it reproduces structure, and it has the capacity to transform structure' (Ortner 1989, p. 12).

Practice theory that draws from Bourdieu and his followers also emphasises the struggle for social distinction emerging from the interaction of agents, institutions, social forces and power structures within a particular of a mix of fields (Bourdieu 1991; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). It directs me to investigate the temple as a social space with overlapping fields of religious, economic and political practices. Each of these fields will be considered in the following

chapters where I will examine how people maximised resources and used different strategies for their self-interests (Bourdieu 1977). In doing so, it allows me to understand how the domination and subordination of social groups is reproduced. It also allows me to examine shifts in power relationships among groups at places such as the Hung Temple. Especially, a practice approach enables me to understand human agency and how the identities of individuals and groups are constructed in practice (Holland 1998).

Dimensions of place, agency and structure are given some degree of attention in each chapter of the thesis. In the first instance, the use of practice theory is important because it helps me identify how the state has constructed the Hung Temple as a place along with the potentially unanticipated ways that different people relate to the Hung Kings and the Temple. Since it is essential to explore the historical context that helps to unfold the relationship between agency, practice and structure (Ortner 1989, p.12), I attempt to understand the 'symbolic and historical dimensions' (Sahlins 1981, pp. 3-8, 67-72) that shape the practices at the Hung Temple. My approach then includes attention to the ambitions of national rulers who construct an official narrative of the nation through their depiction of the Hung Temple's significance.

Ortner (1989) advanced practice theory in her study of religion when she analysed the foundation of Sherpas monasteries in Nepal in relations to the historical contexts and social processes. She argues that the monasteries were built as the result of various structural and historical forces that came together by the actions of particular people at a particular historical moment. This approach is relevant for my investigation of how practice at the Hung Temple and its various structural and historical forces have come together in the actions of particular people in contemporary Vietnam resulting in the rise to prominence of the Temple.

Soucy (2007, 2009, 2012) applies practice theory to the study of Buddhist practices of the Viet people in Vietnam. He sees that the notion of Buddhist practices should be understood in a contextualised way. As in the case of

Vietnam, Buddhist practices refer to a wide range of interactions with Buddhism, from the action of going to a pagoda, paying respect to members of Buddhist pantheon and perhaps asking for some assistance to the chanting of sutra, or the intellectual engagement with Buddha teachings (Soucy 2012).

This practice-based and contextualised view is applicable to my view of place-based practices at the Hung Temple and how the various forms of economic, social and political practices converge within the Temple complex. I agree with Soucy that 'the motivation and the interest of [people's] religious practices are informed by their social positions and cultural background' (2000, p. 180). This social and cultural variation needs to be taken into consideration when examining the practices at the Hung Temple.

Two related themes also run through this thesis: place-making practices and religious practices.

### ***Place and place-making practices***

Among scholars, the term place has a long history and bears with it a multiplicity of meanings and connotations (Massey 1994, p. 1). In anthropology, as in social geography, 'place' is distinguished from 'space'. The French theorist, Lefebvre, stated that space is a social product, constructed by human actors (1991). Space may be understood as a physical and social landscape imbued with meaning in everyday place-bound social practices. It emerges through processes that operate over varying spatial and temporal scales. In an early study of place, Yi-fu Tuan (1977) makes the observation that an awareness of distinct places develops in humans from infancy. Thus, a sense of place is tied to the physiological development that allows us to distinguish, differentiate and classify our surroundings. Because of this, he contends that places also exist in an emotional sense, rather than simply as an intellectual category. It is for this reason that Tuan defines places as '...centres of felt value, where biological needs, such as those for food, water, rest, and procreation, are satisfied' (ibid., p. 4).



However, places are also strategic, political and laden with power struggles. The identity of a place is always unfixed, contested and multiple. Further, Massey sees that the concept of place depends on the notion of articulation. 'It is a move, in terms of political subjects and of place, which is anti-essentialist, which can recognise difference, and which yet can simultaneously emphasize the bases for political solidarities' (1994, p. 8).

With this clarification among terms, I use 'place' to capture the notion of the place-based practices pertaining to the site of the Hung Temple. I follow Massey's suggestion and view place as 'a particular articulation of [social interrelations], a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings' (1994, p. 5). Thus, place can be viewed as a dynamic process of place-making activities, which often involve multiple sites.

The actions of human beings upon places have patterns. As Tuan shows: 'We measure and map space and place, and acquire spatial laws and resource inventories for our efforts' (1977, p. 5) and 'what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value' (p. 6). Returning to the notion of articulation, which Massey suggests as being crucial understanding place, place-making can be seen as a way of articulating practices (1994).

First, place is constructed through building, shaping the landscape and giving a narrative topography (Brett 1996). This can be done through investment into a physical site, such as through the massive project of material construction undertaken at the Hung Temple. Such construction involves a planning process, which implements the ideology of the dominant group who want to assert a certain identity to the place (Noy 2008). But there is a difference between how the place has been constructed versus how people engage with place. Second, people can choose to act within the given space for their various personal, religious or political reasons. They can act within the space through bonding with the site, the processes of *making* (Ingold 2000), or through the interactions of a particular mix of social relations (Massey 1994).

Those sorts of interactions and behaviours with and within a place are place-based practices. They add value to the place. Places need to be seen from the perspective of those performances that take them up and transform them, redeploy them and connect them through metonymic relationships (Crang & Coleman 2002, p. 10).

The concepts of place and place-based practices are found throughout this thesis. In particular, chapters of the thesis will investigate the practices of place making of various groups of social actors that are informed by their different interests. From the top, the state and its influential agents aim to construct a site with political significance that enables actions of nationalism. At an everyday level, the Temple is constructed as a work place within which interactions among people are determined by motivations of self-gain. Meanwhile, individuals who visit the temple frequently as the devotees of the deities have their own ways to make the site a space of spiritual practices. These different ongoing processes happening at the Hung Temple need to be brought together in the attempt to explain the historical rise of the temple in Vietnamese society.

While investigating one particular temple complex with its everyday activities, I also focus my work on a broader range of related practices, meanings, and identities. The aim is to understand how the specific contributes to the understanding of the whole and vice versa, the way the later broad context offers hints to make sense of the variety of expressions of the specific. To begin, I address the Temple as a place constructed by different groups of actors with their various interests. While listening to the multi-vocal narratives of national elites, site based entrepreneurs, temple priests, heritage managers and every day devotees; I attempt to illuminate the complexity of meaning making practices. My approach considers tracing the historical context of the local as well as that of the temple complex. I bear this in mind while investigating various interpretations, experiences, motivations and subjectivities of my interlocutors with whom I built rapport during fieldwork. The daily up and down rhythms of the Hung Temple and its related cultural practices leads me to address, in the later part of the thesis, one focal point that relates to and interconnects all of

those practices in the form of a provincial event of national significance. The reasons why it is significant will be explained in further detail later on but for now it warrants noting that it has to do with an amplified embrace of religion in the nation of Vietnam.

### ***Religion and religious practices***

Because of its significance in human life, religion has been the central research object of anthropologists from 19<sup>th</sup> century (such as Max Muller, W. Robertson Smith, Edward B. Tylor, and James G. Frazer). The studies of religion have been conducted widely in isolated tribal societies as well as in modern societies and developing countries. Anthropologists cannot agree on a common methodology for the study of religious beliefs and practices and how exactly 'religion' should be defined or what the term 'religion' should encompass. However, there are some patterns that can be drawn.

Studies often equate religion to belief (religion as thought) and practice (religion as ritual action). Those who put priority on religious 'texts' (written and oral narratives around the site) are in line with Geertz (1973) in defining religion as '(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic' (ibid., p.70). Levi Strauss stressed the 'text' factor in the study of religion, providing symbolic and structural tools to analyse the religious myths (Deflem 1991). Some other scholars focused on action or religious ritual. Turner (1969) emphasised the transformation of meaning through religious symbols and performance. With the same approach, Tambiah (1981) offered a performative formula to study of ritual—religion as action. His fundamental concerns were about the participants in the rituals and the effects they seek to produce.

Asad asserts that a universal definition of religion is not a viable project because it cannot take into account historical processes and particularities (1983, p. 238). In practices of religion in Vietnam, there are differentiations between two major

categories, belief and religion. The term religion (*đạo*) is often used when referring to world religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islamism or native institutionalised religious practices such as Cao Dai. Meanwhile, the term belief (*tín ngưỡng*) refers to indigenous faith in extraordinary forces and is associated with worshipping practices. Examples of this are: ancestor worship, the worship to supernatural spirits, community hero and heroes, annual festivals, funeral rituals, or 'exorcism of harmful forces, and procedures for the auspicious siting of graves and residences' (Teiser 1995, p. 378). The worship to the Hung Kings falls into this second category of belief. Therefore, throughout the thesis, I use various terms to refer to the practice at the Hung Temple, such as veneration, devotion, worship and the concept of religiosity.

Religion per se, is not the main focus of this research. My main concerns are to understand the interest of different groups of social actors in relation to the place of the Hung Temple complex and its place-based practices as well as the political, economic and cultural processes happening at the site. From that, I aim to unfold the transitions of Vietnam and how the case study of the Hung Temple can contribute to the understanding of what it means to be Vietnamese in the early twenty-first century. This study is an investigation of a religious site through the lens of practice theory. However, I still touch on issues pertinent to studies of religion, as I deal with the performance of religiosity and individual devotional practices.

Since the role of religion in the lives of Vietnamese is changing, an understanding of the existing literature on religious studies in Vietnam is beneficial to position the thesis in larger scholarship about the country. Religious sites and their related cultural practices came under the political environment guided by a Marxist rationality which saw religion as the product of backward knowledge that would decline in the future. This resulted in the displacement of sacred landscapes. Temples, pagodas and institutes of religion were destroyed or used for profane purposes and functions (Malarney 2002, 2003). Everyday religious activities were simplified to avoid superstition, and people were cautioned about

talking about topics of spirituality (Bradley 2004; Pham 2006; Endres 2008; Pham 2011).

The late 1980s and 1990s saw the increase of religious practices since the liberation of social activities in a variety of cultural fields as the result of Doi Moi policies. The case of the Hung Temple and the associated cult of the Hung Kings, is a part of a significant movement happening throughout the country. Especially in the 2000s, religion has re-emerged throughout Vietnam, along with the country's rapid development and global integration. Spiritual places, such as communal houses, churches, pagodas and tombs, have been rebuilt and have quickly become pilgrimage sites crowded with devotees. Offerings, incense burning, prayer, meditation, spirit possession and rituals now take place everywhere, every day. National officers who make pilgrimages to the tombs of martyrs or burn incense to national heroes, stress the continuity of the heroic tradition and promise to maintain it in current national affairs.

This practice of religious resurgence challenges some previous statements about religion in the modern world. It disproves the nineteenth century evolutionists' view that people's reliance on magic and spiritual forces would decline once science and technology were adopted as superior modes for exploring and controlling the world (Tylor 1871; Frazer 1890). It challenges the prediction of secularising the world (Durkheim 1915) where modern bureaucratic rationalities will be the main relationship among social actors (Weber 1976). The rise of religion challenges Marxist traditional scholarship, which assumed that the only condition for religion would be the shortage of material need and knowledge. The shortcomings of these theories are seen not only in Vietnam but in many other countries (Taylor 2007a, pp. 3-4). The failure of historical sociologists to account for the continuing relevance of religion in the modern world leaves the way open for an alternative approach, that might abandon historical explanations altogether for a view of religion as a timeless property of certain places and cultures (Keyes, Kendall & Hardacre 1994).

In Vietnam, the topic of religion has been investigated in different ways. Scholars have broadly drawn out the wide range of its expressions in everyday life. The birth of new religions (Đỗ 2011; Nguyễn 2011b, 2012), the re-emergence of folk religions (Fjelstad & Nguyen 2006; Lê 2000; Phạm 2011a; Trần 1991, 2000; Vũ 2002), and the transformation of existing world religions (Ngô 1996; Nguyen 2008; Tạ 2014; Trần 2000) have been investigated. The studies on religion in post-revolutionary Vietnam have well documented the complexity of religious practices in response to the economic, political and social transformation of the country (Dao 2008; Norton 2002; Pelley 2002; Salemink 2008). One can feel the diversity of this complex religious landscape through varied stories told in urban areas (Endres 2013; Lý 2007; Taylor 2007b, pp. 139-140), rural regions (Kleinen 1999; Luong 2007), in different ethnic settings (Salemink 2003; Taylor 2002, 2004) and in different groups of people (Phan 1992; Roszko 2012; Thạch Phương & Lê 1995; Viện Văn hóa dân gian 1992).

However, the interpretations of religious revival somehow reflect the complexity of the social fact only recently. The traditional historical approach was to look at religious practice through the lens of area studies, classifying Vietnam as a version of Confucian culture (see Long 2011; Taylor 1983, p. xvii; Ungar [1986] 1990) and a product of French colonialism (Taylor 1998). Vietnamese historians use folk religion as a resource of history studies. Temples are mapped out as the signals of the past, festivals are understood as the acting out of historical drama, and texts and stories of the deities are symbolic codes of ancestral narratives (Trần 1991; Vũ 2002). This happened in the postcolonial time, through the generation of intellectuals inspired by the new independence of the state. Scholars tended to reconstruct the nation's history in line with findings about the pre-Chinese period (Pelley 2002).

Recent anthropological studies link religious practices with economic, political and social changes of the country (Endres & Lauser 2011; Soucy 2012; Taylor 2007b). Jellema observes that the booming interest in spirituality in late socialist Vietnam reflects two global trends: 'the first towards religious revival in the developing world, often occurring in tandem with rapid integration into world

markets, and the second towards spiritual rebirth in societies transitioning out of socialism' (2007b, p. 59). She also advocates investigating social changes as a way of explaining religious revival. These changes include, first, those in a society in a post-war situation, and second, those coming from the transformation of a closed society to one increasingly integrating wholly into the global world through economic, technology, social and political exchanges.

At the centre of the debate is the power relationship between religion and the state. As Taylor (2007a) summarises, the discussions can be categorised in three main explanations of the re-enchantment of religion in modern Vietnam. First, some argue that the contemporary religious practice in Vietnam is a form of 'resistance to state power'. Studies of the religiosity of marginalised social groups such as ethnicities, rural populations or urban traders are taken as examples (Salemink 2003; Taylor 2002, 2004). Second, other academic works see religion as a 'response to the decline in state power or the plausibility of official grand narratives in an era of post-socialist economic policies' (Taylor 2007b, p. 139). This also reflects the new debates about modernity, economic growth and the relevance of religion in society (Lý 2007). Third, some recent scholars argue that 'the state relies upon religion to secure its popular legitimacy' (Taylor 2007b, p. 140). This is evident in studies that see the revival of religion in Vietnam as part of nation building and the reinvention or reconstruction of tradition (Norton 2002; Pelley 2002; Salemink 2008). These studies look at religions either as a response to the increasing sense of religiosity or the following of state policies of preserving cultural heritage. The new state plan of developing 'a progressive Vietnamese culture steeped in the national essence' (Luong 2007) needs critiquing in the prevailing discourse of nation, culture and development and opens the door to increased religious activities and religious studies.

Besides a wide range of work about the importance and influence of historical religions to the Vietnamese, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Catholicism, Islam and Hinduism, place-based religions, understood as those religious practices that related to a particular place and a particular group of people, are at the centre of an increasing number of anthropological studies in religion (Dror 2007; Lý 2007;

Phạm 2011b; Roszko 2012; Salemink 2003; Taylor 2004). The many ethnographic accounts of everyday life and religious practices at the local level has meant that new academic writings now focus on old topics such as ancestor worship (Phan 1992), or communal rituals and its festivals (Thạch Phương & Lê 1995; Viện Văn hóa dân gian 1992). While exploring social transformations (Luong 2003), these scholars also engage with individual meaning making and identity formation (Endres 2011).

Although the new anthropological approach effectively critiques the earlier social scientific theses of disenchantment, the challenge for anthropologists remains that of explaining the diversity of religious forms and how the particularity of the regional histories, their social and cultural preoccupations, might account for the great variety in practices at religious places in the modern world. Such variety in religious practices, in turn, is likely to inform the diverse ways that people continuously attempt to construct themselves and reconstruct the world. Part of this thesis will look at these place-based religious practices to discover their significance to the devotees themselves.

That said, these place-based practices can also be highly socialised and politicalised. The practices at the Hung Temple, with the active involvement by state agents, rural elites, successful entrepreneurs and the urban newly-rich generation, show the extent to which a religious site is invoked and becomes important to the modern nation-state and its politicians. It also shows how people construct the site significantly for their own livelihood and everyday practices.

### **Methodology: an insider-outsider approach**

As mentioned, the Hung Temple and its religious practices are familiar to me. As a child, I grew up in the city not very far from the Temple and had many occasions to observe the annual Hung Temple festivals. I went to the temple frequently and felt and witnessed the changes there with the passing of time. I am myself an 'insider' of this practice. In this project, I also position myself as an anthropologist, simultaneously maintaining the lens of an 'outside observer'



(Hastrup 2004). This dual role made my research potentially problematic when interacting with interlocutors. But being aware of my bias, I often held myself back and noted down carefully the context of conversation or participant data.

My initial research in the field commenced when I conducted fieldwork in 2006 on the Hung Kings in Phu Tho province for a master's thesis. For that research, I collected religious 'text' in written and oral forms, such as in poems or narratives told by the old people in the village. That helped me, in this thesis, to develop further questions about the impact that the Hung Kings have on people's lives and how their place-based practices can shape their sense of self. Taking an ethnographic approach, I used mostly qualitative research to understand how the Hung Temple is constructed by different actors through analysing the stories of people who interact with the site. I also considered the relevance of their religious practices to contemporary social life.

I found that I had to be flexible when introducing myself in the field because anthropological fieldwork in Vietnam is rare and because of the traditional social context of Phu Tho province. I had to use different methods and strategies to gain people's confidence. Initially, I attempted to obtain informants formally by first, introducing myself and my project, and then second, asking them to sign a form giving their consent to participate in the project. I found that most people refused to be involved in my project. The strange feeling of having a *researcher* around watching and noting down whatever happens along with the fear of any 'incorrect' statement or behaviour being documented made some of my informants wanted to stay away or avoided questions and conversations. It is also worth noting that most of my interlocutors were cautious in sharing publicly their personal devotion and practices. Gradually, I found that my informants were more co-operative when I first introduced myself as a 'daughter' of Phu Tho province, living near the Temple. People then became more open and interested in my project. Most of them gave oral consent to answer my questions or let me contact them again. Also from multiple meetings with interlocutors, I learnt that I should also introduce myself as a lecturer at a university in Hanoi; this brought me general respect from members of a society

that traditionally values qualifications; in particular I was more welcomed by local elites and male elders. And finally, my status as a married woman with a small child brought about a sense of empathy and a perception of trustworthiness, particularly in helping to build rapport with my female informants or to maintain distance with male interlocutors.

Participant observation was the main method employed during the period of fieldwork. It involved getting close to people and helping them feel comfortable with my presence so that I could observe and record information about their lives (Bernard 2002, p. 322). Being with these people for a long time, I learned to maintain an open conversation with oral consent for note taking and visual documentation. My methods were to observe 'actors in real circumstances using their cultural frames to interpret and meaningfully act upon the world, converting it from a stubborn object to a knowable and manageable life-place' (Ortner 1989, p.18). By working hard to expand my network of contacts and by gaining rapport with key informants, I was also able to explore the essential role of the kinship network in and around the Hung Temple. In villages located outside the urban area like these, the 'snowball' method works best using relationship links between relatives and friends rather than going through administration channels.

The Hung Kings' devotees, Hung Temple staff, and state delegates are three focus groups in my thesis. I argue that they are the main agents shaping the religious, political and cultural practices at this national historical site. While the local residents are the actors that build up the site's appearance, its symbols are obtained through visitors' experiences and under the pressure of political authority. The meaning of the place is expressed in diverse ways but is still fluctuating within the interaction of these factors.

In general, my fieldwork took the form of a multi-sited ethnography since it involved the movement among different sites and that it is 'literally following connections, associations and putative relationships' (Marcus 1998, pp. 79, 81). At the Hung Temple, I observed the use of sound, the presence of objects, the

organisation of space, the employment of speeches, the actions of devotees and the sentiments expressed in the faces that worship the Hung Kings. At other times, I travelled around the Hung Temple site to understand the religious landscape where the Temple is situated. For a month or two during the fieldwork, I resided in Hanoi to collect data at archives of national libraries and research institutions. I also followed devotees to their living areas in other provinces from the North to South of the country. So at times, I travelled in and out the province. Every time I travelled in and out of the Hung Temple, I got a chance to step backward, observe and note down the feeling of the transition of being away and present at the Temple that many of my interlocutors experience.

Some readers may expect a discussion of the ethnic factors that influence religious belief and practices toward the Hung Kings. The narratives of the Hung Kings include the idea that they are the Viet/Kinh ancestors as well as the national founders (and hence the ancestors of all Vietnamese). Even though Phu Tho is a multi-ethnic province, there is no real ethnic conflict at the Hung Temple. The people, who were in minority ethnic groups, if any, consider themselves predominantly as Vietnamese and they did not mention ethnicity as an issue of concern. I also note here that the majority of my interlocutors were Viet/Kinh ethnic.

Also, since the focal point of the thesis is the Hung Temple site and its practice, I do not address at length the phenomenon of village cult practices, though I have stated that they have a long history in Phu Tho province. These diverse and interesting practices do not help me describe the focus of the thesis, which is the rise of the Hung Temple and its significance in forging a shared Vietnamese nationality and religiously informed identity. I do, however, discuss the role that the villagers living near the Hung Temple play in helping to shape the function and significance of the complex. In chapter 3, for example, I explore the influence of village politics on the temple's management. In chapter 4, I touch upon how villagers' notions of place have shaped the motivations and experiences of veneration to the Hung Kings. In chapter 5, I explore what happens when

villagers attend the Hung Temple's anniversary festival (in order to explicate the diversity of social actors, their voices and practices).

## **Chapter overview and thesis contributions**

This thesis aims to enlarge the body of scholarship that discusses place, religion and nation through a place-based ethnographic study of the Hung Temple. After this introduction, there are four additional chapters and a conclusion.

This introductory chapter has presented the temple complex as an important nexus between religion and politics. I build on this focus in the second chapter through a more detailed examination of the political and historical context of the temple. In this second chapter I consider the importance of place-making practices in order to highlight state interests in creating and shaping the national significance of the temple and the narrative of the Hung Kings. I examine the extensive efforts by which the political elites drew the temple into official discourses. This includes investigations of the new constructions at the temple site, the commentaries of visitors coming to the Temple over the time, and the activities of national delegations to the Temple. I argue that these practices have significantly constructed the Hung Temple as a site of commemoration of the nation's origin and one that facilitated the practice of nationalism.

Chapter 3 and 4 engage with intimate accounts of two different sets of social actors participating in everyday practices at the Hung Temple. Chapter 3 focuses on how the people working at the Hung Temple navigated the temple bureaucracy in a variety of ways. It shows the ways people leveraged their social and financial positions to maximise the benefits gained from the Temple and their association with the Hung Kings. I do this by exploring the interface of social actors operating at a variety of levels, including illustrations of practices of cutting corners, maximising profits, or engaging in unauthorised activities. In the interplay between bureaucrats and non-bureaucrats alike, I question how spiritual, social and economic factors affect the process and outcomes of their exchanges; and whether this produces practices different to what the cadres intended.

The focus of religious practices in chapter 4 adds to the discussion of the Temple's everyday life. I explore how people, through different channels, connect to the Hung Kings and come to cultivate the spiritual bond with the Kings. My practice theory approach gives attention to the individual practices of worshipping the Hung Kings and experiencing the deities' blessings and benefits that will help improve people's lives. I analyse the experiences of two women to show how their understandings of the Hung Kings changed over time. In the process, I argue that the changing relationships led to transformations of their sense of self; their sense of who they are and how they fit in the world. The first case study of Mrs Pham explores how religiosity became a means of healing for a marginalised and powerless woman. The second case study of Ms Tri opens up a new view of how religiosity enhanced her imaginations of self at work as well as in social life. More than that, their stories show the capacity of individuals to form new identities for themselves through existing cultural practices.

Chapter 5 steps back from an individual focus to analyse a collective engagement in the anniversary to the Hung Kings at the Hung Temple. I show how the different facets of society come together under the same purpose, but sometimes to different ends. In particular, I use the anniversary celebrations to underline how dynamic the relationships are that people develop for the Hung Kings and how these relationships are not entirely determined by the state's framing of the Hung Kings. I do this while advancing a discussion about *communitas* and contentious practices. I argue that while collective rituals sponsored by the state tend to bring people momentarily together, the ritual practices and devotion of small groups and individuals are not necessarily in conformity to state constructions of meaning connected to the Hung Temple.

In sum, the thesis offers an ethnographically informed engagement with a prominent heritage site that adds to our understandings of the relationship between politics and religion, as well as to our understandings of how these domains impact upon the practices and identities of citizens. Essentially, the thesis uses the case of the Hung Temple to add nuance to discussions of what it means to be Vietnamese in the early twenty-first century.

## Chapter 2 Place-making at the Hung Temple and the state-led production of nationalism

The Hung Temple represents an important nexus between religion and politics in Vietnam. This nexus is driven by longstanding political interests, as mentioned in the introductory chapter. The extent to which the past is drawn from in order to bolster the Temple's significance is, however, varied. This chapter offers an overview of the political significance of the Hung Temple, and of the Hung Kings, in contemporary Vietnam. In so doing, it focuses on the manner in which certain apparatuses of the state exert control over the Temple for the purpose of promoting a sense of nationalism. Included in this exploration are the place-making practices and rituals enacted at the Temple.

This chapter will argue that the state has constructed the Hung Temple as a place that links people with the nation and its ancestors. It will show how the contemporary single-party state of Vietnam intervenes in the site and reinterprets the symbol of the Hung Kings to make them evocative figures that are effective in promoting nationalism. Before discussing place and place-making, however, I first consider developments in Vietnamese nationalism through two periods of time. The first is the period of revolution, in which I draw on the relationship of the party-state with the Hung Temple in the period from independence to the 1980s. In the 1980s, the country underwent a major reform project called *Doi Moi*<sup>8</sup>. The second period was from the implementation of *Doi Moi* onward. Focussing on this latter period, I will provide an analysis of place-making practices of cadres, and by extension the party state, which in turn frames the significance of place in strengthening the position of the nation-state.

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<sup>8</sup>The revolutionary state maintained the country under a tight socialist political system until the mid-1980s when a complete reformation, the *Doi Moi*, began. The reformation was primarily economic. It freed up economic exchanges and introduced the model of a market economy guided by socialist ideology. This economic policy was followed with more open policies in many other fields, such as in religion and politics and in society in general (Đảng 2016). The reformation also opened up to capitalism at an international level. It opened the country to tourists and international commercial and state partnerships.

I will base my analysis on three ethnographic observations: the temple narrative topology, the use of visitor books and an official visit of a state delegation.

By nationalism I refer to both political ideology and individual psychology, defined by Giddens as 'a phenomenon that is primarily psychological—the affiliation of individuals to a set of symbols and beliefs emphasizing communality among the members of a political order' (1985, p. 116). Nationalism as such can be considered as a set of ideas and sentiments. A Vietnamese scholar, Truong Buu Lam, writing about the time of modern Vietnam, developed a view of nationalism, which includes 'a sense of ultimate loyalty to, or inclusion in, a community of people' (1967, p. 29). Politically however, nationalism 'has been defined, in effect, as the striving to make culture and polity congruent, to endow a culture with its own political roof and not more than one roof at that' (Gellner 1983, p. 43). The political ideology of nationalism claims that there exists a unique nation, that this nation has a special value and therefore, right to existence and recognition, and that to secure this right the nation must possess autonomy, often understood as meaning that it is a sovereign nation-state.

An examination of nationalism involves the acknowledgment that 'nation' is a social construct (Jackson & Penrose 1993, p. 28). The project of constructing the notion of 'nation' is often run by the state, the dominant political group. The practices of constructing the nation can be diverse. For example, Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) suggest that traditions, such as the national anthem and the national flag, were invented in Europe in order to 'inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour' in the context of nation-building (p. 1). As Jackson and Penrose explain, the construction project often draws on notions of common interest between heterogeneous groups and by grounding and delimiting the concept in a recognisable physical space, reinforces 'belief' in its existence, and in the legality and morality of reinforcing its legitimacy (1993, p. 8).

The strategies mentioned above, namely, the invention of tradition, the inculcation of norms and values, the reinforcement of political legitimacy and the uniting discourse all can be found separately or sometimes overlapped, as this

chapter will argue, through the articulation of a bond between people and place. Reflecting ‘an immutable relationship between citizens and their country’ the bond with a place is at the centre of constructing the ‘nation’ (Jackson & Penrose 1993, p. 29). This chapter argues that the Hung Temple has been constructed to enable a claim for a unique Vietnam and that this nation—Vietnam—has a special value. This construction has been done through processes of state-led place-making practices.

The state is not a single agent, it has particular mandates that are carried out by state officials through policy systems that can usefully be observed and examined. By saying ‘state-led’, I am referring to the guiding role of the communist state in modern Vietnam in establishing and reinforcing cultural practices, especially through the activities of state delegations or influential agents of the state. The term party-state is also employed in my discussion about state policy because Vietnam is a single party state; by constitution, the Communist Party plays a dominant role in leading the state and society (Chính phủ 2013).

In what follows, I examine the production of a form of nationalism in contemporary Vietnam through the observations of the interactions of state officers with the Hung Temple. I base each section on questions of who decides what is to be seen and what is to be told in order to argue that claims of nationalism and national identity are at the heart of the state-led place-making practices. For this to happen, the conceptual significance of place and place-making requires more discussion in order to situate how the state has constructed particular meanings about the Hung Temple via their place-making practices.

### ***Place, place-making and nationalism***

The Hung Temple is a symbolic and ideologically charged site of national commemoration, which brings together and touches upon aspects of national heritage, collective identity and nationalism. A ‘place’ like this provides the context for nationalist activity and is itself a production of nationalism. For this



chapter, I use the concept of place and place-making to understand the practices producing elements of a state-led nationalism at the Temple site. The concept of place is used throughout the thesis, but it is in this chapter that discussions of construction of place are central.

As a reminder, the concept of place is dynamic. It can refer to more than just a location. The identity of a place is always unfixed, contested and multiple. I view place as 'a particular articulation of [social interrelations], a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings' (Massey 1994, p. 5). As people engage through activities, 'what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value' (Tuan 1977, p. 6). It is therefore necessary to point out how the place has been constructed, especially by the prominent actors with their various personal, religious or political purposes.

With this understanding, place and place-making practices can be especially strategic, political and laden with power struggles when the particularity of a place is made to link to the identity of a nation. A localised place, such as the Hung Temple, can be strategically constructed to also foster an attachment to place at a national level. The term nation used in this chapter follows Anderson's definition: The nation 'is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' (1983, p. 6). This has broad yet clear implications. The nation comprises an 'imagined community' because 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (p. 15). At the same time, nations are communities 'because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' (p. 16).

For the purpose of understanding place-based performances at the Hung Temple site, I borrow some analysis tools used in tourism studies. I use David Brett's concept of 'narrative topography' (1996) to analyse the construction that the managers impose upon the Hung Temple site in framing the site's meanings. I

use Chaim Noy's argument of 'pages as stages' (2008) to explore visitors' textual performance through written comments in visitor books. I also use John Urry's discussion of 'seeing and theming' (2002, pp. 124-140) to analyse themes from how the site is set up by managers and from how visitors describe their experiences.

### **Constructing the Hung Temple during a period of revolution (1945–1986)**

A new government led by Ho Chi Minh, set up in Hanoi in September 1945, saw the birth of the modern Vietnamese nation-state, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). A complex political situation existed in Vietnam at this time, with different political forces striving to rule the country, including: those following the monarchical ideology of the Nguyen King; the forces of the colonial governments of Japan and France; and the parties set up by the Vietnamese, such as Viet Minh and Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (Duiker 1976). Although the September 1945 announcement of independence represented the victory of Viet Minh, other powerful forces still continued to challenge the new government. In the context of social conflict and ideological contestation, the young government sought means of legitimising its leadership and promoting social integration (Pelley 2002).

For decades into the second half of the twentieth century, Vietnam was still engaged in military conflicts. In 1946, the government of Ho Chi Minh was relocated to a mountainous area north-east of Hanoi, from where he led his people in a fight against the French and other opposing forces in a nine-year war. The victory of the DRV army helped them gain control over the north of Vietnam, while the south of Vietnam was under another political entity, the Republic of Vietnam. The DRV then fought a war against the south government and the foreign forces involved (which was led by the United States of America). The goal of this, as Ho Chi Minh said, was to unite the nation: 'Vietnam is one nation, one country...that is the unchangeable truth'. The Vietnam War continued until 1975 with the victory of the north government. This was marked by the birth of the

Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976, which remains to the present day. But there were more wars that Vietnam participated in, including the military involvement in Cambodia 1979–89 and the conflict with China on the northern border from 1979 until the 1980s. Even though the new state did pay attention to developing the country's economy and society, its main concern remained territorial sovereignty.

As soon as they assumed power in 1945, the political Party and the government embarked upon an ambitious project to create a new socialist culture for Vietnam, though its implementation did not actually start until late 1954. The Party and the government asserted a Marxist ideology. Marx and Engels recognised the basic point that cultural values often support the interests of powerful individuals or particular individuals or groups in society (Marx & Engels 1972). The revolutionary government, therefore, took upon itself the task 'to destroy or neutralise those cultural elements that reproduced the old order, and replace them with the new ideas and values to create a new order' (Malarney 2002, p. 52). The Party's ideology and its attitudes towards cultural management were well explained in the guiding books written by revolutionary leaders, such as Ho Chi Minh and Truong Chinh. Achieving cultural change was determined by the communist leaders to be one of the important battles in building socialism. Certain principles were emphasised for a revolutionary culture. Such a culture should be 'collective' and 'shared' and in opposition to 'individual' and 'private'; it should be 'nationalist', 'scientific' and 'popular' (Truong Chinh 2000).<sup>9, 10</sup>

In implementing this process, cadres<sup>11</sup> 'desanctified' spaces, by such actions as leaving village communal houses in disrepair or in ruins. As part of an anti-

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<sup>9</sup> Ho Chi Minh's books *The way of revolution* (*Đường cách mệnh*) in 1927 (HỒ 2000a, pp. 257-318) and *Correcting the way of work* (*Sửa đổi lối làm việc*) in 1947 (HỒ 2000d, pp. 466-476) outlined his views on building a theory of revolutionary ethics, which set the foundation for a new revolutionary culture.

<sup>10</sup> Truong Chinh wrote *Thesis on Vietnamese Culture* (*Đề cương văn hóa Việt Nam*) in 1943 (Truong Chinh 2000). The book was considered the Party's guide book and was an essential reference for revolutionary cadres in asserting the new ideology for cultural practices in Vietnamese society at revolutionary time.

<sup>11</sup> The trained people employed by the government to carry out governmental tasks, known as *cán bộ* in Vietnamese.

superstition promotion, all sacred sites were to be regarded as mundane spaces (Malarney 2002, p. 49). Cadres prohibited villagers from performing religious rituals while at the same time they created civil rituals encouraging the population to engage in these as a way to celebrate socialist culture and socialist ideology (see, for example, Malarney 2002). Under Ho Chi Minh's government, from 1946 the Hung Temple festival was celebrated as a national holiday, and the Hung Temple was recognised as a site of national heritage in 1962. According to a government decree in 1975, the festival to the Hung Kings, as well as those to other national heroes, was preserved, provided that all superstitious elements were eliminated (Phạm 2006, p. 50).<sup>12</sup> National heritage recognition of the Hung Temple turned the site into the property of the state, which took on the responsibility to protect, preserve and manage it. Thus, from the 1960s the Temple site began to be managed by the cadres who framed it as a nationalist and scientific heritage site.

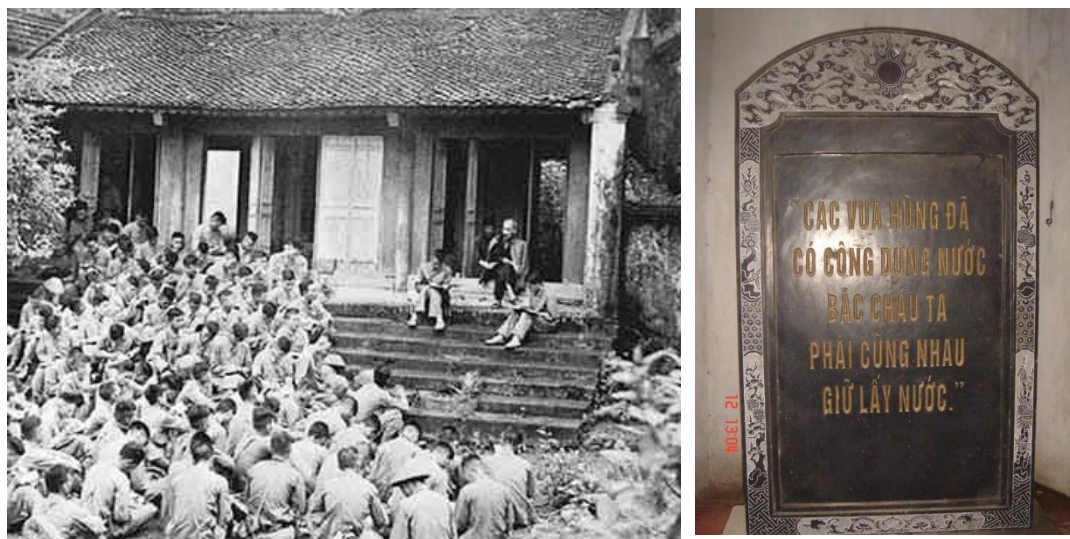
It was Ho Chi Minh, the DRV's first president, who highlighted the nationalist value of the Hung Temple. He first visited the Temple in 1954 when he was on his way from the war capital of Viet Bac to the official capital of Hanoi. At the Temple he talked with the Vietnamese soldiers of the Pioneer Division who were in charge of entering Hanoi and controlling the new capital (see Plate 4 left). His visit was mentioned in communication channels of the government with a photo and content of the talk (Lê 2014). From his speech, one sentence was highlighted: 'The Hung Kings have the merit of founding the nation; you and I have to defend it together'.<sup>13</sup> This saying was then engraved on a stone stele and placed in the stele house of the Hung Temple (see Plate 4 right), replacing an older stele referring to a donor. Also, a stone sculpture depicting Ho Chi Minh

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<sup>12</sup> The Decree 56-CP of the Cabinet Council of the Government (Hội đồng Chính phủ) issued on 18 March 1975 set regulations on organising rituals such as festivals, weddings and funerals, and also recognised some festivals dedicated to national heroes such as the Hung Kings, the Trung sister and Tran Hung Dao, which were to be preserved as long as the organisers eliminated all superstitious elements. For further discussion on the effect of this policy on other popular religions, see the collection of works in Fjelstad and Nguyen (2006).

<sup>13</sup> In Vietnamese: '*Các vua Hùng đã có công dựng nước, bác cháu ta phải cùng nhau giữ lấy nước*'.

talking to the soldiers was set up at the T-junction in front of the Water Well Temple.



**Plate 4:** Photo of Ho Chi Minh talking to soldiers, displayed at the Hung Vuong Museum (left), and the stone stele carved with Ho Chi Minh's saying displayed at the Lower Temple (right)

Ho Chi Minh, the revolutionist hero who led the war for national independence and one of the most influential national leaders of modern Vietnam, was the leading figure interested in reconstructing the Hung Temple. His statement made during his visit in 1954 was then considered a 'must know' lesson about the Hung Temple. It fitted well with his other teachings defining how and what it is to be Vietnamese. For instance, he wrote in an earlier poem *The history of Vietnam*: 'The Vietnamese must learn Vietnamese history, to understand the origin of the nation' (Ho 2000b, p. 221). Or with students, he taught: '[to be a Vietnamese one must] love the nation, love the people' (Ho 2000e, pp. 356-357). He believed that one must also protect the nation-state of modern Vietnam, as mentioned in his well-known declaration of independence.<sup>14</sup> At Ba Dinh square in Hanoi, the capital of the modern nation-state, he said to the Vietnamese and a global audience: 'This nation must be independent...The Vietnamese commit to sacrifice everything for that right of freedom and independence' (Ho 2000c, p.

<sup>14</sup> The declaration of independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, written by Ho Chi Minh (Hồ 2000c, pp. 9-12), was recited by Ho Chi Minh at Ba Dinh square, Hanoi on the 2 September 1945.

12). Then in the Hung Temple, at Phu Tho, the legendary capital of the first kingdom of the Hung Kings, he restated to his soldiers that they had the responsibility of uniting to defend the nation. These two speeches were clearly alike; they both aimed at mobilising people to adhere to a form of nationalism, which prioritised nation-state sovereignty.

Ho Chi Minh stressed in his second visit to the Hung Temple in 1962 that it needed to be preserved and trees planted to be 'solemn and beautiful, a park of history for our children to visit' (Hùng 2012, p. 35). His idea was understood as maintaining the Hung Temple as a secular site, which represented the past, where people could visit and learn about the national history. In response to Ho Chi Minh's statement, the local government appointed their cadres to reside at and manage the Hung Temple. They kept the Temple as it used to be, continued to protect the surrounding forest and set up some facilities for the management of work at the site. They built a range of offices at the foot of Nghia Linh Mountain, set up water and electricity distribution for the site, and maintained the roads around and within the mountain. Late in 1980, a museum was built next to the offices, for exhibition activities.

At the same time, the provincial cadres of Phu Tho built up the scientific aspect of the Hung Temple site by actively attracting mainstream scholars to do research on the Temple site and the history of Phu Tho. They held conferences and published works in a variety of fields such as archaeology, history and folklore studies (Viện Khảo cổ học 1970, 1972, 1973, 1974). Their purpose was to find scientific evidence for the statement of Ho Chi Minh that 'the Hung Kings had the merit of founding (the) nation' and to prove that 'the Hung Kings era did exist in Vietnamese history' (Phạm 1972).<sup>15</sup> Many of the maps and archaeological objects were then displayed at the Hung Vuong Museum (see Plate 5). Some scholars have offered the critique that in this half century, under the influence of nationalism, invented traditions of Hung King stories have been made into unchangeable truths (Trần 2013).

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<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 1 for more information about academic research on the Hung Kings during this period.



**Plate 5: A bronze drum displayed at the centre of Hung Vuong Museum, and the ceramic mosaic mural representing the story of the Dragon father and Fairy mother with the hundred sons**

In addition, the Temple was managed in such a way as to reflect how the party-state at that time categorised some practices as ‘backward superstition’. In those revolutionary decades there was an evolution of ritual practices (Malarney 2002). As a result, rituals at the Hung Temple were held in simplified forms to avoid the performance of religiosity; thus, for instance, there was to be no incense burning or ritual praying. Mr Cung, a retired official at the Temple, told me:

Most of the time, I welcomed the leaders of the province and the nation. In those years, all of the people I went with did the walk through all the temples but they did not burn incense or bring offerings. Uncle Ho, Pham Van Dong and Le Duan did it like that, although in 1977 Le Duan called it ‘a spiritual visit’ (*đi viếng*). General Giap burnt the incense; a journalist who went with him intended to take a photo, but he stopped him and said: ‘these days there is still no clear separation between belief and superstition, so you should not take the photo of this’.

Not using incense at the Hung Temple is an example of the adjustments made by the managers, party and state representatives to keep practices in a line with

state ideology. I asked Mr Cung whether his observation applied as well to ordinary people visiting the Hung Temple at that time. He confirmed that it applied only to state leaders and state delegations, saying: 'The people always burn the incense<sup>16</sup>, at all times'. General Giap's caution reaffirms that it was the state's intention to re-model the people's relationship with the Hung Temple.

There have been various changes, as I have shown, from the initial intention of Ho Chi Minh until the Doi Moi period. However, in this period of revolution, the Hung Temple was clearly used to symbolise a narrative of the nation, and the two principles of 'nationalist' and 'scientific' had significantly influenced the way the site was constructed.

The following period, since the 1980s, witnessed significant changes to the policies towards the Hung Temple. This consequently affected the interaction of visitors coming to the Hung Temple, and hence the type of nationalism produced at the place, as I will analyse in the following sections.

## **Contemporary state-led place-making practices and the production of nationalism**

Facing a poor economy, a crisis in socialist ideology and many social issues after the wars, the Vietnam party-state decided to conduct a major renovation of its political system and economic policies (Nguyễn 2006), which was called *Doi Moi*. This reformation, from the state's point of view, has had significant advantages as well as disadvantages. On the one hand, it impelled national economic development and social reform. After two decades of developing a market-oriented economy, for example, the national Gross Domestic Product in 2005 was 3.7 times higher than in 1985, the economic index increasing continuously over these 25 years. Vietnam gradually integrated into regional and global economic organisations becoming a part of the ASEAN Free Trade Area in 1995, the Asia–Europe Meeting in 1996, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation group

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<sup>16</sup> Burning incense, in Vietnamese *thắp hương*, is an essential part of conducting a ritual in popular religious practices of the Viet people. It is believed that the burning incense helps to mediate the prayer to the ear of the deities.



of nations in 1998 and the World Trade Organization in 2006. Under *Doi Moi*, Vietnam has achieved significant gains in economic, political and social affairs and has gone from being a poor country, to become a middle-income country (The World Bank 2012).

On the other hand, the reform projects have put the party, state and its Marxist ideology at risk in several ways. First, the market-based and globally integrated economy has brought inequality to ethnic groups, classes and regions. Second, a challenge has come from the 'decline of socialist ideology, morality and personality in the Party and in society' due to the failure of the centrally planned economy (Đảng 2007). The decline has increased anxiety and unrest among people seeking alternative values, often resulting in extreme mobility and vulnerability. In addition, a challenge has arisen because of the disorientation in popular cultural life brought about by 'unhealthy, foreign-oriented and anti-tradition phenomena', which is a negative consequence of uncertain socio-economic conditions (*ibid.*, pp. 62-84).

Under *Doi Moi*, the state saw a need to introduce an adjusted way of promoting social solidarity and state legitimacy. Under these challenging conditions 'the sense of national identity is especially threatened' (Kong & Yeoh 1997, p. 214). In other words, 'the need to foster and assert the sense of identity' was stronger at this time than at others (*ibid.*). Struggles for identity and development became the central focus of post-war nationalism. A concept of nationalism, which highlights a long history of wars against invaders as I illustrated in the previous section, was no longer suitable for a country that has gained its peace and unity, and is now turning its attention towards development and global integration (Jellema 2007b; Malarney 2002, 2007; Tai 2001). The question remains as to what type of nationalism is being tailored by the contemporary nation state.

In response, the state strategically promoted cultural values that would sustain the social fabric alongside the burgeoning market forces. One of the state's strategies was to draw the Hung Temple and worship to the Hung Kings into a

project of promoting a cult of national ancestor, to be interpreted as part of a common national identity.

Therefore, from the mid-1990s to the present, the state constantly issued new policies to promote the Temple site and the Hung Temple festival. An instruction from the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam<sup>17</sup> in 1995 designated the Hung Temple festival as one of major national events of the year. This was promoted further by a decision from the Political Committee that was implemented from the year 2000, that the Hung Temple festival would be organised at the national level. The Ministry of Culture Sport and Tourism took the leading role in organising this 'national anniversary'<sup>18</sup>, with the participation of national leaders as well as delegations from other provinces. The Hung Temple's anniversary became the only traditional ritual being held at the national level (Salemink 2007) and the Temple itself was declared by the Prime Minister to be a 'national special heritage site'<sup>19</sup> in 2009. This significant decision marked the turning point when the Hung Temple gradually started to become known by the population at large as a shared temple to worship the nation's ancestors.

In another direction, but for the same purpose, the state has encouraged popular devotional practices to the Hung Kings to spread all over the country. Temples devoted to the Hung Kings were built in many southern provinces, such as Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai, Ca Mau, Kien Giang and Lam Dong. The temple keepers in these new temples often made pilgrimages to the Hung Temple in Phu Tho Province to take incense roots, soil and water from there back to their home places, in order to perform rituals in tribute to the original temple. An investigation in 2005 undertaken by the Ministry of Culture concluded that there was a total of 1417 Hung King shrines all over Vietnam (Luu 2010). In 2007, a

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<sup>17</sup> In Vietnamese: *Ban Bí thư Trung ương Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam*. This is the highest body of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

<sup>18</sup> From the year 2000, the Vietnamese state officially used the title 'national anniversary' (*Quốc giỗ*) for what was called 'the Hung Temple festival' by the population.

<sup>19</sup> Decision 1272/QĐ-TTg on 12 August 2009 of the Prime Minister

change to the Code of Labour was approved,<sup>20</sup> which gave workers one day off with pay on the Hung Kings anniversary day. On this day, because the Hung Kings anniversary would be observed at all temples worshipping the Hung Kings throughout the country, the Vietnamese could either go to the Hung Temple in Phu Tho or to another Hung Temple to conduct the anniversary ritual.

### ***Reconstruction and expansion of the temple complex***

The reforming party-state continued to use the heritage label given to the Hung Temple to rationalise a construction and expansion process. In the decades of the 1990s and 2000s, the Hung Temple underwent major reconstruction. In 1994, following a decision approved by the Prime Minister, the Hung Temple heritage site was remapped to encompass an area of more than a 1000 hectares, including 32 hectares of the old temples and more than 900 hectares of land from the surrounding villages (Hùng 2012, pp. 77-80). The decision turned the Hung Temple into the biggest heritage site of the province. A series of construction projects involved a number of surrounding villages, thus incorporating them into the landscape of the heritage site. Then in 2005, two other decisions were approved by the Prime Minister relating to the Hung Temple. One was for a plan for a ten-year project to rebuild the Hung Temple. The other decision enlarged Viet Tri city to cover the heritage site, with a vision to develop it as the city of the festival celebrating the origin of the nation. Under the former decision, over this ten-year period, a great amount of money was invested in replanning the Hung Temple. As reported by the Hung Temple Management Office, up to 2011, 1.542 billion Vietnamese Dongs has been spent, of which the state funded 90.7 percent (Đền Hùng 2012a).

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw an intensive change to the site. The old temples on Nghia Linh Mountain were in turn rebuilt by funding from the state or donations from other provinces (for example, Hanoi donated to a fund to rebuild the Lower Temple, and Quang Ninh funded the Water Well Temple,

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<sup>20</sup> The change in the Labour law was approval at the meeting of the Eleventh National Assembly of Vietnam in 2007.

while the state invested in a project to rebuild the Top Temple). The boundary of the site was expanded and new functional buildings were built around the central site on Nghia Linh Mountain. This included office buildings, resting places, a square, car parks, kiosks, restaurants, hotels and so on. To paraphrase the temple manager's words, the new construction was to meet the needs of the increasing number of visitors and to augment the sense of it being a 'national historical site' (see Figure 3).



Notes:

Green line: National Road No.2

Red line: road to the Hung Temple

Yellow line: road to Lac Long Quan temple

1. Au Co Temple

2. Top Temple

3. Middle Temple

4. Lower Temple

5. Water Well Temple

6. Hung Vuong Museum and office building

7. Lac Long Quan Temple

8. Hung Vuong Square and Car park No.4

9. Car park No. 2 and 3

10. Restaurants

11. Hotels

12. Kiosks and Car park No.1

**Figure 3: The map of the Hung Temple heritage site in 2012**

In addition, new constructions for veneration were built. At the Top Temple, a stone was set up called the Oath stone (*cột đá thề*). Initially, it was an old stone found during the preservation project of the 1960s, but it was referred to by people as a stone mentioned in the Hung Kings' story. Visitors started burning incense at the stone, and gradually it became a sacred object of the Top Temple<sup>21</sup> (see Plate 6). Similarly, people worshipped the stone stele in the stele house, engraved with Ho Chi Minh's sentence and the stone bas-relief of Ho Chi Minh with Vietnamese soldiers at the T-junction to the Water Well Temple; they are now sites to commemorate Ho Chi Minh (see Plate 4 above).



**Plate 6: The Top Temple in the 1960s before the Oath stone was installed (left) and the Oath stone worshipped at the Top Temple in 2012 (right)**

Also in the first decade of the twenty-first century, new temples were built within the expanded area of the heritage site. One is the Au Co Temple, which is devoted to the legendary mother of the Hung Kings. Another one is the Lac Long Quan Temple, where people worship the dragon king who was said to be the father of the Hung Kings in the legend of the origin of the nation. Not far from these temples, a memorial site was built devoted to local unknown soldiers of

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<sup>21</sup> First erected in 1962 by the temple manager, the stone was a piece remaining from the previous religious construction work. The managers of the temple set a place for it in front of the temple as a commemorative object. Gradually, some people related it to the stone mentioned in a story of the Hung Kings, called the 'Oath stone'. The story was told among visitors and people at the site, and people started to burn incense for it and pray at what they considered a sacred object. In 2007, the old stone was replaced by a new one, a semi-precious stone, donated by a company based in Hanoi.

the modern Vietnamese wars. When I was conducting fieldwork there in 2013, the leading managers and the provincial leaders were talking about a plan to build a memorial house for Ho Chi Minh within the site in order to worship him and to remember the times he visited the Hung Temple. It was through such processes that the Hung Temple site was transformed into being 'a spiritual centre of the Vietnamese', as a leader of Phu Tho province stated proudly.

### ***Narrative topology***

The story about a site is always adjusted to please the will of the teller and the visitors. Each time that visitors go to the temple, they listen to a different story about what they were observing. The objects and places are displayed in a particular way at a particular time. That meaningful arrangement of things is the narrative topology of the site. The construction of this narrative topography helps visitors comprehend the significant meaning and value of the heritage site.

As Brett explains:

Narrative topology is, briefly, the arrangement of spaces and the connections between them such as that they set up, suggested or assert relationship between whatever is displayed in those spaces... What I mean by it is best illustrated through the circulation patterns and hierarchy in typical buildings (1996, p. 88).

I borrow the definition of narrative topology from the work of Brett to talk about the Hung Temple's story. The site has been arranged in a particular way and has continued to be rearranged over time to serve different purposes. As Brett asserts, visual displays have 'a formative power over the content of the understanding'. He adds that 'these conventions are a form of ideology' (1996, p. 7). In so saying, the author implies that there is a link between visualisation and ideology, and the implication is that we can identify the ideologies used in certain displays.

At the Hung Temple, I observed a system of signs designed to inform visitors of directions, names and stories of landscapes and constructions. There were two types of signs, one resembled the past style with old architecture and one followed contemporary construction fashions. The old signs were characterised

by texts written in Sino Nom language<sup>22</sup> or by architectural decorations. For example, the whole Nghia Linh Mountain was marked as a site by two gates at two sides of the mountain foot. The gates were engraved with statues of guardian spirits, which reflects the belief that those spirits would protect the boundary of the sacred zone. A structure of three temples—at the top, the middle and the low position of the mountain—and its circled pathway also reflected a traditional religious cosmology and practice.<sup>23</sup>

Also, the wooden sculpture featuring an engraving of two dragons moving towards a sun (*lưỡng long châu nguyệt*), found on the top of the gate of the Hung Temple (see Plate 7 left) and inside a temple (see plate 7 right), was a typical pattern of decoration. This was a symbol of the faith in natural forces. Throughout the temple site, there were wooden banners or parallel poems carved in Sino Nom letters. The banner at the main gate, for example, read as ‘the beautiful path to the mountain’ (*cao sơn cảnh hành*) (plate 7 left). The one inside the Top Temple was a wooden banner, with its name written in Sino Nom: ‘the temple of the ancestral Hung Kings’ (*Hùng Vương tổ miếu*) (Plate 7 right).

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<sup>22</sup> Sino Nom (*chữ Hán*) was the writing language of the Viet people, which had evolved through adopting Chinese characters. It became less popular in use after the appearance of the Vietnamese alphabet (*chữ Quốc ngữ*, literally ‘national language script’) developed from the seventeenth century. The use of Sino Nom by the French colonial government made it especially unpopular. Sino Nom was used as the official written language of the Vietnamese government until the early twentieth century, when the Vietnamese alphabet writing system was approved to be the official writing language. This remains the popular writing system to the present time. More discussion on the history of writing of the Vietnamese can be found in (Hoàng 2007).

<sup>23</sup> The motif of a sacred site located on a mountain is found throughout Vietnam. The mountain is considered sacred landscape as the reflection of the centre of the universe. Circumambulation around a sacred mountain is a part of the pilgrimage to a mountain or prayer there. This has been considered to be the influence of Buddhism on Vietnamese indigenous theology (Dao 2008).



**Plate 7: The Hung Temple gate (left) and inside the Top Temple (right) have banners of Sino Nom text and decorations of rolling dragons and the sun**

Sino Nom (*chữ Hán*) is a written language based on Chinese characters; it was used in Vietnam before being replaced by the official modern alphabet writing system (*chữ quốc ngữ*), which is based on Latin characters. Because of its unpopularity, the majority of modern Vietnamese people cannot read or understand Sino Nom. Similarly, the old architectural style with decorations imbued with Confucianism or Daoism is also difficult for the modern observer to understand. These signs at the Hung Temple were valuable for the researchers and heritage managers to understand the history of the site as well as its meanings and values. Many books introducing the site have recorded all the existing Sino Nom texts at the site and have translations into modern Vietnamese. Even the temple staff members who were responsible for interpreting the site to visitors found it difficult to remember the Sino Nom writings. From my observation, the staff tended to remember the meaning of the Sino Nom letters even though they did not understand the exact letters used. Or, while explaining the site, they just preferred to ignore those details if the visitors did not ask them specifically about the meanings.



To make the site friendly for modern-day visitors, the temple managers have added more signs written in the modern Vietnamese language. A system of signs with information about directions was set up from the entry point on all roads leading to the site and at all the T-junctions and turning points of roads. For example, on National Road No.2, at the point turning to the Hung Temple, they built a big gate with the banner ‘Hung Temple, the national heritage of history and culture’. Throughout the site, there were stone slabs carved with commemorative or edifying texts. For example, ‘the birds have their nest, the people have their hometown’; ‘[when you] drink the water remember where it comes from’; ‘one tree cannot make a mountain; three trees united together would make a high peak’<sup>24</sup> (see Plate 8 for an example). At each temple, there was a board with text explaining the name of the temple, time of construction and story related to that temple.



**Plate 8: A stone slab with text by the side of the walkway on Nghia Linh Mountain (left); the LED electric board on the T-junction leading to Hung Temple (right)**

The sound system was another tool that was frequently used to frame the meaning of the Temple. A system of speakers was set up all over the main site of Nghia Linh Mountain. The radio was turned on during the opening hours of the Temple. It played either stories of the Hung Kings or songs about the Kings, the Temple or the original land. One staff member of the Hung Vuong Museum told me, it was an automatic and convenient guide for the visitors at the site. In

<sup>24</sup> In Vietnamese: ‘Chim có tổ, người có tông’, ‘Uống nước nhớ nguồn’, ‘Một cây làm chẳng lên non, ba cây chụm lại nên hòn núi cao’

addition, big LED electric reader boards were set up at two of the most crowded areas of the site displaying information for the visitors (see Plate 8, right).

Within this intentional visual display, the circumambulation pattern at the Hung Temple site was designed to lead visitors from one site to another. Visitors coming to the site first encountered the Hung Vuong museum where they could find out facts and figures related to the history and the place. The main gate of the Hung Temple leading to the pathway up the mountain was immediately at the exit from the museum. After more than a thousand steps, the Lower Temple appeared first on the path. There was a new board there written in the national language saying that this was the place where the Immortal Mother Au Co gave birth to the hundred sons who built up the first kingdom of Vietnam and who were the ancestors of the Vietnamese. The path led the visitors upward to the Middle Temple. There the information board told them the story that the Hung Kings used to stay in that place to meet with their vassal lords. In the front yard, a stone table and stone chairs were displayed as physical evidence of the story. At the Top Temple, there was a mausoleum for the Hung Kings. The text on the board explained that the Hung Kings wanted to be buried there so that they could look down to the villages and care for their people. The Top Temple had a Sino Nom name, which indicated its significance: 'the temple worships the Deity of Heaven' (*Kính thiên linh điện*). The Oath stone sat in front of this temple with an altar. A bowl of incense and trays of offerings were placed in front of the Oath stone, attracting visitors to the inscription. The temple yard was designed to be as large as possible to provide space for visitors to find a good vantage point for sightseeing and photography. From here, there were other steps leading down to the other side of the mountain to the Water Well Temple, which lay at the foot of the mountain. The board at this Temple told the story of the two princesses and the sacred water well inside the Temple. Going out of the mountain area, a visitor could either take the road that led to the Au Co Temple (mother of the Hung Kings) or the one to Lac Long Quan Temple (father of the Hung Kings) (see Plate 9) to finish the circular tour of the heritage site.



**Plate 9: Lac Long Quan Temple, one of the new temples built on Sim Mountain**

A map of this circumambulation with its specific order, stops and introduction was printed on a flyer and reproduced in many guidebooks available at the Temple. Tour guides working at the site also often took visitors around the site, based on this order. This circumambulation aimed to re-inforce intended themes printed in the advertising flyers at the site. These included such things as: ‘a pilgrimage to the past’; ‘an educational site’; and ‘a spiritual convergence place’. To borrow Urry’s words: ‘such themes are designed to demonstrate national pride’ (2002, p. 135) in the cultural activities presumed specific to Vietnam. ‘Such exhibitions operate as a technology of nationhood providing narrative possibilities for the imagining of national culture and indeed the national “brand”’ (ibid., p. 136).

### ***Textual performance of nationalism in visitor books***

Given that the constructions of heritage and traditions at the Hung Temple are part of a political agenda, I here will use data about the activities of state leaders at the Hung Temple to illustrate how they have shaped a sense of national place

at this physical site. One important source of data comes from the written entries of leaders in the visitor books kept at the Hung Temple.

The visitor books were large books with blank pages for the visitors to leave their written comments about their visit to the Temple site. Visitor books can be studies of 'collections of expression and articulation' (Noy 2008, p. 509). While the visitor book itself can be designed as a part of the place to 'constitute spaces in which these expressions and articulations materialise and take shape' (ibid.), these writings in turn reflect the emplaced experiences and comments. They enable practices of meaning-making. Noy suggests that 'the visitor book constitutes a meaningful stage in and of itself, and its semiotic and communicative function are manipulated so as to serve and promote the mission of the site, which is to construct a sense of shared heritage' (2008, p. 512). Noy asserts that visitor books invite visitors 'to communicate with and among national symbols'. While the physical site offers a walk through the materialised signs, the visitor book gives a chance to revisit the impressions and also 'to participate in this as active producers and contributors' (ibid., p. 515).

Since taking over the management of the Temple, administrators have been keeping visitor books at Hung Vuong Museum within the site. As I observed, guests were welcomed at the museum, taken through the site with a guide, and then taken back to the museum before leaving. There they were asked if they wanted to write in the visitor book. Often I observed that each page of the book had only one entry, mostly written by a government delegate. The entries in visitor books, therefore, can represent the experiences of a portion of visitors, mainly those of official delegations led by national leaders or governmental cadres.

These visitor books are important objects of study. The available books recorded entries from the 1960s and still continue to be used at the time of the research fieldwork. The entries are often hand written with the signature of the visitor. Visitor books at the Hung Temple contained many signatures of famous national leaders in different years since the 1960s, which contribute to highlighting the

significance of the site. Moreover, those entries provide data to help understand how visitors in the revolutionary period had expressed their feelings when visiting the Hung Temple. The writings reflected the meaning-making practices that helped bolster the importance of place at the Hung Temple. In the act of writing, visitors set themselves up for a conversation with an imagined audience. Each entry was an utterance addressed to a certain audience and the entry itself was the responsive reaction of the visitors to that audience. Entries in the visitor books included 'performative utterance' (Austin 1975) since in the text, the writers often narrated their activities at the site and expressing their experiences. And by expressing their feelings such as feeling proud or being moved, or in remembering, these 'acts of speech'<sup>25</sup> were performed.

For example, when a delegation of teachers specialising in politics visited the Hung Temple in 1969, the head of the group left the following note:

We have long desired to be with our ancestors. Coming here we had a chance, by listening to Mr Loc, to know about the heritage Temple. It was like re-living a history of our ancestors who founded and built the nation.

Coming here, we also listened to Uncle Ho's teachings. Those words reminded us, the teachers of politics, to always enrich our patriotism, appreciate the military tradition and contribute to make a heroic Vietnam. We want to express our endless pride and our gratitude for being the children of the heroic land.

The Hung Temple, referred to as 'here' in the writing, was perceived as a place of national reminiscence, pride and belonging. By positioning themselves as 'teachers of politics (of the Party)', the writers identified themselves as holding legitimated positions in the governmental system. They also upheld the Party ideology. The writer addressed the people working at the Hung Temple site to bring them in an imagined *conversation* with the host, the visitor and the place in which the meanings were constructed. That conversation assumed a collective

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<sup>25</sup> Austin (1975) suggests that there is a kind of sentence called 'performative utterance' or 'performative sentence' which is not just to say something but is to perform a kind of action. 'Speech acts' or 'the acts of speech', according to Austin, refers to the action which is performed when a 'performative utterance' is issued (pp. 6-7).

identity among people who had the same past and live under the same government and party in the present.

Another example further illustrates my argument about the place-making practices enacted by visitors writing in these books. On the occasion of the celebration of the National Liberation of South Vietnam in 1970, a delegation of the People's Armed Force visited Hung Temple and left this comment:

Today, we, the children of the Hung Kings in the time of Ho Chi Minh, the heroes of the People's Armed Force<sup>26</sup> from the North and South, from all battles in the country, come here to visit the original land.

We are proud of the tradition of our ancestors in 4000 years of history of founding and protecting the nation. We are determined to follow that heroic tradition, to fight until victory, to protect the North and to liberate the South, even to the last drop of our blood, even with 'the last drawstring from our pants'. We will fight for one day when the nation will unite and people in the South can visit the Hung Kings' land.

The writer in this entry put the Hung Kings and Hung Temple in a 'forest of symbols' (Turner 1967)<sup>27</sup>. I borrow the term to emphasise the way symbols are put next to each other in the writing above, creating an interpretation of the nation and its contributing values. The themes of tradition, pride and responsibility (or determination) were mentioned to combine all the symbols used into a coherent narrative. In that narrative, the role and the will of the present people were legitimated under an umbrella of nation and heroic nationalism. The semiotics used in the utterance made it a performance of sorts, one that was involved in promoting a particular form of nationalism linked with the Hung King Temple. The tone of the writing makes me recall the work of Noy who, when commenting on entries in visitor books at the national museum in Jerusalem, said that the visitors tended to identify with current party-state ideology in ways that 'are supportive of the nationalist and militarist worldview promoted by the site' (2008, p. 512).

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<sup>26</sup> In Vietnamese: *Anh hùng lực lượng vũ trang nhân dân*

<sup>27</sup> In his work, Turner uses the term 'forest of symbols' to refer to symbolic categories and actions that bound together to build a network of meaning that reflects Ndembu society.

Visitors writing these utterances linked the legacy of the Hung Kings with the legacy of Ho Chi Minh into a unified understanding of the nation. The use of personal names such as the Hung Kings or Ho Chi Minh here represented more than names. Rather, they became part of a 'shared cultural system of meaning' (Taylor 2012, p. 126). The Vietnamese were imagined as the holders of this past and present 'essence' who had the obligation to ensure the future of their beloved nation.

By reproducing nationalist themes and discourses in written statements, these visitors were producing a textual form of an emplaced nationalism. This emplaced nationalism was a framed production that, in turn, contributed to the making of place. The place-making produced in the Hung Temple's visitor books, I argue, was a collective practice. When I read the visitor books, I noted that those themes in the above writings (nation formation, national continuity, past merit and present responsibility) were often repeated. In the range of entries, there were patterns in terms of words used, as well as in tone and themes. In many entries the visitors used the first person plural 'we'. At the end of the writing, there were often long lists of signatures that reflected the group's support of the statement. Finally, the visitor book itself was also a collective production, in the way that it included entries of many visitors through a certain period of time.

The Hung Temple in these writings was perceived as a representative of the past. Examples of comments about the Hung Temple in the late 1980s visitor book include: 'where the Vietnamese have their birth' (Taylor 1986) and 'a historical source' (Luong 1987). The Hung Temple mediated between the past dynasty and the present nation. Nationhood was re-imagined through a chain of time which combined aspects of ancestors and children, merit and responsibility, and nation, party and ideology. Visiting the heritage site was to bring the connection between the imagined past and the present to life, as Brett argues:

The representation of the past has a direct bearing upon political legitimacy in the present. Indeed, the construction of 'heritage' is a means for the definition of the contemporary, which it reveals in a fantastic or fetishised form (1996, p. 8).

Before closing this section, I give two examples of contemporary entries in the visitor books by state delegations. These illustrate how such entries further enhance state-led place-making practices at the Hung Temple. The first entry is from a delegation from the State Department of Justice. As I observed, delegations of this Department visited and conducted rituals at the Hung Temple at the beginning and end of each lunar year. A member in the delegation in 2013 told me that they had maintained that activity for a decade. In 2010, the representative of the delegation wrote:

Visiting the Hung Temple every new lunar year has become a good tradition of the State Department of Justice... We burn the incense, bow our heads in front of the Kings and ask for your [the Kings'] blessing. We ask for your support to overcome the difficulties and become successful at work.

The 'tradition' in the comment of this delegate refers not to a 'national history' but rather a practice that had been set up and maintained by the Department of Justice. The words indicate that the officers credit the blessings of the Hung Kings for their yearly success.

A second example illustrating the new themes sanctioned by the state at the Hung Temple was a comment by a member of a delegation of the Vietnamese Business and Industrial Department, a state-owned business corporation, in the new lunar year of 2012. The entry said:

We burn the incense, bow our heads in front of the Kings and thank them for their blessing. For the coming year, we ask our Hung Kings to bless the nation and support us to have a peaceful country with happy people. We ask your blessing for national entrepreneurs and the business community. We ask you to support us to educate strong business people, with nationalist spirit, business cultural manners and social responsibility. We ask you to support us to integrate into global markets and to ensure our success.

Words in this entry are typically speech acts according to the understanding of Austin (1975). They are written expression of feelings, in the words of written prayer (typically indicated in the saying 'we ask for the blessing'). Therefore, they can be seen as forms of social performance in the Bourdieuan sense and as rituals. The words indicate that the officers prayed for the blessings of the Hung



Kings for their yearly success. And in this praying, the delegation asks for the Kings' blessing for the nation and for all people, and then asks for blessings for specific entrepreneurs and the business community. These two entries highlight the link between the Hung Kings' blessings with a variety of contemporary concerns related to national affairs, such as the judiciary, business, and global integration.

In sharing these writings by visitors, I highlight that these visitor book entries have changed emphasis from (national) pride, emulation and generic gratitude to asking the Hung Kings' blessing for (individual and corporate) economic success. Even though, in those entries, I have shown that the Temple was understood to be a national heritage site that conveyed a standardised interpretation of the nation. I have used the comments in the visitor books to illustrate how visitors (often times are state delegations) responded positively to that constructed story. Each entry worked to reinforce the national narrative that was based upon interactions at the heritage site. That narrative was nationalist in the sense that it was recognised by the nation's political representatives and their leadership and was consistent with their ideology. It was also nationalist in the sense that it offered a common understanding of history, custom and nationhood, which defines Viet-ness. In this collective construction, it was the 'memory-nation' that was important, as Taylor argues in a study of the construction of the Thai nation in Thailand: 'the reliance on national narratives of history ensures a sense of continuity in the imaginative ethno-symbolic construct of "Thai'ness"' (Taylor 2012, p. 122).

Having explored both narrative topology and textual performances of nationalism, I now move on to investigate the place-making practices of official delegations at the Hung Temple site.

### ***Producing nationalism on official visits***

In this section, I discuss official visits and the production of state-led nationalism at the Hung Temple. I do this by analysis of a particular delegates' official visit at the site and their engagement within the place. These interactions speak to the

production of nationalism at the Hung King Temple, which, as I will illustrate, follows the main themes set up from the previous period but with some adjustments.

In the spring of 2013, I had the opportunity to accompany a delegation of ambassadors visiting the Hung Temple, before they went abroad to take up their new positions. The description of the visit I offer below is an example of how people coming to the temple were taken through the site and how this framed their interactions with it.

For the trip, we journeyed in three cars, starting from the building of the Provincial People's Committee in the centre of Viet Tri City. After going along National Road No.2, which connects Hanoi to the North West provinces, the three cars slowed down to turn left and passed the barrier of the first car park without being stopped by the guards, since the temple managers had been advised of this visit.

We stopped in front of the main building of the Hung Temple Management Department. Mr Tung, Vice-Director of the Department, greeted us and led the delegation to the meeting room in the Hung Vuong Museum. In the meeting room, people sat down on luxury wooden chairs arranged in a U-shape. Mr Tung introduced himself as the representative of the Hung Temple. He greeted Mr Tuc, Vice-President of the province who accompanied the delegation to the Temple. He then greeted the ambassadors. Among them was Mr To, who served as head of the delegation. After the welcome speech, Mr Tuc and Mr Tung gave a Hung Temple badge to each guest (see Plate 10). The Hung Temple badge is a piece of metal with scripts on its face; it was designed in 2000 as a gift of the Management Department to visitors of the temple.<sup>28</sup> Mr Tung then introduced Mrs Hong Anh, saying: 'Now please listen to Mrs Hong Anh, staff member of the Office of Heritage, who will tell you about the Hung Temple. When it was her

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<sup>28</sup> Not every visitor going to the Hung Temple can have a temples badge. During my fieldwork, I observed that staff of the Department of Management often gave it just to VIP guests.

turn to speak, Mrs Anh started with a warm smile. 'Welcome to the Hung Temple, our number one heritage site in Vietnam'. She then continued:

The badge that you are wearing has the image of the Hung Temples' main gate, which you will see on the way to the Temple. The gate image has been the symbol that reminds Vietnamese of the Hung Temple. It symbolises our wish that the ancestors will follow and bless us. This is also our wish to all of you today. Some of you may have visited the Hung Temple many times; some of you may have not; so please excuse me if I repeat something you already know, in my talk.

This [Hung Temple] is a site commemorating the Hung Kings. The Vietnamese have a saying: 'drinking water, remembering the source'. It means that gratitude is one of our important traditions, as it is for many other nations. Our ancestors have built this heritage site for thousands of years. There are many new constructions and antique buildings that we will observe today. Each temple on this mountain has a historical lesson that our ancestors have passed down for posterity. I hope some of the stories today will follow you to foreign countries. Now please, we will start our trip!



**Plate 10: Pinning the Hung Temple badge on an official delegate**

We went out of the museum and down the steps to the main gate, where two guards were standing with burning incense for everyone in the group. Each person, in turn, took the incense with their hands and made a prayerful gesture.

They bowed three times towards the statue of the guardian spirits before placing the incense into a big bowl.

After the first incense ritual, we continued up the stone stairs. There were stone slabs carved with text along the way. Some delegates took photos of them with their mobile phone but the delegation did not stop for any further explanation of those objects. When we reached the Lower Temple, the members of the delegation performed another incense ritual at a big incense bowl at the front temple door. Mrs Anh informed the delegation about the Lower Temple:

The Lower, Middle and Top Temples in this mountain have the same altar structure to worship the mountain spirits, the Hung Kings and the two princesses. In our oral narratives, the Lower Temple was the place where our national mother Au Co gave birth to a box of a hundred eggs, which turned out to be a hundred sons. They were the first inhabitants of the land and set up the first kingdom of the Vietnamese. The word to call all Vietnamese people, *đồng bào*, originated from this myth.<sup>29</sup>

Most of the delegation concentrated on the story, nodding their heads. Others were looking at a big tree in the front yard of the pagoda beside the Lower Temple. Mrs Anh explained:

This frangipani tree (*cây hoa đại*) and the sago palm (*cây vạn tuế*) planted in front of the Thien Quang pagoda are treasures. The frangipani is three hundred years old and the sago palm is seven hundred years old. They are symbols of pureness and longevity.

I followed her pointing hands, and noted that the branches of the trees were covered with green moss, showing their old age.

The pathway led us up to the Middle Temple where a guard was waiting for us with the burning incense in his hands. The delegation gathered at the front yard to perform the incense ritual (the third time) and then straightaway returned to the walking track without going inside the Temple. The Top Temple appeared in front of us not long after that. Everyone stopped outside the Temple for a short rest. Soon after, we all went inside the Temple. The smell of the burning incense was still in the air as we passed the outside hall where a big incense bowl was

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<sup>29</sup> '*đồng bào*' literally means people who come from the same womb of a mother. This is a Vietnamese word that has its origins in the Chinese word, *Tóngbāo*.

placed. We moved through the big room towards another smaller room at its back. There were some other visitors in the temple. They were gathering in front of a big altar and its offering table, praying with hands at the centre of their hearts. The temple keepers opened the doors of a sanctum sanctorum room (*thượng cung*)<sup>30</sup> to let the delegates in, one by one.

In the small room, there were four altars in aged ironwood, decorated with gold lacquer. Flowers and fruit-filled trays were placed on the altar tables, which were against the walls. Everybody touched their palms together in prayer while the temple-keeper rang the bell three times and prayed (see Plate 11).



**Plate 11: Ritual at the altar of the Hung Kings in the secret room**

As the delegates' representative, the temple keeper prayed that the ambassadors promised to work to the best of their ability, to be loyal to the interests of the nation and to the leadership of the party and the state. The delegates kept their hands in praying position till the end of the prayer and bowed their heads toward the altar to end the ritual process.

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<sup>30</sup>The sanctum sanctorum room (*thượng cung*) is the room built at the back of the Top Temple where stored the four altars with the tablet writing names of the deities.

After the ritual, they gradually moved out of the room, heading down to the Hung Kings Mausoleum (*Hùng Vương Lăng*) for another incense ritual. Then, the mission went down following the stairs on the other side of the mountain. The way down from the Temple was cool and shaded by the large trees along either side of the footpath. The area around the Temple abounded with nature, adding a sense of seclusion from the outside houses and roads. I listened and recognised that the music of the song *Thậm Thành* (the sound of pounding rice in a rice pounder) was playing through the sound system along the pathway. This song retold the story of how the Hung Kings taught the people to make rice and rice cakes. Only then was I aware that the sound system had been playing for the whole time since we started our visit in the morning. After a while, we moved out of the forest and saw the final temple—the Water Well Temple. As we were walking into the Temple, I saw Mrs Anh waiting at the side of the altar. She continued her talk:

The water in the well inside this Temple is believed to bring health and luck to people who drink it. Now the water is less plentiful, so we only offer it to very special guests.

After Mrs Anh said these words, the heritage manager of the Water Well Temple took a bucket. On cue, the temple's guard team opened a metal screen covering the inside of the well. The heritage manager then put the bucket into the well and took out half a bucket of water to fill about thirty small cups. Each person drank one cup, some nodding their heads and saying that the water was very fresh and cool. The delegates then bowed or prayed at the front of the altar before leaving the Temple.

After the last ritual, the head of the delegation asked Mrs Anh for a copy of the ritual speech for each of the members so that they could take it with them on their work trip abroad. When exiting through the Temple's gate, I asked one member whether they would now go back to Hanoi. He let me know that the program was to visit two places: the Hung Temple—the birthplace of the Viet kingdom, and then Tan Trao in Tuyen Quang province—the birthplace of Viet Minh.

The visit I have just described was one among many similar visits to the Hung Temple that I observed during my research. The description has highlighted one purpose that visits to the Temple serve. It illustrates the way that the Hung Temple is politically significant for the construction of a state-framed nationalism. It shows how a structured site is 'consumed' in a programmed way as people move through the various parts or places of the Temple. The pathway that was taken on the ambassadors' delegation tour was full of signs that relay to visitors the meaning and symbolism of the Temples, and the value-laden landscape of which it is a part. The sequence of the stops on the tour was designed to add elements to make it a coherent narrative of the place. All the elements unite together to make the site purposely constructed, including the temples, museum, the walk ways, surrounding trees, the music, the signs and so on. Added to this was the introduction and commentary of the guide or the temple managers. This combination framed a particular narrative of the Temple of the Hung Kings that is significant to the modern nation-state, a narrative that helps to paint a state-sanctioned vision of national formation and common identity.

The prominent pattern of interactions by visitors was to respond positively to the narrative topology and the visit agenda. Wearing the badge carved with the image of the national flower and the Hung Temple gate, they agreed to mark themselves as honoured visitors at the site, different from ordinary visitors. By following the set path, listening to the speeches and conducting rituals at approved places, they engaged in a collective practice designed to convey a set of expected meanings and values that connected the symbolism of the place with a narrative of the nation.

The description shows that the visit of ambassadors had aspects of tourism. These included visual consumption, gaze, and the collection of signs (Urry 2002) that contribute to the construction of place. However, the nature of the visit is much more complex than that. The ambassadors' visit was not voluntary but an obligation of work. Without having the position of ambassadors-to-be, they would not be included in this trip. Therefore, interactions at the Temple site

were work-obligated performances and also prestige recognition. Besides some moments of entertainment and curiosity, members of the delegation followed the program seriously.

By engaging with the idea of 'national heritage' we are imaginatively (as visitors) constituting the 'nation' as a real entity, according to the underlying assumptions. We are, in play, enacting the creation and development of the concept of the 'nation' (Brett 1996, p. 156).

In contrast to the national leaders before *Doi Moi* who did not use incense, these delegates burnt incense and performed rituals. They conducted rituals at all the temples in the site with prepared offerings and ritual prayers. Their actions were scripted as religious expressions: burning the incense seven times, citing the ritual prayer at the Hung Kings altar and drinking the blessed water. They were performing religiosity.

These observations imply that the Hung Temple was perceived to be a place of veneration to the national ancestor rather than a 'park of history' as Ho Chi Minh had described it. This is an obvious shift of framing on the meaning of the site, away from the previous scientific and militaristic approach and towards a cultural and religious approach. Instead of pride in national history, the visitors put more emphasis on the pride of the unique 'culture' shared by all Vietnamese.

It is through daily practices that the so called national cultural heritage of the Vietnamese is made. As Bendix argues:

From the warp and weft of habitual practices and everyday experience—the changeable fabric of action and meaning that anthropologists call 'culture'—actors choose privileged excerpts and imbue them with status and value (2008, p. 255).

I contend that over time a certain way of interacting with the Hung Temple has been established for visitors as a consequence of the newly constructed Hung Temple site. The way visitors interact with the Temple builds upon historically consistent, albeit modified practices. In a way, the state-led construction of the place and the rituals that are enacted there constitute a place-based 'habitus'. By habitus, I mean (following Bourdieu) a 'system of durable, transposable dispositions which function as the generative basis of structured, objectively



unified practices' (1977, p. 72). That said, this does not mean that people unthinkingly mimic what they are told to think, do and feel. Habitus, after all, influences—without determining—individuals, groups and social classes. It guides expectations that assure continuity and regularity even in new situations. This is a process that appears to be taking place at the Hung Temple in the contemporary period as people draw from the symbols and practices at the suggestion of the state-led framing work, to create new ways of interacting with the site, and of being Vietnamese.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed place-making practices at the Hung Temple through an investigation of how the state has framed a religious site for the consumption of a nation. The chapter sections have described how the state manipulated the Hung Temple and the symbol of the Hung Kings for its political purposes in two periods of time, from the revolutionary time to the contemporary. I have argued that this manipulation has considerably changed the Hung Temple and the symbolism of the Hung Kings, giving them an emergent significance in the making of the nation.

First, the chapter illustrates that the Hung Temple has been constructed to serve as a national heritage site under the control of the state. I have shown how it has been renovated to promote a selective memory of the nation. I have also shown how new constructions expanded the meanings of the site and how modern instruments and technology have been employed to emphasise aspects of identity of the place. Through the visual displays and the presentation of its narratives, the Hung Temple evokes the memory of the ancestors and offers a physical bridge to the past—a past that the state very much wants its citizens to consume. The site hence offers visitors the ability to frame and represent the values of the contemporary nation state.

Second, while making the Hung Temple site significant for the national narrative, there has been a shift of emphasis in the place-making practices. Before *Doi Moi*, the Hung Temple was considered a symbol of the national past that helped to

construct the national present. This ideology was based on a scientific approach and a rational consumption of the site. After *Doi Moi*, while still being reminded of the past–present connection, visitors instead used the themes of cultures, values and tradition to express their understanding of the nation. I emphasise changes in recent decades to illustrate how the symbolism of the Hung Kings and the Hung Temple has been interpreted by the state and its officials at a time of significant changes in the society and people’s lives. I have shown that the Hung Kings have long been involved in the symbolic discourse of nationhood, but in recent decades, these mythical figures have emerged as a spiritual and cultural focal point for the construction of a new post-socialist national identity.

Throughout, the state has played a driving role in the development and promotion of the Hung Temple as a national resource. However, the state itself faces internal conflict in managing its attitude towards the Temple and the Kings. The chapter initially highlights the effort to amass historical evidence about these figures and write them into a mythology of socialist nationalism that de-emphasises overt religiosity. Latterly, it shows how the state has turned to recognise the spiritual characteristics of the Hung Kings and praise the moral value in people’s devotional practice towards the Kings. The meaning of the Hung Kings and the Hung Temple, therefore, has shifted from a memorial symbol to a spiritual power affecting the nation and people’s lives.

Third, when state delegations go to the Hung Temple, they are expected to perform the notion of nation that is being given. While absorbing the narrative topology, the delegates express their supportive response to its meanings. On the one hand, they leave writings in the visitor books which credit the historical significance of the Hung Kings. On the other hand, they burn the incense and perform actions of religiosity to ask for blessings of the Kings on national affairs. Whether or not these actions reflect their inner feelings, they do acknowledge the veneration to ancestors as a ‘tradition’ and highlight the model of nationalism that the state wants to impose upon the national population. These are performances of cultural and religious nationalism at the Hung Temple site where nationalist sentiment is based on common religious belief and practice.

My analysis supports and adds to Jellema's argument on ancestor veneration and nationalism in Vietnam after *Doi Moi* (2007a). The visit to the Hung Temple, she argues, reflects the movement of 'returning to origin'<sup>31</sup>, which models a flexible "coming and going" engagement with the nation' (2007b). While she argues that this new form of nationalism reflects the mobility of post-socialist society, my data suggest that this form of nationalism reveals the religious element that is increasingly significant in contemporary Vietnam. In both circumstances, the examples show the adjustment of the state's official view in order to encourage a suitable sense of belonging to the nation.

For this reason, the state delegation's performance of worshipping the Hung Kings at the Hung Temple is close to 'the specific form of religion associated with the life of the national community' (Reynolds 1977, p. 268), which Reynolds termed as 'civic religion'.<sup>32</sup> In his comparative research of religion and politics in Thailand, Reynolds studied the traditional Thailand relationship between religion and the kingdom-state and stressed the continuity of this relationship in the modern nation. The leaders (the Kings), in each period of time, used different strategies to create and enhance the royal power as sacred and indubitable. In the same approach, I have pointed out that the Hung Temple has been continuously employed in the construction of a national narrative and that in modern times, the driving force for this has been the state and influential state agents.

There is, however, 'not an agreed "national" narrative nor a set of representative strategies around which a...heritage could be constructed' (Brett 1996, p. 8). The visual displays that I have described still provide plenty of variations for visitors.

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<sup>31</sup> In Jellema's research, *về nguồn* or 'returning to origin' movement refers to Vietnamese who have migrated away from their village, returning to pay tribute their hometown or village, bringing money home or investing in the home place. The visit to the Hung Temple is also interpreted as an action of 'returning to the origin'.

<sup>32</sup> Reynolds sets up the term civic religion in comparison with the phrase 'civil religion' which is significantly developed by Robert Bellah in his research in America (Bellah 2005). Bellah's civil religion is the product in the context of modern nation state; it is not the continuity of any previous organised religion. It closely related to national issues, namely rights of man, law, social order, and national meaning; it is obviously involved in the most pressing moral and political issues of the day (ibid., p.52).

Even though the constructed narrative, including what I have referred to as the narrative topology, seeks to persuade visitors, it does not mean that they are not reflexive about what they are asked to consume. After all, 'the identity that matters is the one we choose for ourselves' (ibid., p. 138). At the Hung Temple, in spite of the structured displays, people engaging with the Hung Temple construct the site for their own purposes. In the following chapters, I will discuss this further by focusing on different groups of people who have particular relationships with the Hung Temple.

### **Chapter 3      Navigating the bureaucracy for personal gain: ritual, social and economic practices**

As discussed in Chapter 2, the revolutionary socialist state intentionally constructs the Hung Temple and its deities as the symbol of national identity and a tool for national solidarity. It also attempts to impose management over the site to ensure Temple practices are aligned with official ideology. The state bureaucratic system has replaced the village structure that once took care of the site. This chapter examines bureaucratic practices and associated consequences on people's everyday lives in the post-*Doi Moi* period.

Anthropological interest in organisations, politics and the state has burgeoned in recent years, as many academics have commented (Bernstein & Mertz 2011; Curtis, Ferguson & Gupta 2011; Heyman 2004, 2012; Hull 2012). Anthropological studies of bureaucracy often approach the phenomenon in three main ways according to Heyman (2012). The first approach involves 'examining bureaucracies in the deep history of unequal and centralised societies'. The second approach involves 'examining bureaucracies in comparative perspective with attention to similarities and differences across cultural, social and political contexts'. The third approach involves offering 'rich fieldwork-based information on the workings of actual bureaucracies, the lives and thoughts of bureaucrats' (Heyman 2012, p. 1269). This chapter fits within the third category.

Much of the work on bureaucracy owes a debt to Max Weber. He was a classical scholar who established a theory of bureaucracy. In his study, he placed much emphasis on the representation of bureaucracy as rational, efficient and stable:

Once fully established, bureaucracy is among those social structures which are the hardest to destroy. Bureaucracy is *the* means of transforming social action into rationally organised action. Therefore, as an instrument of rationally organizing authority relations, bureaucracy was and is a power instrument of the first order for one who controls the bureaucratic (1978, p. 987).

Focusing on organisational form and behaviour, Weber (1978) describes bureaucratic procedure as 'impersonal' and 'rational'. This view is supported by

studies that focus on organisational structure, such as the analysis of the vertical slice of power (Britan & Cohen 1980), or bureaucratic structure as symbolic of rational government (Herzfeld 1992).

In contrast, later scholars placed greater focus on the practices of bureaucracy within an organisation or between the organisation and its public counterparts. An impressive work is that of Lipsky (1980). He pursued a theory of street-level bureaucracy, which takes into account the interactions of the bureaucracy with other social settings, leading to a lack of control of policy outcomes by the administrators. He does this by providing a wide range of examples of policy implementations that have the potential for a disconnection between the bureaucrats' intentions and the eventual policy outcomes. As Heyman points out, many ethnographic descriptions have supported Lipsky's theoretical view (2004, pp. 491-494; see also Hupe & Hill 2007).

Different approaches provide different analyses of the role of bureaucrats. While Weber (1978, pp. 987-988) states that 'the individual bureaucrat cannot squirm out of the apparatus into which he has been harnessed', other scholars argue that bureaucrats are relatively independent in their capacity to shape policy implementation and outcomes. I take into account Hoag's (2011) explanation for my analysis of bureaucracy in this chapter:

Bureaucracies are confounding in part because their law, rules, and regulations all fundamentally prescribe or proscribe behaviour of an ideal, universal, and abstract sort. Given that these idealised rules are never specific enough to fit a local context, bureaucrats' work is to interpret them. As a result, the ideals are always in deferral, and they can operate as depoliticizing technologies, masking the exercise of power in the guise of an always emergent – but never attained – perfect order (p. 82).

Investigating the work of low level bureaucracy, such as local or institutional administration, is an effective way of revealing the diversity of policy implementation at the micro level. As argued by Hupe and Hill (2007): 'the accountability of street-level bureaucrats is essentially multiple, rather than practised only in vertical relations' (p. 279). By emphasising multiple aspects of

street-level bureaucracy, they suggest that other social actors that interact with bureaucrats have some degree of influence in policy implementation<sup>33</sup>.

In this chapter, a particular approach is used to investigate micro-level implementation of state bureaucracy. This research considers various interactions among actors in the Temple bureaucracy, including day-to-day management of the Hung Temple, with a focus on administrators and their associated work practices. Importantly, this research explores how social actors navigate Temple bureaucracy and leverage particular administrative processes for their own benefit.

This chapter is structured to reflect the top-down bureaucratic systems of the Hung Temple management. Each section considers a specific group of actors involved in management processes at various levels, namely: temple managers, temple keepers, shopkeepers and even some actors who may not seem to be directly related to temple management, such as a bee keeper.

### **Temple bureaucracy and the influence of village politics**

As with all Viet village temples, the temples on Nghia Linh Mountain used to be cared for by people within the villages who built the temples. When the Hung Temple was recognised as a national historical site in 1962 (as explained in the previous chapter), management was gradually transferred to the authority of the state and represented by a local administrator. The institutionalisation process started very early under state management, occurred gradually and was completed by the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The first official administrator was chosen from a nearby village and received a state allowance<sup>34</sup> to take care of the Hung Temple. The administrator's task was to protect the buildings and pathways on the mountain (Đền Hùng 2012c, pp. 33-34). Later, in 1969, a management team of five staff was established, as the

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<sup>33</sup> From the same point of view, a case study by Sandvik (2011) illustrates how refugees in Uganda use money and sexual pleasure to gain the support of bureaucrats.

<sup>34</sup> Hung Temple historical records indicate that in the years 1960-1962, the temple manager's allowance was 14 VND a month, equal to that of a president of a commune.

Temple was in need of more specialised care in order to cater for increasing numbers of political visits. The management team was in charge of protecting buildings and the forest, and welcoming visitors; they worked under the management of the commune's administration<sup>35</sup>(*ibid.*, p. 37). After 1975, the team became the Hung Temple Management Office and employed more than ten staff members working under the Provincial Department of Culture.<sup>36</sup> Tasks included caring for the Temples, undertaking repairs, planting the forest, building the Hung Vuong Museum and providing services for visitors (*ibid.*, pp. 43-47).

The fastest period of development started with the *Doi Moi* economic reforms in the mid-1980s. The Hung Temple Management Office became the Hung Temple Management Department, operating under the management of the Provincial People's Committee instead of the Provincial Department of Culture. The number of staff increased to seventy and continued to increase, reaching around five hundred employees in 2010. This marked the peak of the process whereby state employees had gradually and increasingly taken over authority for managing the Hung Temple.

### ***Understanding the institutional structure***

A top-down administrative system was applied to the management of the Hung Temple, gradually turning it into a 'bureaucratically structured site' (Hoag 2011, p. 81). The operation of this bureaucratic organ was outlined in documents assigned by the Provincial People's Committee in 2005, regulating the functions and organisation of the Hung Temple Management Department. According to this document, the Department works as a functioning organ of a higher level organisation, the provincial government. But as a cultural institution, it is also managed by the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism (see Figure 4).

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<sup>35</sup>A commune is an administrative sub-division in the government that is hierarchical and highly regulated. 'Commune (*xã*) is the smallest territorial unit in the nation-state's administrative structure. The commune is a subunit of the district (*huyện*), which in turn is a division within the province (*tỉnh*)' (Kerkvliet 1995, p. 401).

<sup>36</sup> The Provincial Department of Culture is one of many departments working under the management of the Provincial People's Committee, the highest administrative institution in a province. The responsibility of this department is to manage cultural facilities and activities of the province.



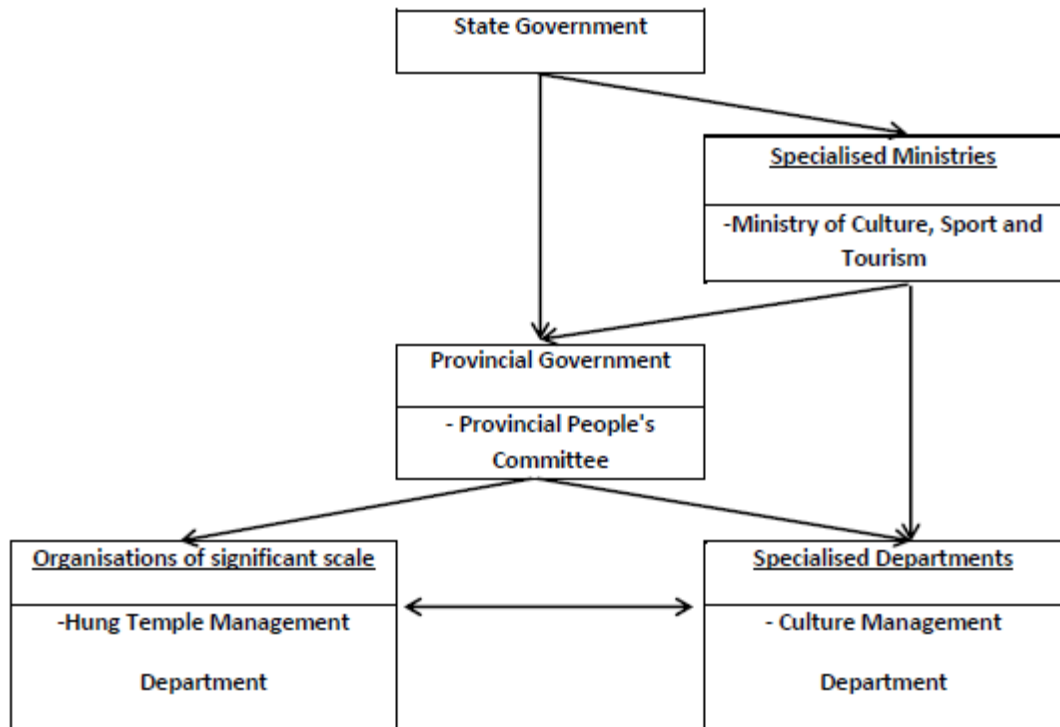


Figure 4: Position of the Hung Temple Management Department in the state bureaucracy system

The Hung Temple Management Department is divided into various offices that undertake different administrative tasks. The offices include: the Administrative Office, the Finance Office, the Heritage Office, the Office of Service and Transactions, the Security Office, the Forest Management Office, the Site Management Office and the Office of Tourism. Each office comprises a head, deputy head and staff team, and operates under the leadership of a director and deputy director (see Figure 5).

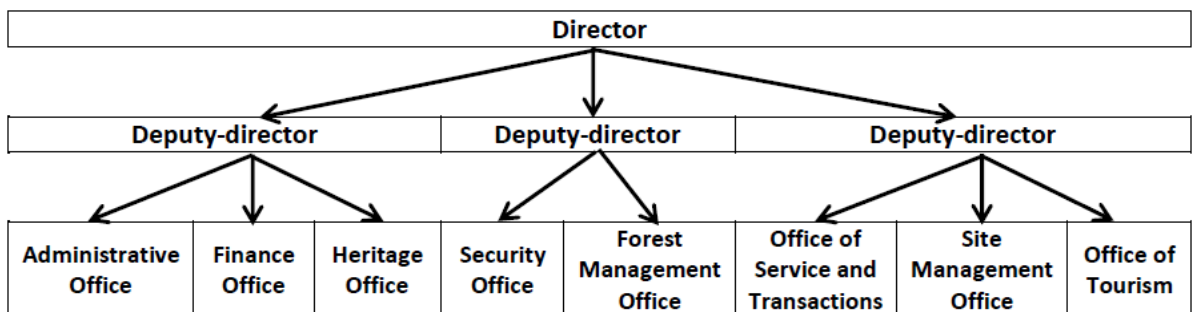


Figure 5: Organisational structure of the Hung Temple Management Department

The Hung Temple Management Department oversees the following:

1. Research regarding the Hung Kings and the Viet people in the time of the Hung Kings in order to popularise this knowledge and organise ritual activities at the Temples
2. Planting and care for the forest surrounding the Temples
3. Management of construction projects at the heritage site
4. Management of the receipt and expenditure of funds, including determining how funds received from the state, provinces, organisations and individuals will be invested in the heritage site
5. Cooperation with related institutions to ensure visitor security and to provide and manage services at the heritage site
6. Management of human, financial and infrastructure resources.

Within each of these areas of responsibility, the Hung Temple Management Department has the authority to make decisions, allocate resources and reward or punish actors according to its policies.

The structure of the Hung Temple Management Department has a vertical distribution of authority which is repeated in each structural unit. Power is centralised at the top with authority distributed down to lower organisational units. This is what the Vietnamese party-state calls 'democratic centralism'. According to the general provincial policy, the Department Director works with assistants to devise Department management regulations that best suits the Temple. The regulatory system defines the scope and extent of decision making for each Departmental employee and is designed to be 'impersonal', 'rational' and 'effective' (Weber 1978). Like bureaucratic bodies elsewhere, it aims to ensure transparency and openness of the system. This type of network, as suggested by Koh, 'has the potential of making individuals comply with the rule, *if it works properly*' (Koh 2001a, p. 280, italics in the original text).

People involved in the management of the Hung Temple have different understandings of the management system. A retired official stated that the

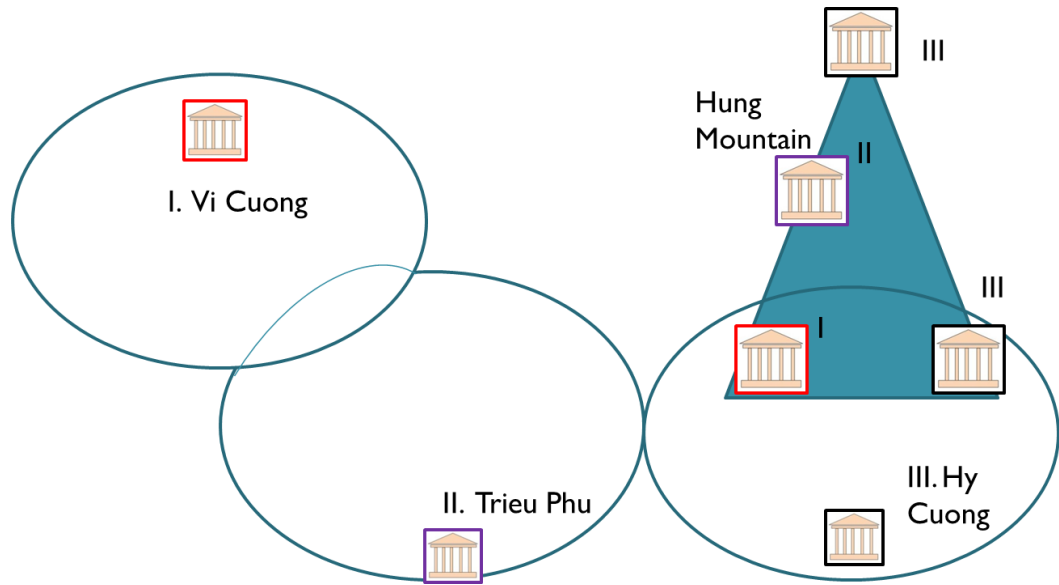
management model helped him to understand state bureaucracy where the party-state was the controlling power situated atop the management hierarchical ladder. Each person held a position in the hierarchical ladder and, therefore, needed to be aware of their own responsibility to work within the principles of the system. Another retired temple keeper used the shape of Nghia Linh Mountain to discuss the management system. He explained that the Top Temple, located at the top of the mountain, is where the Hung Kings performed rituals to the Heavenly Deities, making it the most powerful place. The second most powerful shrine is the Middle Temple where the Hung Kings discussed kingdom affairs with their mandarins. The third level of power is found at the Temples at the foot of the mountain, which are the Lower Temple where mother Au Co gave birth to her sons and the Water Well Temple where the Hung King's princesses used to live. Interestingly, he used this understanding of a spiritual power structure to make sense of the profane organisational structure. These different understandings affect the activities of people working at the Temples, as I will illustrate in the section about temple keepers.

The Temple bureaucracy system employs people from surrounding villages as members of staff. In 2013, the Hung Temple Management Department employed approximately five hundred people. This number does not include people who worked under the Department's temporary management, such as shopkeepers or photographers, nor a large number of wandering sales people who sold goods illegally. Roughly estimated, there would be a thousand workers whose livelihood depended on the site. From my observations, many had family relationships with each other. From Department staff to service providers, many came from some specific families in the surrounding villages. Therefore, local people have become both the subject and object of bureaucracy. This raises the question of the influence of village politics on the implementation of bureaucracy.

### ***Significance and effect of village kinship***

The Hung Temple is located in the territory of Hy Cuong administrative commune. A commune may be formed from one or several villages (*làng*). Usually, each village has its own communal house, temples and pagodas. The state maintains its influence on the management of religious sites through the administrative commune, but the village has actual ownership of and authority over these places.

Management of the Hung Temple involves a complex relationship between the site, the village and the state institution. There are four temples and one pagoda on Nghia Linh Mountain that were built by three villages around the mountain (see Figure 6). Of these three villages, one is Hy Cuong village, which forms the Hy Cuong commune. The other two villages are Vi Cuong and Trieu Phu villages, which belong to Hung Son town, an administrative unit at the same level as a commune. The three villages cared for and managed their temple on Nghia Linh Mountain until the provincial government established the Management Department in the 1960s. From that time on, the Department managed the Temple, but still maintained the role of the three villages. This was achieved by allowing the villages to conduct rituals at their temples and by giving villagers priority to work at the site, especially in the position of temple keeper. The Department cooperates with the administration of the two communes to enforce management policies. This management system is designed to allow the villages to maintain influence in the management and use of the Hung Temple.



**Figure 6: Villages that built temples on Nghia Linh Mountain**

Hy Cuong, Vi Cuong and Trieu Phu are villages with long histories. The kinship network is rooted deeply in village society. Over hundreds of years of settlement, the population increased and families migrated in and moved out, but there remained the power of some older lineages that established the village; their ancestors are worshipped at the village communal temple. Take the case of Hy Cuong village. There were more than 4000 people living in the village in 2012, but a large proportion were from the four interrelated lineages of Hoang, Trieu, Dao and Nguyen, whose ancestors were the first inhabitants of the region. Kinship relationships are either produced through birth or expanded by marriage over generations. As one old Hy Cuong man stated: ‘Half of the village are relatives’.

The kinship network is a significant factor in village politics. Not only are land resources distributed through inheritance lineages, but families with high influence have a greater likelihood of family members gaining leading positions in local administration and the village committees. This hierarchy is reproduced through generations. The Trieu family is a typical example. As a result of an inheritance from their father, the sons in the Trieu family each own large fields and gardens and live at the foot of the sacred mountain at the Temple site. The second son, Mr Phan married Mrs Thuong from the Dao family, another

honourable lineage in the village. Both Mr Phan's and Mrs Thuong's fathers are respected men on the village committee. Mr Phan's uncle was a vice-president of the commune. He helped Mr Phan's son gain employment as an officer with the commune administration. Due to the agreements among the administrators, Mr Phan's family enjoys an honourable social position in the village. Due to this family honour, Mr Phan and Mrs Thuong are well regarded in the Hung Temple Management Department, which resulted in them winning a contract to operate a shop at the central area of the site for many years. Their son married an officer working at the Hung Temple whose mother was a senior staff member working at the Office of Service. These relationships helped the son to lobby for a contract with the Department to run a business at the foot of Nghia Linh Mountain.

Kinship ties affect bureaucratic decision-making in both the Temple and commune administrations. When the Hung Temple Management Department took control of the Temple, kinship ties influenced management processes because staff members working at the Hung Temple were mainly from surrounding villages. The kinship influence is also felt in commune administration, if only because successful management requires cooperation between the Department and commune administrations. Also, importantly, many everyday management practices involve interactions with villagers whose livelihoods rely upon the Temple site.

The kinship factor is also influential in the practice of employing temple keepers for temples on Nghia Linh Mountain. Certain criteria, which apply in the selection of a temple keeper or ritual master, have been maintained over generations in the villages. The selected person must be a man, whom villagers respect and his family must be a good family.<sup>37</sup> Where family members have previously been a temple keeper, this suggests that the family has maintained a good history, which is an advantage in the selection process conducted by the village

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<sup>37</sup> In the villagers' judgement, a 'good' family means that the husband and his wife are still alive, they have both male and female children, and in the year of being appointed his family must have no funeral.

committee. In the villages, some families particularly maintain their honour and history related to the Hung Temple, such as the respected Trieu, Hoang, Dao, and Nguyen families in Hy Cuong village.

The extent to which kinship ties are influential in the competition to become temple keeper has changed over the last several years. More criteria have been added to the temple keeper selection process, such as the requirements that temple keepers be over 60 years of age and be members of the aged association.<sup>38</sup> The most challenging criterion to be introduced is the need to satisfy the requirements of a training course, which places pressure on candidates. A decade ago, a decision was made to limit the job to a one-year period and allow a man to hold the position only once. This decision was made in response to the villagers' request that more people should have the opportunity to hold the position. Implementation of the one-year tenure, along with other requirements, has gradually lessened the influence of village politics by limiting the dominance of kinship power and at the same time offering more opportunities to people who do not belong to powerful lineages.

### ***Perceptions of bureaucratic practices***

This section illustrates the Vietnamese saying: 'The Party has policies, but the people have ways'. The people whose livelihood is affected by implementation of bureaucratic regulations, including bureaucrats and non-bureaucrats, engage with bureaucracy using different strategies for different purposes. This has been illustrated in many studies in Vietnam, in different fields and in different social settings (Kerkvliet 1995, 2005; Koh 2001a, 2001b; Malarney 1996, 2002). Koh (2001a) gives an account of how local administrators and karaoke shop owners in Vietnam cooperated to circumvent state policy. These cooperation practices helped to maintain the operation of the shops and at the same time augmented the income of officials. Before that, Kerkvliet (1995) studied state-village

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<sup>38</sup>The aged association or association of the elderly (*Hội người cao tuổi*) is a voluntary social association with its institutions present at all different administrative levels of Vietnamese government, from national to commune. The smallest level of the 'association of the elderly' is at commune level.

relations around the issue of farming land ownership in rural Vietnam. This study revealed the day-to-day resistance of villagers in northern Vietnam to the collectivisation of agricultural work. Kerkvliet argued that state-village relations comprised a continuous, dialogical process where the implementation of policy was significantly influenced by happenings in rural society that gradually forced the leading cadres to stop the cooperatives and allow private farming (ibid.). Malarney (1996) studied the reformation of ritual practice in urban Vietnam and showed that people who participated in funeral rites, including families and state officials, were not following state guidelines completely. Indeed, even strict rules were not followed as villagers continued to practise some traditional customs, and local officials ignored them or were unable to intervene.

The ethnographic accounts discussed above show that when bureaucracy operates at the ground level, such as in villages, wards or institutions, there is always a way for people to navigate the system. In interactions among bureaucrats, and between bureaucrats and the public, each party leverages various resources for personal gain. In fact, the decision of whether or not to be involved in a particular management procedure depends on the promise of benefit for the participant.

So, what do people at the Hung Temple seek when they leverage the administrative and bureaucratic systems in their everyday work practices? In my fieldwork, I posed to interlocutors questions like: 'Why did you apply for the job at the Hung Temple?'; 'Why do you try so hard to be a temple keeper?'; 'Why are you keen to get a shop contract?' Mostly, people answered that to work at the Hung Temple brings them *lộc*. In Vietnamese, *lộc* means: 1) a bud of a tree; 2) the salary or money distributed to the mandarin from the king; and 3) (material) things that have spiritual blessings. Studying Buddhist practices in Vietnam, Soucy engages with various discussions of *lộc* as interpreted by both practitioners and scholars (2006, 2012). He suggests that the meanings of *lộc* go beyond the perception of gift giving with its religious connotations. I concur with his opinion that *lộc* can be seen as part of the symbolic economy described by Bourdieu (1990), since its associated actions such as *lộc* production and



distribution 'partake of a hidden economy of reciprocity which serves to elevate relative social position and power' (Soucy 2006, p. 108).

The *lộc* that is discussed in this chapter refers to both material and immaterial gifts that people working at the Hung Temple gain through related practices with the deities. They use the term *lộc vua*, meaning the Kings' blessed gifts, when talking about the benefits of work. The temple keeper at the Thuong Temple observed that, two times every month, people working at the site go to the Temples to perform rituals to the deities. He explained: 'They do that because they believe that they are getting their *lộc* distributed to them by the Kings. They want to thank the Kings.' Some people, with an extreme perspective, perceive that the Hung Temple has become a battleground where people fight for their benefits.

The analysis of interlocutors' stories of *lộc*, the ritual, social and economic practices of self-gain, and the ways that different groups navigate the management system to their benefit, help to further understand the connections contemporary people seek, and engage with, in regard to the Hung Temple.

### **Bureaucracy in practice at the Hung Temple**

Administrators are employees of the Hung Temple Management Department tasked with ensuring that the bureaucracy effectively manages the Temple. Working directly with people from other social settings, they are the 'street-level' bureaucrats, as described by Lipsky (1969). Street-level bureaucrats are 'people employed by government, who: 1) are constantly called upon to interact with citizens in the regular course of their job; 2) have significant independence in job decision-making; and 3) potentially have extensive impact on the lives of their clients' (Lipsky 1969, abstract). These people are 'complicit with their powerful institutions, but sometimes antagonistic to them or even in sympathy with the population they are supposed to control' (Hoag 2011, p. 88).

In practice, state employees working at the Hung Temple are influenced by many factors. Within a pyramid system, they are positioned in the middle and have

relationships with their surrounding villagers and distant provincial leaders. Involved in the everyday practices of caring for the Temple, they play a direct role in implementing bureaucratic policies at the local level. However, they do not see themselves as controllers of the bureaucratic practices. Many state employees explained to me that they suffer the stress of facing various responses to bureaucratic regulations from people at the bottom level, while also leveraging among themselves for benefits within the practices of the Hung Temple Management Department. An understanding of their points of view and work practices helps to illuminate the characteristics of this management system.

In the early years of the Hung Temple Management Department, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, the officers were mainly villagers or people living near the site. From the late 1990s, the need to professionalise management procedures increased and existing officers were asked to gain further qualifications to satisfy new requirements for being a staff member. The Department required that new employees hold a degree in cultural management. This led to a situation where more and more employees were sourced from outside the villages. In 2010, two-thirds of the staff in the Hung Temple Management Department were from outside the villages. Mr Hao, a senior member of the Department, is one example. He was born and grew up in Nghe An province until he moved to Hanoi to study at university. He graduated with a degree in heritage renovation and was assigned by the state to go Phu Tho and work at the Hung Temple. He had been working in the Site Management Office for over thirty years and was due to retire in the year that fieldwork for this study was conducted.

In this Department's structure, Mr Hao, like other officers, is identified by a staff profile, a degree and a working position. His tasks are set out in the Department's constitution, which is not only a guide for his role but also helps his manager supervise his work. However, despite his expertise and experience, Mr Hao could not get a promotion and still finds the job stressful. For him, work challenges result from not only bureaucratic processes, but also from social

factors, especially the fact that he is not a local. He discussed disagreements he had with bureaucrats when he was working in the Heritage Office:

They think they have all the power to decide how to deal with heritage, but actually we are the people doing the job. We do not need them to decide but to consult with us.

Mr Hao provided a specific example. The Heritage Office team found an old well in the middle of the mountain during an archaeological project. A plan of restoring and protecting the well was established with a consultant from the Heritage Office team. The Site Management Office team was in charge of carrying out the building work. The well was restored and the area around it was paved with white stone from Thanh Hoa, which is a distant province. One year later, Mr Hau, a senior officer of the Heritage Office, organised for a consultant to send a letter objecting to the project, saying the work needed to be redone as it would be better to use local stone for paving. Mr Hao recalled:

We had been advised to use high quality and stable materials [those from Thanh Hoa]. Mr Hau objected after we had already finished it. We did not agree to dig it up. He then asked a provincial leader to push us and told us that it was the scholars' advice to redo the job with local materials.

This story of a work conflict indicates a practice that occurs quite often in the Department. In Mr Hao's view, a decision was made by powerful individuals in their own interest, rather than by following bureaucratic system procedures. As he explained, if the construction used local materials, local enterprises would benefit. Mr Hao raised suspicions of corruption regarding the relationship between Mr Hau and his uncle, the provincial leader, and the enterprise that might supply the stone. He suspected they had cooperated to alter the project to benefit themselves. In contrast, Mr Hao stated that he suspected Mr Hao had received a bribe from the original stone providers. This example shows conflict at work and different views of how a decision should be made and by whom.

The conflict between Mr Hao and Mr Hau shows the complexity of on-the-ground practices arising from bureaucratic decisions, particularly in who exactly is involved in specific decision-making. This example illustrates the potential for discretion in bureaucratic practices and suggests that management processes are

not always conducted in a transparent and rational way, as stated in regulations, but are very flexible and situated. Bureaucrats like Mr Hao and Mr Hau, like people in all manner of social environments, are influenced by many factors in making decisions and implementing policies. Bureaucratic outcomes, therefore, depend on specific circumstances where the bureaucrats and non-bureaucrats involved cooperate or oppose each other to gain benefit.

Evidence of leveraging bureaucracy for personal gain was also evident in the relationships between temple officers and villagers at the site. This public-organisational encounter involves both the bureaucratic power of administrators and the power of the people whose social network is dominant at the site. Mr Hao recalled his experience in dealing with villagers about such things as the exploration of and compensation for suitable land for a project:

I am the outsider. In this Department, as well as this village, people are either relatives or neighbours. So they conduct Department procedure based on their village rules, regardless of the institution's regulations. They make decisions for their benefit and ignore the voice of people like me.

Interestingly, the experiences of bureaucrats were not all the same. Mr Hau in the Heritage Office presented a very different perspective to that of Mr Hao. In the Office, Mr Hau was a successful bureaucrat who worked with villagers and the local administration. Some participants mentioned that he had influence over the villagers because he had an uncle who was a provincial leader and many other relatives in the village. However, Mr Hau did not mention that himself during the interview. Instead, his narratives suggested that there was an art to being a successful manager working at the local level. The key to success, he said, was to understand village politics and adopt a management style that works within that social setting.

This study found that at times a bureaucrat can be a friend to the villagers. Mr Hau provided examples of how he and his colleagues successfully conducted many projects to restore temples and organise village festivals in the region where people worship the Hung Kings. Many temples were damaged during the Vietnam War and festivals were discontinued at that time. For a long time

following the war, people did not remember the festivals and were not encouraged to restore them. To motivate the people, Mr Hau and his assistants spent many days at the village working closely with the village aged association, especially with elders from influential lineages. They also cooperated with the local administration to have these people help supervise the project. In addition, the bureaucrats paid villagers for their participation, and they paid more to village leaders. In that way, they created a desire to restore the festivals among the most influential group in the village. This group then influenced others. Being encouraged and paid to work for their village, the villagers became excited and worked hard for the success of the project. Mr Hau explained, 'I understand their need and I satisfy it'. In this relationship, heritage officers needed the cooperation of villagers to complete the project. From the view of the employer, the projects were part of bureaucratic practices. But as Mr Hau explained, the villagers took care of the projects in terms of other factors such as labour, payment and social participation. Completion of the projects was viewed as a success by bureaucrats and villagers, as both benefited.

Not all interactions between bureaucrats and villagers are as harmonious as in the above example. Heritage rules are enforced by bureaucrats. As a manager, Mr Hau saw that his main responsibility was to ensure that villager activities did not contravene heritage law as, 'they are farmers with limited knowledge'. Mr Hau mentioned a case he dealt with the year before. Mr Tien, a villager who owned a house in a restricted area of Nghia Linh Mountain, built a house for worshipping ancestors (*nhà thờ tổ*) in his garden. The Hung Temple Management Department issued a document ordering the house be dismantled. Initially, Mr Tien did not follow the orders and the Department Manager referred the case to provincial leaders. As a result, the provincial police visited Mr Tien and forced him to destroy the house.

As mentioned above, for Mr Hau, the key to being a successful bureaucrat is to understand how village society works. He emphasised how the action he takes is different in different cases. When paying villagers, he paid more to leaders of the village aged association or members of the local administration. But when

applying punishment for contravening a heritage rule, as in the case of Mr Tien, he increased the punishment even though Mr Tien came from an honourable family. He did so by informing the provincial police and letting them imprison Mr Tien for a period of time. When asked about the reason for the difference in treatment, he said:

It is fair enough. The villagers always look to influential people to learn their behaviour. So I gave them more money to encourage other people, while in the other case I treated them more harshly to send an effective warning to the whole community.

Responding according to different situations reflects the logic of what administrators see as their position and capacity at work, especially in implementing and adjusting institutional policies. It suggests an insight into why bureaucratic management may be conducted in a particular way and, therefore, why some bureaucrats are more successful than others.

### **Temple keepers: everyday roles and motivations**

The position of the temple keeper is particularly interesting because, although only short-term, it has a strong combination of spiritual, social and economic factors that influence the practice of bureaucratic management. In this study, I spent time observing and talking with temple keepers and their family members. The topic of temple keepers was also raised during conversations with the heritage manager and other people who have observed the work of temple keepers. These observations and discussions provided different insights into how temple keepers navigate administrative hurdles set by the bureaucracy for social and financial benefit.

I begin this section with a discussion of the training provided to people who applied to be temple keepers at the Hung Temple. The practice of training was of particular interest, as interlocutors described it as an effort to institutionalise a number of existing practices, which have been important to local people for a long period of time. I will now analyse how bureaucracy is imposed upon temple keepers' activities through the training process.

Traditionally, temples on Nghia Linh Mountain were under the care of local villages (Vi Cuong, Trieu Phu and Hy Cuong). Committees of the aged associations in the communes had selected their old men to take care of the temples and to conduct village ritual activities. This changed when the Hung Temple Management Department increased control over the site from the 1990s. Although the Department retained the custom of employing village men as temple keepers, a new selection process was implemented to ensure that the person appointed would undertake the job in accordance with the rules established by the Department under the decrees outlined by the Ministry of Culture. Every year, the selection process is repeated to choose temple keepers for the coming year.

The temple keeper selection process starts at village level. Male members of the aged association are eligible to apply to be a temple keeper when they reach the age of 60 years. Each commune's administration then filters the application forms and selects two or three applications to be sent to the Hung Temple Management Department for the second filter. Since 2005, potential candidates have been required to undergo a training process provided by the Department and then to sit for a final exam run by an examination committee of the Department. Based on exam results, the Department selects four men to be the main temple keepers for the following year. Each main temple keeper can appoint up to two assistants. While working at the Temple, temple keepers are supervised directly by administrators of the Heritage Office.

During fieldwork, I had the opportunity to participate in a temple keeper training course. There were 32 trainees undertaking the course, of which eight were candidates to become primary temple keepers (see Plate 12). The course involved four sessions and was designed to provide the minimum knowledge that a temple keeper must master prior to taking up service at the Hung Temple. In the first session, Mr Hau, the Dean of the Heritage Office, started his presentation by emphasising the importance of the Hung Temple and the training course:

The task of managing and promoting the Temple nowadays is more important than at any other time. Working at this site, you will need to understand this clearly...and do your work with passion and keep healthy. Being a normal person, you may not often do this [learn about the Hung Temple history, narratives and rituals], but coming here to be a temple keeper you will have to. The image of a temple keeper, formally robed in traditional silk dress, reading out loud the Sino Nom poem and explaining it, is the most impressive image for the visitors. As our Department Director said: 'Each staff member in the Department should work as a proponent of heritage'.



**Plate 12: A training class for temple keepers at the Hung Temple**

Mr Hau explained that every bureaucrat, including the temple keeper, needs to understand how to work professionally. The training examined academic and state official materials about the Hung Temple and handouts for learners provided them with information about the Temple's history, narratives, and the site's structure and meanings. Trainees were asked to review the 'must learn' facts carefully for the exam. In the first session, Mr Hau taught trainees how to use the knowledge to explain the significance of the Hung Temple as a national site of commemoration.



Session two was training in conducting rituals and reciting ritual prayers. Mrs Anh, Deputy Dean of the Heritage Office, ran the class. She started by explaining what it meant to be a temple keeper at the Hung Temple. Along with caring for items of the Temple, the Temple's appearance and its area, an essential task of a temple keeper was to give support to visitors who perform rituals in the Temple. She emphasised two things that make the job of temple keeper special. The first is that the job requires ritual skill. While other positions at the Hung Temple require working with people, landscaping, paperwork and so on, only temple keepers have the role of being ritual masters, connecting people to the deities. Therefore, the most important criterion used to select a temple keeper is the ability to conduct the rituals and recite the prayers. The second thing is that the work of temple keepers at the Hung Temple needs to be performed professionally at this national heritage site and this makes the job much more demanding than at other temples.

Over the past few years, following research and academic consultation, the Heritage Office team has prepared guidelines regarding how to perform the rituals to the Hung Kings. This session in the training course ensured candidates were fully aware of these requirements and learned the necessary skills. The guidelines introduced some changes to the ritual process. For instance, the traditional ritual of villagers often included the offerings of a boiled head of a black pig. The new guidelines suggest that a proper ritual to the Hung Kings should include offerings of two types of sticky rice cake<sup>39</sup>. Also, the ritual process starts by burning incense, followed by ringing a bell, then bowing in front of the Hung Kings' altar five times, and finally reciting the ritual prayers. In Chapter 4, I offer further examples of how rituals are conducted by devotees at the Hung Temple. Those descriptions illustrate how bureaucratic processes shape the

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<sup>39</sup> Since the 2000s, the Hung Temple Management Department has issued requirements for 'official offerings' to the Hung Kings, which apply to all rituals conducted by official delegations. Offerings as required should include 18 square cakes, 18 round sticky rice cakes, 100 cups of wine, as well as betel nuts, flowers and fruits. These new requirements are to represent aspects of the legend of the Hung Kings. Sticky rice cake reminds people that it was the most popular food of the Viet ancestors. Number 18 refers to the 18 generations of the Kings and the number 100 to the story of the hundred sons who had the same parents.

ritual performances at the Hung Temple, even though details of the practices may vary.

Adding to the explanation of the knowledge required for temple keepers at the Hung Temple, Mrs Anh reiterated Mr Hau's statement stressing the significance of the site as the only place of ancestor commemoration in the nation. Visitors to the site, therefore, include delegations from the government, the Party, or leading national organisations. The rituals they perform are for the nation or other institutions, not for their individual families. The example of a ritual performance of a national delegation, given in Chapter 2, showed that such official rituals follow a formal structure. Temple keepers must satisfy the special needs of these visitors, while reminding them and directing their understanding of the Kings through recitation of the prayers. Hence, the Management Department has prepared a formula for the prayers as part of ritual guidelines for temple keeper candidates. Mrs Anh explained that this formula includes the following necessary information: name and merit of the deities; date of the ritual; list of the offerings; names of the delegates; and the request of the delegation, or promise made to the deities. Following this formula, temple keepers can perform a prayer that satisfies the visitors and the Heritage Manager.

After the commentary, Mrs Anh facilitated a practice session in which trainees practised ritual prayers and provided feedback to each other. Mr Liu, an experienced ritual assistant from Hy Cuong village, was asked to recite a prayer for a delegation of the Ministry of Education and Training. He read his prepared prayer:

I pray to the Hung Kings at the Hung Temple. I am the temple keeper. I am the representative for the delegation from the Ministry of Education and Training, led by the Minister. We invite you to enjoy our offerings, including the square and the round sticky rice cake with flowers and fruits. We remember your merit of founding the nation and we promise to protect it. This year the Ministry of Education has improved the quality of education, especially in achieving universal primary education. They also have put in place the project 'Say no to negative phenomena in education' throughout

the whole country. In this New Year, they perform the ritual to ask the Hung Kings' blessings to have a better result.

When finished, he waited to receive suggestions for improvement. Not long after, a voice from the back of the room said, 'The prayer is too long'. Mrs Anh agreed, saying: 'You should learn the prayers by heart as you showed a bit of nervousness and a lack of confidence. The prayer content is well prepared. The part where you said about the delegation's achievement sounds like a political report; you should shorten it and you can say more in the part about praying for the New Year'. Another voice said critically: 'Too political and not smooth; people will not pay money to you for this prayer'<sup>40</sup>. Most of the learners then joined in a discussion about ritual prayers, discussing prayer content suitable for each delegation as if they were listing the tasks and policies of national organisations. Mr Vuong from Vi village sitting nearby showed me his notebook. I had a quick look at the headings that itemised prayers for the Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Defence, and Ministry of Public Security. His notebook mentioned most government organisations and institutions. He said that most candidates have such notebooks. His notebook was copied from his older brother and includes some of his own modifications.

In the last session, the Department Director visited the class and talked with the trainees. He restated the significance of the temple keeper's work in assisting Temple visitors, and not just performing the rituals in order to receive payment. He also repeated the advice that candidates should revise the materials carefully. He stressed:

This year we will pay attention to both temple keeper candidates and assistants; so, be prepared. This year, I will invite a doctor to be a member of the examination committee to make sure all temple keepers have suitable health for the job. I also want to remind all of you to specially review the way of conducting rituals and reciting prayers, to meet the needs of different groups of visitors.

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<sup>40</sup> It is common that many visitors do not know the exact information about the deity, the place and the way to express their wish. In that case they ask the ritual master (or the temple keeper) to recite the prayer as their representative. After that, they pay money to the temple keeper for helping with prayer recitation. In Vietnamese this money is called *tiền hành sai*.

At the end of the session, someone stood up and asked the Director: 'We, the villagers, used to call the place where Lac Long Quan Temple was built Sim Hill. Now in the book it is called Sim Mountain. So, what should we call it in the exam?' The Director gave a quick answer to end his speech: 'Sim Mountain, of course. Follow the book!' When the Director left the class, an administrator asked the trainees to write a report as evidence of class attendance. The exam following this course is said to be very competitive. The Director selects questions from the Department guidebook for the exam. To be successful in the exam, trainees must learn course content by heart and repeat the provided materials as exactly as possible.

The training course is indicative of how knowledge has been structured and institutionalised to fit with bureaucratic processes. The new role of the Hung Temple as the site of national ancestor worship is built on local knowledge of the cult, but villagers are now taught formerly about the position of the temple keeper. Also, the ritual performance is gradually being standardised along with more detailed regulations about offerings, the ritual process and prayer format. Even local nomenclature for the regional landscape is named differently to fit with bureaucratic terminology.

The temple keeper training process effectively disseminated academic and bureaucratic knowledge to villagers working at the site. A number of people who attended the class had undertaken the training several times because a person can hold the temple keeper position for just one year, but can be a ritual assistant for a few years before that. Mr Hung of Treo village is one example. He had been working as a ritual assistant for four years. Mr Hung attended the class with an old notebook containing written notes of previous classes. If he passed the exam, he could be employed as ritual assistant for a temple keeper. The following year, at the age of 60, Mr Hung intended to apply to be a temple keeper. With this training process in place for the last twenty-five years, it is not surprising that a large number of the old men in the three villages (Hy Cuong, Vi Cuong and Trieu Phu) know how to perform the rituals and are able to recite by heart all the stories about the Temple that the Department wants to popularise.

The same applies to the registration of other groups of people working at the Hung Temple.

Throughout the training of temple keepers, the interaction between the staff of the Management Department and the candidates can be observed as a relationship of obedience where trainees do what they are told. But once working in the position, the relationship between the temple keeper and the bureaucratic system is much more complicated as the following description and analysis of the activities of a selected temple keeper shows.

### ***One year up the mountain***

Most temple keepers declared that they undertake a difficult job as it demands knowledge, skill, experience and commitment. They work hard even though it is just a one-year appointment. During this intensive time, each temple keeper is assigned a separate room near the Temple and is required to live there for the year. They can only leave the temple if they have special reasons (such as family issue) and the temple managers should approve this. Often, they have their family members staying and supporting them during the year. Mr Vuong, the temple keeper at Top Temple, openly shared his story and everyday activities. He called this experience 'one-year up the mountain', a time when daily routine is very different and separate from other times in his life.

The job of temple keeper requires a specific and detailed daily routine. Mr Vuong explained that every morning he had to clean the Temple (see Plate 13) and do the altar rituals. Throughout the day, the candle and incense must be kept alight. The altar table must be cleaned and organised frequently to have space for guests to place their offerings. The inside and outside areas of the Temple must be always clean. The Temple should be opened and closed according to Department regulations. During the day, the temple keeper must welcome visitors and guide them to perform the ritual in line with Management Department standards. Day and night the temple keeper looks after and protects Temple belongings, which Mr Vuong described as an important task as the Temple contains many items. Even though the Temple is a sacred place and

people probably have good intentions, the temple keeper must pay a lot of attention to remember, manage and maintain all items in good condition. Mr Vuong had his wife, his second son and nephew with him to help him with the daily workload. He explained that his wife helped him by cooking for the team of workers at the Temple who help to take care of the offering room. His nephew helps clean the Temple area, while his son helps take care of work inside the Temple, such as by helping visitors or rearranging or cleaning the offerings table. In addition, Mr Vuong has one or two male ritual masters who assist him in making ritual for visitors. During busy times, such as New Year and festival days, Mr Vuong needs even more assistants.



**Plate 13: Cleaning the Middle Temple yard**

Although they have learnt what to do at training sessions and by working throughout the year, temple keepers are always under the supervision of officers working at the same temple, including the heritage manager and security officer. Mr Vuong discussed how demanding the work can be, emphasising that temple keepers are always under the gaze of others, including those in upper

management. His phrasing used a Vietnamese proverb to express the idea of constant surveillance, which literally means ‘both your boss and the surrounding people evaluate your performance’ (*quan trên trông xuống người ta trông vào*).

During fieldwork with temple keepers, the security and heritage officers often listened to our discussions and would sometimes say something to stop the conversation. One administrator said to me: ‘If you want to know anything, it would be better to ask me. Those temple keepers just work here for one year, they do not know anything’. It was apparent that when the heritage officer was in the room during our discussion, Mr Vuong’s face showed his caution and his talk became less informative. He refrained from criticising temple staff, which he discussed more openly in later conversations when I visited him at his house following his one year of temple keeper work.

Mr Vuong explained: ‘My behaviour is very flexible in order to satisfy others. For example, if it is time to close, but visitors are still doing the rituals, I wait until they finish. During the festival, closing time is usually much later; some visitors even go at night.’ He also noted that he must be aware of the limits of his responsibility. He can take care of regular visitors, but when political delegations come from the Provincial People’s Committee or other national organisations, the Department heads often take over.

During the discussion, Mr Vuong left his chair and went to the altar to burn a new stick of incense. He stated that his job is supervised not only by managers, but also by the deities. As he explained, the Hung Kings are themselves also supervisors of the temple keeper’s job. Therefore, he strives to perform his job well, partly because of his own need to serve the deities.

Every morning I get up at 4 or 5 o’clock and I clean the altar as the first priority. I keep the flower and fruits always fresh, I change the water and tea daily and I always keep an eye on the incense throughout the day. I use separate towels for altar cleaning; I cook the cleaning water with cinnamon and anise to give it a good smell. I start and end everyday by conducting rituals at the Kings’ altar (see Plate 14). Every day is the same. Every task needs to be done carefully; otherwise, I would feel irresponsible, especially in relation to the deities.



**Plate 14: This temple keeper is performing ritual to the Hung Kings, for himself**

Mr Vuong commented further on the religious dimensions of his responsibilities. Pointing to the altar and objects inside the Temple, Mr Vuong explained: ‘These are heritage items and all are sacred things. You can move them (and) if it pleases the deities that is fine’. But, he cautioned that if the deities were unhappy that an object was moved, there could be negative consequences. In particular, the deities’ anger can cause bad luck for temple keepers. When asked about bad luck that might result from moving things in the Temple, he showed me a strange stone with drawings on it, inside the Temple, and whispered as if he did not want anyone else to hear the story:

That stone has been here since I started my job, but I know that it is not in the heritage record. I heard that someone donated it and the Director accepted it and put it in the Temple. A few months after that, I was cleaning it when the Buddha head above the stone suddenly fell down (see Plate 15). I was very worried. I conducted the rituals many times after that; I prayed to let the Kings know what had happened and ask blessings for myself. Last month, as you might have heard, there were many comments from visitors objecting to the stone. There have also been objections raised in journal articles and criticism from individual scholars. People are curious; they come and ask me about the stone. I had to tell what I know, that the stone was recently brought to the Temple, and that I do not have the power to decide whether it should be kept in the Temple as a heritage item. Last week, I heard that the Minister of Culture has decided to move the stone



out. To tell the truth, that news relieves me a lot. As long as the stone is in the Temple it is part of my worries.



**Plate 15: The strange stone with drawings on it (left) and shown in a corner of the Top Temple (right)**

Later, I found out more about the strange stone. It was the previous director of the Temple Management Department who had approved the donor placing the stone inside the Top Temple, but had not recorded the item in official records of the Department. The strange drawings on its back and front were read by some visitors as a form of unknown incantation. This led to widespread criticism of having the stone in the Temple and finally, the Ministry of Culture ordered the Temple Department to take the stone out of the Hung Temple.

Mr Vuong believed that what happened was guided by the power of the Hung Kings. He believed that if he had not conducted the ritual and prayed to the Kings, he and his family would have been punished. Other temple keepers shared Mr Vuong's concern. To conduct the job, they need official assignments from temple managers. But to feel comfortable doing the job, they ask permission from the deities. Thus, temple keepers work under double supervision while undertaking their tasks.

### ***Producing the Kings' gifts***

Interlocutors were asked why male village members are so keen to become temple keepers, and specifically what motivated them to work so hard to secure the position. After all, it is a temporary job for only one-year, which involves living away from one's home and family while taking on a large amount of responsibility. Mr Vuong explained: 'This is first a spiritual duty. If I do it well, the Hung Kings will bless me well'. Second, the job gives the temple keeper honour. As explained by Mr Vuong, the Department has a policy that only men in Hy Cuong, Vi Cuong and Trieu Phu villages can be temple keepers. He proudly said:

Caring for the Temple of the national ancestors, as a representative of all Vietnamese people, is an honour and people visiting the Temple see the importance of our role. They respect us for what we are doing.

Mr Vuong emphasised that being a temple keeper also brings social advantages to the family in village society. He explained that although he comes from an average family, the title of temple keeper itself made villagers respect him. Also, as a temple keeper at the Hung Temple, he would have opportunities to improve his social relationships and his political position in the village.

My wife and my children also work here with me for one year; we meet most of the villagers. Often times we help them to prepare the offerings and conduct the ritual without taking their money, so they appreciate us a lot.

However, according to many comments from villagers, it is likely that the main reason that people compete keenly to be chosen as a temple keeper is that the position gives them a great opportunity for economic benefit. This may seem contradictory as the job has no salary and requires an intensive period of work. But the lucrative nature of the position is confirmed by temple keepers and others. One shop keeper said:

After one year up this mountain, nine out of ten temple keepers can earn enough money to build a new house or afford the marriage expenses for their children. The profit changes their lives.

The main source of income for temple keepers is from visitors. Part of this comes from the offerings that they leave at the Temple after performing the rituals and

the temple keeper can use these as he wants (see Plate 16). Part comes from the 'offering money'<sup>41</sup> that visitors place at the altar table. Part comes from visitors who give money directly to temple keepers when they help them perform the rituals and recite the prayers. Another part of the income, as Mr Vuong explained, comes from donation money. There are donation boxes in each Temple for the visitors to put money in as a contribution to the renovation project of the Temple. While this money is collected by the Hung Temple Management Department, a fixed proportion is then allocated to the temple keeper. With all this income the temple keeper pays for offerings prepared for the deities, as well as paying his ritual assistants and covering his and his family's expenses over that year. The remaining money becomes his earnings for this year. This research did not uncover exactly the amount of each income component or how much a temple keeper can earn in one year. However, villagers talked about the experiences of previous temple keepers and believe that the profit is worth the effort in competing for the position.



**Plate 16: Offerings to the Hung Kings left by visitors**

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<sup>41</sup> Offering money (*tiền dầu hương*) literally means: 'the money [for] light and incense'. It is the money that devotees put at the deities' altar to contribute to the daily expense of incense, light and offerings.

In Mr Vuong's experience, the major income comes from the direct money that visitors pay the temple keeper for helping them with the ritual performance. As an example, a temple keeper at the Top Temple who helps a visitor conduct the ritual in about ten minutes can earn a payment equivalent to half a day's labour. This money is usually more than the money the visitor puts on the altar trays or in the donation box. Therefore, to gain more money temple keepers focus on helping visitors to recite prayers.

There is no stipulated amount of payment for this service, as it depends on the circumstances and the visitor's decision, as Mr Vuong experienced. When visitors are happy with the ritual performance they give the temple keeper more money. Likewise, if what they wished for came about, visitors may return to the temple and thank the temple keeper with a large sum of money, or bring offerings. Therefore, each temple keeper employs various techniques to recite the prayers in order to improve the likelihood of receiving money from visitors. According to Mr Vuong, a prayer's structure and length is not important, rather it is essential that the content reflects what the visitors want:

Except for general needs such as health, wealth and happiness for each member of the family, I always pay attention to the private need of every person. For new couples, I pray for them to have children soon. For couples with young children, I pray for the children to grow up healthy and happy. If they go to thank the Kings, I pray for the King to continue to bless them. Before ending the prayer I always ask them whether they have any other wishes.

Although Mr Vuong worked at the Temple for only one year, he still has many prior 'customers' from that time who visit the Temple frequently and ask him to help them recite their prayers (see Plate 17). He believes that these visitors not only go to see the deities in what was his temple, but also to seek help from him, as he knows how to please them. When the reason for the visit to the Temple is sensitive, the temple keeper needs to understand that what the person says is not actually what they want in the prayer, which is likely to be heard by others. Mr Vuong provided an example of an unhappy wife who went to the Temple to pray for divorce. He recited the prayer as: 'Our family life is like uncooked rice, unseasoned soup, so I wish the Kings to show me the right way to follow'. A few

months later when the visitor was happy again, she returned to make tribute rituals to the Kings and to thank him. This technique helps Mr Vuong continue to serve his 'customers', which means they bring more offerings or money.



**Plate 17: A temple keeper, wearing a traditional black headband (left side of photo), reciting ritual prayers for his client**

Reciting the prayer for visitors is an important part of the temple keeper's job because, as well as being a service, it is also a spiritual duty. Discussing the ability to conduct prayers, Mr Vuong emphasised that being able to say appropriate prayers is not only a personal skill but also a spiritual gift from the Hung Kings; the blessings of the deities include the ability to pray for his customers to have their wishes fulfilled. Temple keepers share the belief that what they gain from the job is a gift of the Kings. So there is an unwritten custom among temple keepers of making a tribute ritual to the Kings three years after they undertake the temple keeper job.

Many villagers discussed how temple keepers attempt to increase their income. Mrs Thuong, a shop owner, shared stories of several relatives who had been temple keepers:

Working here for many years, I am familiar with the way the guards, heritage managers and temple keepers steal and share the donation money amongst each other. I have also seen many temple keepers bring offerings of the visitors to the market to sell. That is illegal and immoral stuff, which

they all do. Why? All because of the money they can earn. In this Temple; who does not try to gain benefit for themselves?

Mrs Thuong's statement shows her belief that temple keepers undertake the job to make money, with their success depending on managing income and expenses. Temple keepers who have finished one year of work at Hung Temple must take care of the communal temple in their village the following year. Many undertake work in the communal temple with less interest and concentration. Some even implied that there is no need to perform the job carefully as it does not bring income. This is a strong indication of economic motivation in the role of temple keeper.

Apart from personal gain, the temple keeper is an important part of the system whereby the money gathered in a temple is distributed to different parts of the management system, going up to Department level, and also going down to families in the village. This economic activity is partly managed by the bureaucracy, but partly beyond its direct control through the activities of temple keepers and the people with whom they interact.

The temple keeper's position is unique due to its combination of interactions with administrators, outside social actors (such as visitors and villagers), and the spiritual force of the deities. In the intensive one year position as temple keeper, activities of caring for the Temple are affected by factors such as spiritual gain, social relations and economic profit.

Temple keeper practices show the integration of bureaucracy into a social arena within a religious site. They further illustrate the complicated outcomes of bureaucratic practice at the Hung Temple, and in particular, show how bureaucratic structures can be leveraged for personal gain.

### **The shopkeeper: manipulating the bureaucracy to make a living**

Similar to the position of temple keeper, the position of shopkeeper at the Hung Temple site is temporary and competitive. The investigation of daily practices of shopkeepers, however, gives other perspective of how kinship, social

relationships and economic factors are involved in the bureaucratic processes at the Temple complex.

From the late 1990s, the Hung Temple Management Department established a range of empty kiosks along the pathways leading to the foot of Nghia Linh Mountain and within the Temple site. The Department rents the kiosks to people who want to conduct business at the site, usually to sell offerings, souvenirs, food and drinks (see Plate 18). According to Department policy, anyone can apply for a contract to hire a kiosk. The contract duration is for one year and can be renewed the following year. Selling within the Temple site is prohibited without such a contract. However, reality does not necessarily reflect the policy. There were a number of wandering salespersons, who had no working contract. These people generally managed to keep themselves out of sight of temple staff. A wandering saleswoman at the Hung Temple explained:

You see, the kiosks at good locations, such as along the T-junction in front of the Water Well Temple, all belong to the Dao, Trieu, Hoang or Nguyen families. People like us only have the chance to sell things on our own shoulders, like this.

She pointed to a shop owner and continued:

In the Department, the staff members respect her and no villager dares to limit her business.



**Plate 18: Kiosks at the Hung Temple which villagers hire to run their businesses**

The woman pointed out and referred to in the above comment was Mrs Thuong. At more than fifty years of age, Mrs Thuong has been running a business at the Hung Temple for half her life. Her shop sells a range of items, including paper

offerings, guidebooks, souvenirs and what she calls local specialty foods. Her husband, Mr Phan, helps her look after the shop and also drives a motorcycle-taxi. Mrs Thuong is known as one of the most successful salespersons at the site, which interlocutors said is mainly due to the position of her kiosk. It is located at the T-junction in front of the Water Well Temple, at a point connecting with four pathways leading to the National Road, the main entrance to Nghia Linh Mountain, Lac Long Quan Temple and Au Co Temple. Mrs Thuong's kiosk is particularly well-positioned. Visitors usually start their walk to the Temples at the main entrance making Mrs Thuong's kiosk, and the few others located nearby, the most visited kiosks, thus improving their likelihood of selling goods. Villagers stated that many other people would also like to hire this kiosk, but Mrs Thuong continues to win the contract mainly because she comes from an influential lineage, the Nguyen family, and has the support of her uncle, the vice-president of the commune. Mrs Thuong confirmed that she uses her extensive relationships to compete for the kiosk contract, and those who run nearby kiosks do the same by either having influential relationships or spending a lot of money to gain the contract.

Though she has no official position in the bureaucratic structure, she has influence over it through family connections and this allows her to run her business successfully. Also, her business is able to continue year after year and is more stable than others. Furthermore, she runs her business without interruption, while other shops are often inspected by temple managers.

During fieldwork, I often sat in her shop to observe visitor activities. One afternoon, it was raining lightly and I noticed some salespersons from nearby shops standing at the gate of the Temple lending hats, with the shop name on them, to visitors for free. Visitors generally came back to the shop to return the hats after they finished their walk and many would purchase food, drinks or souvenirs from the shop. This was a commonly used technique to increase trade. But on this particular day, Mrs Thuong sat in her shop watching the scene without offering her hats to visitors. When asked why she did not offer hats to visitors, she responded that the contract did not allow attracting visitors in that



way. If the managers caught the kiosk holders contravening the rules, their contracts could be cancelled for the following year. However, according to Mrs Thuong, the rules were not always followed so strictly. But on this occasion Mrs Thuong had good reason for obeying the rules as she was in the process of applying for a new contract for her son to run another kiosk. She had already secured good references from the local administration and a promise from the Department Manager. Therefore, all she needed to secure the contract was to maintain a good profile in the Department's records until the contract was approved.

The salespersons and managers follow an unwritten rule of not fighting over benefits. Often when shopkeepers were caught attracting visitors using unauthorised techniques, the manager gave them a warning and let them go. This 'letting go' practice (Koh 2001a) is common, not only in the interactions between the manager and contracted salespersons, but also with non-contracted salespersons due to an agreement between managers and sellers. The seller gives an amount of money to the manager so that the manager ignores the seller's non-permitted actions. Examples of these actions are selling goods with prices higher than the registered price, or following visitors to beg them to buy things. Mrs Thuong explained that people make these agreements with managers because they know each other, as many are either neighbours or relatives. The agreements help villagers earn more money and supplement the income of temple managers. This extra income may be even higher than a manager's actual salary. This finding is similar to the observations of Koh (2001a, 2001b) in urban Vietnam.



**Plate 19: Selling on the pavement in the absence of management staff**

The practices described above indicate that economic factors are increasingly dominant in the bureaucracy of temple management. People who gained their shop contract through their social standing, may have a negative perception of this. For example, Mrs Thuong compared herself to two young women running a nearby shop. She explained that these women paid a lot of money for the contract, and furthermore, that they constantly engage in unauthorised activities to increase sales, but the managers still ‘let them go’. Mrs Thuong distinguishes herself from these saleswomen:

I am different. I have relatives working at the Department and even in the commune’s administration. I get this business opportunity because of my kinship relationship, not because of money. They respect me; I also need to respect them. Besides, I am at the age of 50 years now; I do not want to be criticised by officers who are just my kids’ age. It would be shameful!

Discussing her relationships, Mrs Thuong highlighted the value of social capital to a successful business. However, the case of the two young shop owners above shows that the use of money in making an agreement with the managers to conduct business at the Temple site is also an effective business strategy. In fact,

the economic factor potentially threatens the existing dominance of kinship relationships. Mrs Thuong complained that using economic leverage annoys people who just use their kinship network, as managers start to ask for money from them, too. It was evident that Mrs Thuong actually spends a significant amount of money building relationships with managers who can help maintain her contract. Thus kinship relationships are an advantage at times, but economic factors increasingly influence business success in this bureaucratic system. Operating a shop requires a complicated network of interactions, involving but not limited to kinship, social relationships and economic bonds.

### **Working outside the management system**

This section identifies people who appear to be earning money outside the bureaucratic system established by the Hung Temple Management Department. However, in reality, some of their everyday practices are still subject to the bureaucracy or affected by its regulations and procedures. These people must endeavour to follow the rules, as they earn a living.

Heritage rules are extensively enforced on people and the landscape at the heritage site. As set out in the Department's management document, the area of Nghia Linh Mountain and two mountains nearby is a strictly protected area. Houses in this area cannot be rebuilt without permission of the Hung Temple Management Office, with even the height of houses being restricted. The forest on the three mountains is national conservation forest, which means that no one can cut down a tree without the permission of the Management Department. All land belongs to the heritage site. People living at the site have given their inherited garden and rice field to the Hung Temple Management Department in return for an amount of money in accordance with land compensation law.

During this research, villagers showed their unhappiness with bureaucracy. Some detested bureaucracy for its limitations, such as corruption, use of bribes and unfair decisions. As an example, villagers mentioned forest protection practice. A few years ago, a young villager was imprisoned for two years for cutting down a tree on the mountain in order to fix his house. But in the last two years, a vast

number of old trees have been cut down by the Hung Temple Management Department. Villagers explained that the reason the trees were cut down was to clear land to build the Au Co Temple. The way managers used the rules to legitimate their own action while punishing similar actions from others upset the villagers.

Mr Tien, the owner of a house and a garden at the foot of Nghia Linh Mountain explained his dissatisfaction with the bureaucracy:

Our land, they use and then they pay us back with a cheap price. A few years ago, it was worth 600 VND per square metre. They took my whole garden and gave back to me an amount of money, which was less and only enough to buy a few cartons of cigarettes. Isn't that unfair? Later, when I built a worshipping house for the family, they sent police to my house to stop me. They said I had no right, and it was in my own house. That is so irrational!

The tension between Mr Tien and temple managers is an example of a range of problems villagers in this commune may have as a result of the Temple project. Other villagers also describe the system as unfair and irrational. By losing land for the Temple project, a large part of the village faced difficulties in finding alternate ways to earn a living. Some people left the village to find a job in a nearby industrial zone, while some managed to obtain employment at the Temple, like Mr Vuong and Mrs Thuong. Coming from the same family as Mr Phan (from the honourable Nguyen lineage), Mr Tien used to earn money by running a shop at the Temple site and he also used to be involved in renovation projects at the Temple. But villagers stated that he ran into conflict with the managers and was ostracised from the network. Mr Tien explained that he became tired of the social competition and economic fighting. Sighing, he said:

In this society of the open economy, everybody runs after money. Our father looked after the Temple for many years before, without asking for money in return. But these days it has become a money battle that I do not want to join. In the village, for money, the son kills his mother, the brothers fight against each other, and the villagers try hard to get a job at the Temple. Development is good, but this type of development, I cannot see that it is good in any way!

This story is of particular interest, in the context of institutionalisation of the Temple site, as Mr Tien is different from the people who engage with the bureaucratic system and leverage gain from it. On the contrary, Mr Tien stays at his house and somehow still manages to live in the restricted site. To him, he is living well without involving with the system.

Mr Tien lives in Hy Cuong village at the foot of the mountain, under the forest trees. When I arrived to interview Mr Tien he was caring for his bees in his back garden. I sat with him for hours, listening to his experience of raising bees, his main everyday concern. Mr Tien understood the surrounding forest as much as his garden patch, as he had planted every single tree. He raises bees to obtain honey and sells it to his regular customers in the village and in Viet Tri city. Mr Tien stated that he earns enough to support himself.

When questioned about his job, he commented in a humorous tone:

In this restricted site, there are many strict rules, but raising bees is not listed as a forbidden activity. This forest is ideal to raise bees, since there is a vast array of big trees, far from the main road.

Mr Tien explained that the bees do not steal nectar and they work to make honey. He noted that it is important not to keep too many bees to ensure that the forest provides them with enough food. From January to June he harvests around 200 litres of honey. During the cold season, when there are fewer flowers, he feeds the bees to help them survive. In January he harvests the drones and uses them to make bee wine to sell as a drink. It was evident that Mr Tien is a master in his job. He explained:

You need to be skilful to recognise the quality honey. The best type is very soft, and when pouring the hot water in, the honey will settle lower. This job needs a lot of skills. Here, some other people have also tried but they failed. Some even use sugar to feed the bees, making bad quality honey. They can only sell honey to the tourists. I sell at home, for a good price, to the people who know me well.

In Mr Tien's view, the forest and its richness is the Hung Kings' gift for him. He has access to the forest and earns his living from the natural resource. Mr Tien likes this way of living. He raises bees and cares for the forest. His narrative

illustrates his patience and love for the environment around him. 'In the forest, I am free to do as I please', he said with a smile. The heritage rule is good for him as it protects the forest, giving him a perfect environment for raising bees. Interestingly, standing at the main gate of Hung Temple, one cannot see Mr Tien's house under the forest. Mr Tien's bees, flying restlessly for honey, are also invisible to people from outside the village. His honey production, though very good, is not part of the tourism market and is unavailable to visitors. The bee keeping business hides him from the visitors and the business of the Temple that he does not want to be involved in. His attachment to the site is intimate and joyful.

Mr Tien found a suitable and unique way to earn his living. He has taken advantage of the fact that the forest adjacent to his home is protected, undisturbed and a perfect place to raise bees. His day-to-day life practices illustrate one way villagers can navigate their way through the management system at the Hung Temple.

## **Conclusion**

The Temple has a bureaucratic structure that regulates how the Temple is managed. At the same time, people navigate the Temple bureaucracy in a variety of ways to leverage their social and financial positions to maximise the benefits to be gained from the Temple and from people's association with the Hung Kings. This can involve an interface of social actors operating at a variety of levels. Depending on the social standing of the individuals involved, it can also entail not complying with the administrative regulations as laid out by the Temple management or in Mr Tien's case, just stepping outside them.

Examining processes at the Hung Temple shows that bureaucratic management, though institutionalised in association with state concepts, is affected by local politics and allows some traditional practices to be maintained; the state does not entirely succeed in imposing bureaucracy upon all everyday activities. In the interplay between bureaucrats and non-bureaucrats, the scope of their exchanges is significantly affected by spiritual, social and economic factors

operating in and around the Temple. Some of the resulting practices may be different to what the cadres originally intended for the Temple site.

In everyday practice, administrators, temple keepers and non-bureaucrats demonstrate different understandings of bureaucracy. Those closely associated with bureaucracy, such as administrators and temple keepers, try to follow administrative practices even as they acknowledge the influence of kinship networks and village ties in work placements and promotions. Of the non-bureaucrats, shop keepers closely observe and discuss the ways in which people can obtain contracts through kinship networks and social or financial ties rather than through official administrative process. In most cases, people's engagement with the state bureaucracy, and their perceptions of it, are influenced by the factor of kinship, but they are also likely to be strongly affected by economic considerations.

## Chapter 4      Influence of religious practices on identity and agency of devotees of the Hung Kings

I am visiting the Hung Temple on a busy day. This is the first day of the tenth lunar month, the day my informants usually make ritual offerings to their ancestors at home and to deities at their usual temples or pagodas. They do it to feel blessed by the spirits in their lives. From around the 1990s this has been a popular routine for a large number of people who live around the Hung Temple and in the Phu Tho province. I sit at a table in the front yard of the Water Well Temple, at ten o'clock in the morning. I already have counted a hundred people going into the temple. I can hear their prayers loudly asking the Hung Kings to help them in their daily lives such as in work affairs or family troubles (see Plate 20). It is hard to imagine that once the site was not as religiously important as it is today.



**Plate 20: People give offerings and recite prayers inside the Hung Temple**

When I look into the temple, Mrs Pham is still there on a bamboo mat in front of the altar. She is holding a notebook with a long list of names and praying. She



has been doing it for three hours. Finally, she bows her head towards the altar in a reserved manner, holding two hands together in front of her chest, and stands up to leave the room. On the way out, she makes a phone call and I hear her asking people on the phone: 'Is there any trouble with your work now? I made the prayer for you but the coins kept facing down. The deities are angry; did you forget to report something?' After listening to the person on the phone, she continued: 'Let's make an urgent pilgrimage to the Hung Temple tomorrow. I will go with you!'

Over the course of my fieldwork, Mrs Pham was a person who intrigued me because her practices spoke to the growing performance of religious ritual and its influence on the lives of contemporary Vietnamese. After meeting her and observing her religious practice, I came to understand the importance of the Hung Kings in the lives of Mrs Pham and her fellow devotees.

In the previous two chapters, I have shown how the state promoted and constructed the Hung Temple as the site of nationalist practices. As a state-sponsored temple, the Hung Temple has become the preferred destination of increasing numbers of state organisations and public servants. This chapter shows that over time, connections with the Hung Kings have become personal and in ways that the state might not have anticipated. I show how some of these connections have led to people cultivating a belief in the Hung Kings as guardian spirits and powerful deities who can help them. This has even changed people's sense of self and sense of identity. I discuss the process through which this occurs while drawing from conceptual and theoretical debates when appropriate.

### ***The re-emergence of religious practices***

The Hung Temple encompasses a part of the world of gods and spirits of the Vietnamese. I observed that temple keepers at the Hung Temple often called on a list of gods and spirits in their rituals. This list often included in order: the eighteen Hung Kings and the mountain spirits, the two princesses, the Hung Kings' mandarins, the Buddhist deities worshipped in the pagoda, and the deities

worshipped in the Lac Long Quan temple and Au Co temple located on the two mountains nearby<sup>42</sup>.

People coming to the Hung Temple often engage in more than one form of religious practice in their everyday life. I observed that many people going to the Temple for rituals also go to other temples and pagodas. Some of them claimed to be Buddhist or followers of the Mother Goddess religion. For example, some people going to the Water Well Temple at the Hung Temple claim that their veneration to the Hung Kings' princesses is a form of the Mother Goddess religion<sup>43</sup>. This type of hybridity among various forms of religion is commonly found in contemporary Vietnam. Practitioners of one religion, such as the cult to local deities, also practise other religious forms, such as Buddhism, Mother Goddess religion, or ancestor worship (Soucy 2012). This shows the complexity of contemporary religious practices. This chapter does not dwell on how interlocutors perceive their relationship with the Hung Kings and other gods and goddesses or on how their religious practices combine various deities together. My argument focuses instead on the relationship between religious practices and practitioners' sense of self and sense of being in the world, especially with those who see that they hold special spiritual connections to the Hung Kings.

Some suggest that religious practices are means of anxiety management in a world of uncertainty and insecurity (Eriksen, Bal & Saleminck 2010). Philip Taylor concludes:

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<sup>42</sup> As I have explained in the previous chapters, the Hung Temple site include temples on Nghia Linh Mountain and the two temples newly built on two other mountains in the site. On the Nghia Linh Mountain there are several temples for the Hung Kings and the princesses of the Kings; it also has a pagoda for Buddhist deities. In each temple, there are altars for different deities.

<sup>43</sup> The Mother Goddess religion (*Đạo Mẫu*) or the Four Palaces Religion (*Đạo tứ phủ*) is a widespread popular religion in Vietnam (Nguyễn 2002). Its basic belief is that the cosmos is made of different palaces (or domains, *phủ*) that are controlled by the goddesses. People worship the three holy goddesses controlling the cosmos domains in order to have their support in their daily lives (Endres 2011, pp. 12-16). As it developed, the Mother Goddess religion integrated with many other practices, such as the cult of goddesses, the cult of Tran deities, Taoism and Buddhism (Ngô 2011). In the relationship with the Hung Kings, for example, some deities of this religion are identified as real figures linked to the time of the Hung Kings. Also, the followers of this religion, while worshipping the three holy mothers (goddesses), tend to co-opt the local deities into this religion.

People have turned for assistance to a cast of powerful spirits that concretise and give familiar form to that which is ineffable and apparently uncontrollable. Transacting with them has become one of the key means through which the path to success and avoidance of disaster have been imagined' (2004, p. 87).

Meanwhile, others look at religious engagement and constitution of the self (Endres 2008, 2011; Fjelstad & Nguyen 2006)<sup>44</sup>. Endres emphasises the personal experience of spiritual efficacy, to show that people's perception of gods and spirits is not necessarily in a line with the official discourse of the party-state, which encourages its citizens to appreciate the gods and spirits for their 'meritorious contributions to the good of the country and its people' (2011, p. 9). She asserts that: 'for the devotees...the reason why certain deities enjoy more attention than others is, first and foremost, to be found in their perceived spiritual efficacy' (ibid., p.10). Pham adds to these debates while asserting that a connection with the gods helps mediate how people see themselves and are viewed by others. In the particular case of the cult of Saint Tran<sup>45</sup> she asserts that human relationships with the saint affect the formation of 'self-identity and ego' as well as the ways in which people actively manipulate their social relations to empower themselves... (2009, p. 17). This research emphasises the point that religious practices are meaningful to devotees, and that they believe that they benefit in myriad ways from their connections with the divine.

In this chapter I set out to show how people come to identify themselves as devotees of the Hung Kings and in doing so how their religious practices can transform the perception of their identity. A subsequent question is how a sense of being connected and devoted to the Hung Kings improves, or enriches, their sense of being Vietnamese.

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<sup>44</sup> For instance, devotees have been shown to turn to religiosity in certain ways, Nguyen illustrate that in the Mother Goddess religion, the practitioners experience 'yin illness' as patterns of the 'pathway-into-mediumship' (Nguyễn 2008).

<sup>45</sup> Saint Tran refers to Tran Hung Dao, a national hero under the Tran dynasty in the fifteenth century. According to Pham, this heroic figure gained sainthood after his death, and being worshipped by the followers who seek power to cure illness and exorcise evil spirits (2006, p. 32).

### ***Conceptualising identity and agency***

Identity is defined in a number of different ways. Some scholars (Katz, Rubinstein & Katz 2003) define identity as 'a steady state—a manifested psychosocial/social reality' (p. 6). These scholars conceptualised the notion of 'identity' of a person in relation to the 'role' that person holds in the world and hold that it is essential to study the linkage of 'role' to 'identity'(ibid.). This argument, however, is outdated and questionable. First, it sees the formation of identity as a completed, steady state and therefore fails to take into account the transformation of identity. Second, a focus on the relationship between identity and role fails to leave room for people's capacity to feel and act for themselves. This therefore, is an inadequate definition of identity.

Critics of this approach emphasise that identity is a fluid and dynamic concept. Drawing from social practice theory, I see identity as continuously formed by a sense of self and by their actions in response to that sense of self. I use Dorothy Holland's definition of the concept:

People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities (1998, p. 3).

This definition emphasises identity as the production of continuous and dialogical processes. The sense of self that is developed is 'of' but also 'for' themselves, since they figure in people's 'communication with themselves about their past and present actions' (1998, p. 4). Identity, in Holland's formulation, is the constitution and interpretation of personal activity in 'historically circumscribed, though never closed, venues of social activity' (ibid., p. 42). That said, forms of personhood are historical products; and identity is taken 'to be a central means by which selves, and the sets of action they organise, form and reform over personal lifetimes and in the histories of social collectives' (ibid., p. 270).

At the heart of discussion on identity is the relationship between identity and agency. Holland's understanding of identity is important as it highlights people's

agency as the capacity of 'self-objectification' and 'self-direction' (ibid., p. 5).

Inden defines agency in the following way:

The expression 'human agency'...mean[s] the realised capacity of people to act upon their world and not only to know about or give personal or intersubjective significance to it. That capacity is the power of people to act purposively and reflectively, in more or less complex interrelationships with one another, to reiterate and remake the world in which they live, in circumstances where they may consider different courses of action possible and desirable, though not necessarily from the same point of view (2000, p. 23).

With this perception of agency, identities as 'continuous self-fashioning' are 'possibilities for mediating agency'. Identities as such provide important bases for the creation of new activities through which people construct new worlds and the ways they fit in the world (Holland 1998).

The relationship between identity and agency is crucial; identity impacts upon agency and agency on identity. Drew (2011) shows an instance of this in a group of Indian women compelled them to defend the damming of the Ganges sacred river (which is an embodiment of the Goddess Ganga) due to their self-professed identity as good Hindus. As the women engaged in the river's defence, they became embroiled in a web of social movement activism. Over time, these women began to see themselves as movement actors and 'activists'. The women in the case that Drew explores began by singing devotional Hindu songs in moments of protest. While they saw this as a way of reminding others of the river's cultural and religious importance, the repetition of such acts led to a change in the ways that the women saw themselves. Whereas before they had felt insecure about speaking in public, due to their low levels of education and literacy, through the process of singing (and eventually speaking) at protest events, they came to see themselves as important contributors to the debate on how a religious entity should be managed. Drew states: 'The women's participation via the cultural form of devotional song helps women to author their own importance and reflect on their agency' (ibid, p. 176). In this example, identity and agency are mutually influencing.

Activities of identity formation are diverse from life rituals to cultural forms of daily practices (Holland 1998, pp. 223-224). People produce understandings of themselves through the cultural resources that are available to them. And in this chapter, I will highlight devotional performances. Such performances are long researched in relation to identity construction. Referring to the above example, the women use devotional songs in their moments of protest about damming the Ganges River.

The performance of devotional song does open spaces within which women can voice dissent. The songs and their performance do have transformative effects, especially in the realm of intimate subjectivities and identity making (Drew 2011, p. 169).

Butler suggests that performances are effective behaviours that constitute identity (1999). The ritualist, Driver (1998), has suggested that ritual performance is transformative and have the power to effect change. In a case study of Christian women pilgrimage, Baker (2010) asserts that the performances of pilgrimage rituals help the women 'challenge established expectations for gender and spirituality, perform women's role in new ways, and work to transform spiritual and gendered identity' (pp. 31-36).

I focus on performances of devotion towards the Hung Kings that are practised by my interlocutors. They include various forms of rituals, acting as a medium and pilgrimage. I explore the transformative characteristic of devotional performances of two women in this chapter. Through this, I discuss how the practices help to transform their sense of self and their capacity in negotiating identity and self-direction. I argue that practitioners perform devotional practices to claim new identities and knowledge, which in turn affect their future performance. It is through this process that individuals can master their 'history' of being a devotee. While participating in devotee activities, I also listened to their narratives and engaged with their life stories. The self-narrated stories reflect the 'narrative act of self-creation', and illustrate how the teller makes sense of historical contingencies and facilitates the positioning of the individual within a society (Endres 2008). This practical approach to narrative helps to

disentangle the cultural web of meaning that constitutes human reality. As Steven Parish asserts:

Narratives offer a means of thinking and feeling about the world—as actuality—and for going beyond the actuality of the social world, for reimagining it...Narrative work can generate a dialogue between ‘what is’ and ‘what should be’ that alerts a sense of self and identity’ (1998, p. 52) .

In the following sections, I provide profiles of two selected women to illustrate the types of spiritual connections that are sought and experienced. The first profile is of Mrs Pham, a former administrator at the Hung Temple, who in seeking a spiritual connection to the Hung Kings to cope with life's difficulties, eventually became a religious specialist. I let her narrate her life story and let her make sense of the changes that seem to be in contradiction at certain points in her life. The second story is of Ms Tri, a woman born in a village near the Hung Temple, who left her hometown to establish a business career, and who now engages in regular devotional practices to the Hung Kings. Drawing on her narratives, and of my observations of her during fieldwork, I show how she came to identify herself as a daughter of the Hung Kings and how that belief changed her actions.

The two women discussed in this chapter have come to understand that the best way to take care of themselves is to take care of the Hung Kings. In addition to contributing to ethnographic accounts of religious revival in everyday life of contemporary Vietnam, I argue that this devotional practice offers an insight into how the devotees’ sense of self and agency is transformed.

### **Mrs. Pham: becoming a religious specialist**

At the end of 2012, after first meeting with Mrs Pham at the Hung Temple, I visited her at her house in Hanoi. Mrs Pham used to live in Viet Tri when she worked at the Hung Temple but after her retirement she left to go to the capital, Hanoi, to live with her son. His house was at the back of a city bus station. This part of the city was always noisy, smelly and crowded. Following the new road, I escaped from the station and entered a small road along lines of storehouses. This area of the city had just been expanded, turning it from a village to a city

ward. There were narrow tall houses, colourful shops on the two sides of the zigzag street, which used to be a village road. Those new buildings located next to older constructions such as the village temple (*đền*), the communal house (*đình*), or a pagoda (*chùa*). All this created a sense of chaos, a sense of the old and new, high and low, narrow and large, tense and free, tight and loose. It made one unable to stop thinking that something was breaking while something else was emerging in a contested way.

I stopped at a three storey concrete house. A closed gate stood right at the edge of the road keeping a limited space for the front pavement of the house. Pham opened the door looking as though she was busy with household work. With her hair tied back, her casual clothes and wearing her apron, she was going to cook lunch for her grandson and herself. I entered the house. The living room was small, with a table and three sofas taking up most of the space. Pham closed the door, keeping us separate from the noise outside. As we talked in a tiny room in the house, she kept busy the entire time, either walking up and down the steps, cooking in the nearby kitchen, or feeding her grandson. It was during this time that I began to know more about her life.

As her life story unfolded, I saw her go from being a guide at the Hung Temple when she informed visitors about the history of the Hung Kings to a person who worshipped the Kings as deities. I argue that Mrs Pham's story shows how contradictions within her inner thoughts and the struggle she engaged in, transformed her sense of identity, as she changed from a Hung Temple administrator to a master in religious devotion to the Hung Kings.

When Mrs Pham spoke of her life, she often emphasised her youth as an enthusiastic student growing up in a socialist state. As she said:

I am the eldest daughter of a family of five children in Phu Tho town. Uncle Ho gave us education. I finished high school in Phu Tho town and studied at a university in Hanoi. University education was free at that time and I even got a monthly stipend from the government.

'The society', she explained, 'encouraged people to study. Knowledge was power and everybody had the right to gain a good job'. After graduation, she was



appointed to the Hung Temple Management Office, working as a staff member of the Management Department. She married a soldier, the ideal model of citizenship at the time. Mrs Pham was confident in her social position having a state appointment and a military husband.

Talking about her job seemed to make Mrs Pham excited. Although most Vietnamese learn the stories of the origin of the nation in primary school, Mrs Pham recalled that her working years were her first connection to the Hung Kings. She identified herself as an expert in the history of the Hung Temple and the practice of the devotion to the Kings. She was always happy recounting memories of her time at work. In the first few years, Mrs Pham was a tour guide leading visitors around the heritage area. She described her work as follows:

Introducing the heritage site to the visitors was easy. Knowledge and skill were essential. For example, when talking with politicians or educated visitors, I used historical and archaeological information; with soldiers or ordinary people, I used myths and poems. My favourite part was speaking at the Top Temple, I would say:

‘We all know Uncle Ho’s sentence: “Hung Kings have the merit of founding the kingdom, you and I have to protect it together”. This lesson is developed from the Hung Kings’ teaching of how to be good citizens in the kingdom. Like the prince, Lang Lieu, though being the King’s youngest and poorest son, he stood out for his knowledge, talent and morality. So the Hung King gave the throne to him. The lesson is still valuable today. In our times, the key factors of success are one’s talent and morality. The person with talent and morality can move people’s hearts and unite their wills.’

Mrs Pham’s example recalls the popular approach to history in Vietnamese schoolbooks, with the educative purpose of using historical knowledge in the formation of citizenship (Nguyen 1982). Her description portrays a confident and successful, well-educated guide with expert knowledge and professional skills. Mrs Pham showed me the photos she had taken with visitors at the Hung Temple, some of whom were easily recognisable as famous national leaders. She showed me the writing of national leaders visiting the Hung Temple in the early years of her career, which she said, strongly influenced her attitude to work. Here is one example:

My national fellows, especially the ones in Vinh Phu<sup>46</sup> province! Please uphold the spirit of the socialist community, strive for self-training to become the new Vietnamese who both inherit the fine traditions of the era of the Hung Kings and promote the essence of the times of Ho Chi Minh...You are encouraged to contribute to the worthy task of building socialism and protecting the beloved nation.<sup>47</sup>

These written comments reminded Mrs Pham about aspects of herself during those years. On the one hand, the work offered her money, networking, friendship and social, as well as, political authority. On the other hand, it built up her awareness of the self, connecting her with noble spiritual meanings and mission. The job position centred Mrs Pham in a social and political network where she had opportunities to prove herself and develop her career.

Mrs Pham's story of her youth offers an individual's illustration of the view of the state and state officials towards the Hung Temple during the closing decades of the twentieth century (also described above in Chapter 2). It reflects the socialist ideology that is at the core of self-understanding in the revolutionary era of Vietnamese citizenship—the socialist individual, who serves people and achieves acknowledgement. However, while Mrs Pham's relationship to the Temple was initially political, it ultimately became religious when she faced work difficulties and sought healing from the Hung Kings, as I illustrate in the section below.

### ***Ideological crisis and religious healing***

Mrs Pham was promoted to a leading position in her department just before she decided to undertake further education in culture studies to become a more knowledgeable and educated member of staff. However, her happy working years abruptly ended when she started having troubles with her colleagues, especially her boss.

It happened when my office was involved in a lawsuit. Someone claimed that I had prepared an irresponsible report about the heritage. Although it

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<sup>46</sup> Vinh Phu was the old name of Phu Tho from 1968 to 1996, before it was divided into two provinces Phu Tho and Vinh Phuc.

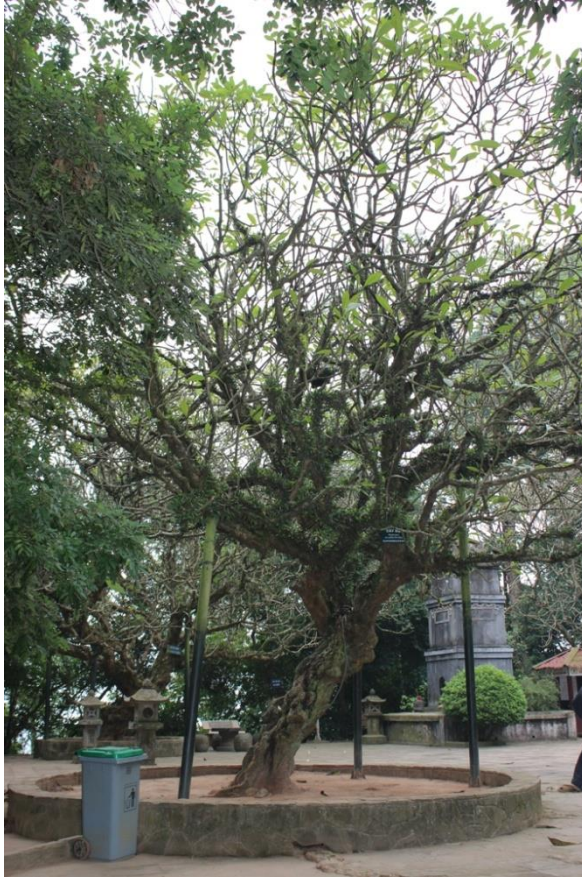
<sup>47</sup> This was an entry in the visitor book at the Hung Temple in 1986 (see chapter 2 for further discussion on visitor book). The writer was General Vo Nguyen Giap, said as one of the most important military heroes of Vietnam in the modern history

was an anonymous letter, I was in trouble with my superiors. Colleagues started to doubt me. The director no longer appointed me to important tasks. The head of the Department called me to the meeting room every day, asking me to write reports of what I had done and what my purpose was in doing them. In my office, people turned their backs on me. My own staff sent their work reports to the vice-director instead of giving them to me, their direct manager. No one said a good word to me. I felt like I was being attacked in the dark as I did not know where the accusations came from and how to address them. Tired, stressed and sorrowful, I was sick for two months, but no one visited me. People thought that I was going to fall down [lose the battle].

Mrs Pham told me this the first time I visited her at home. She bowed her head, closed her eyes and spoke with a fast raised voice, with her right hand rolling into a fist and punching her chest. I did not understand why the lawsuit had happened and what it was about; I wondered why she would act like this in the first meeting with me, a stranger. Obviously, this was something very important to her.

Mrs Pham told me more about what had happened. She claimed that sending the anonymous letter was a plot by someone who wanted to take her job. She traced these allegations back to previous events that happened at work and concluded that it was the result of a series of conflicts.

They attacked me collectively as I did not agree with their work. Two years before that, I went back to work after completing my studies. They were building some supporting pillars for the old trees near the Temple. I told them not to intervene too much with nature. It would be better to use wooden or metal pillars (see Plate 21 for an example). But they built concrete pillars, and too many of them. They planned a higher number of pillars than necessary so that they could apply for more money; they would then use low quality materials and corruptly misappropriate any left over money. The builders unintentionally cut the main root of a three hundred-year-old tree at ground level. That tree died of lack of water one year later. No one in the Department said a word. Then in a following storm, another tree fell down upon the dead tree. They cleaned up both and then reported it as the result of the storm. They safely avoided any disgrace, but I knew it. You see, for them, my downfall was just a matter of when and how. After the event, though I remained in my old position, it was like a demotion, as they left me out of the office's main events.



**Plate 21: Artificial pillars built to support an old tree at the Hung Temple**

Mrs Pham's story is told as though she was the victim of an internal purge within an organisation to eradicate those with dissenting opinions. As she saw it, the conflict was between two different working principles: one prioritised quality and responsibility and the other put personal benefit first. Mrs Pham positioned herself as 'the one' representative of the former who was distinct from 'the many' of the latter. She claimed that she alone stood up for the old values and that made her different and resulted in her isolation.

The experience haunted Mrs Pham's memory; it was not only a blow to her ideological faith but also a moral injury. That crisis pushed her to turn to the deities' religious powers. Mrs Pham stressed that this was a significant time for her.

I made a ritual offering to the Hung Kings in February that year. For months after that, I prayed at the Hung Temple, asking the deities to punish those who treated me badly'.

Mrs Pham happily recalled the outcome of her prayer.

The director after that had to go to the hospital for an operation on his head. He came to ask forgiveness from me; only then did I pray to the deities, saying: 'He has now repented. I pray to you my lords to forgive him.'

Talk of the Kings' disciplinary power reminded me about an oral narrative told by local people about this power. I asked Mrs Pham about that story, and she retold it to me:

It is said that the hundred hills around Nghia Linh Mountain have a shape like a hundred elephants. Ninety-nine of them turned their heads toward the Hung Temple, except one that turned its back to the Mountain. The first Hung King was angry, and ordered his princess to behead the treacherous elephant. Since then, on that hill there has been a red stream running down looking like the blood of the elephant.

This story is well known because it is often told when introducing people to the Hung Temple. It contains a moral lesson about loyalty and punishment for poor behaviour. The story used to be told by guides like Mrs Pham to encourage a right attitude toward the nation. However, she used it to solve her individual problems. Mrs Pham prayed to the deities to deliver justice when she believed that the state structure had failed to do so. She believed that the ritual had helped her overcome the lawsuit and altered her destiny. The work as a temple officer had disappointed her, so had been less meaningful to her. Mrs Pham continued to play the role of a silent observer in her own institution, stayed at her position until her retirement in two years after that.

Also from that point on, Mrs Pham had turned to the Kings whenever she was in need. She sought an alternative source of power in them, a supernatural power. Her example illuminates the role of religious practices as practical solutions to cope with life difficulties and treatment for mental illness. Her connection to the Hung Kings had shifted significantly if not contradicted her former convictions. She became a religious devotee to the deities she believed in and saw as powerful. The change that Mrs Pham experienced through her exchanges and connection to the Hung Kings consequently led to a change in Mrs Pham's sense of self.

### ***Developing a religious identity***

After her successful intercession with the deities about her work problems, Mrs Pham frequently made ritual offerings to the deities at the Hung Temple and continued to do so after her retirement. The regular visit to the Hung Temple gradually became an important part of her everyday routine. Mrs Pham visited Hung Temple everyday up until her move to Hanoi in the last one year. Even after moving to Hanoi, she travelled to the Hung Temple often twice a week from Hanoi, and whenever there was a need to go. This was because she also helped other people to conduct rituals to the Hung Kings and take care of their religious connections to the deities. Mrs Pham acknowledged herself as a religious specialist. Her followers began calling her 'master' (*thầy* for male, *cô* for female) in the way Viet people often call a religious specialist.

In order to hear her own explanation about the change she made in connection to the Hung Kings, I asked Mrs Pham the reasons that led her to this religious work. Mrs Pham answered:

In 1992 when I was working at the Hung Temple, a fortune teller in Hy Cuong village told me that I had the fate<sup>48</sup> (*duyên số*) of being a master (*thầy/cô*): either a teacher (*thầy giáo*), or a ritual specialist (*thầy cúng*). When I worked at the temple, my tour guide job was similar to that of a knowledge provider, and then I trained people to do the work of temple keeper. So I thought it was my fate to be a religious specialist.

In her complex identity as a state official, a scholar and a religious specialist, Mrs Pham was struggling within herself to come to terms with a variety of forms of religious practice. Mrs Pham said she worshipped the Hung Kings but also followed the Mother Goddess religion and practised Buddhist meditation. At home she had an altar for worshipping Kuan Yin, a Buddhist goddess, and the goddesses of the Mother Goddess religion, and her ancestors (see Plate 22). However, she only performed rituals at the Hung Temple. According to Mrs

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<sup>48</sup>The term fate (*duyên số*), introduced into Mrs Pham's explanation, refers particularly to pre-determination in spiritual life—the belief that a person living in the world has been set by a supernatural force to play a particular role in society. For more detailed discussions on fate in Vietnamese popular religion, see Endres (2008).

Pham, 'A person can have different religious practices that are not in opposition with each other'.



**Plate 22: An altar at home for worshipping Kuan Yin and family ancestors**

In her actions, Mrs Pham struggled with finding ways to perform her devotions. In line with her formative socialist education as to what is acceptable behaviour towards the Hung Kings, Mrs Pham was cautious when speaking about practices that could be viewed as 'superstition'. I saw her comfortably burning incense and reciting ritual speech. However, when I asked her 'Do you practice medium possession (*hầu đồng*)?', she raised her voice, and looking straight to me, spoke clearly: 'No, I am not possessed by the deities. I am a party member, a doctor of culture studies. I do not believe in possession'. The 'scientist' as well as the 'Marxist' in her still saw medium possession as superstition and not for her to practise.

In regard to her religious practice, I asked Mrs Pham how she understood the deities' message. Mrs Pham admitted this to be the most difficult skill for a religious specialist. She said she mainly uses verbal prayers and the yin yang coins. Throwing the coins is a popular ritual practice among the Vietnamese. The coin's side with the decoration is called its face. During the ritual, Mrs Pham

states her request to the deities. Then she holds two coins in one hand and throws them onto a plate held in the other hand. The aspect of the coins face, which is revealed, reflects the deities' attitude toward the one who is praying. If two coins end up face down, it means the deity is angry with the prayer. If two coins face up, it signals that the deity is laughing at the prayer. Only when one coin faces up, and the other faces down does the deity agree to grant the wishes of the prayer (see Plate 23). Mrs Pham shared her experience:

I often throw the coins three times. If after three times they give you one answer there is no doubt about that. But this skill is still the most mysterious part of being a religious specialist. You must guess, and feel, and have experience.



**Plate 23:** A set of yin yang coins ('face up' and 'face down' signals agreement)

In her recollections, there is a struggle between a religious self that is persuading a secular self for a tolerable explanation of her veneration practices. This individual struggle has many similarities with the state struggle with the symbolism of the Hung Kings during the first decade of the twenty-first century, partly discussed in Chapter 2. On the one hand, as an ex-temple manager, Mrs Pham was guided to limit superstitious practice at the Temple such as spirit



possession. Yet, on the other hand, she is aware that some forms of spiritual practice are acceptable and institutionalised, such as throwing the yin yang coins, burning incense, praying or giving offerings.

The yin yang coins and ritual performances help Mrs Pham call forth the invisible presence of the Hung Kings. This fosters the belief of Mrs Pham and her followers that they have their deities' support. This ritual practice allows Mrs Pham to express her religiosity and as well as confirm her sense of identity as a medium. This informs subjective domains and notions of identity. In this continuous self-fashioning, 'identities are hard-won standpoints that, however dependent upon social support and however vulnerable to change, make at least a modicum of self-direction possible' (Holland 1998, p. 5).

### ***Effects of ritual: story of a businessman***

As I have noted, Mrs Pham's perception about the Hung Kings has significantly changed. She is now mediating for a network of devotees of the Hung Kings, who frequently make pilgrimages to the Temple, to perform rituals and seek spiritual support from the Kings. In this section, I illustrate further what types of blessings people seek from the Hung Kings through stories about followers of Mrs Pham. I will begin by using the example of a businessman, Mr Tung, to illustrate the way Mrs Pham led people to a spiritual connection to the Hung Kings. First, she introduced them to a new perception of the Hung Kings' power and then she conducted rituals to show how the power of the deities can support them. In Mr Tung's case, this meant to support his business affairs.

The day I first met Mrs Pham at the Hung Temple, she made a phone call to Mr Tung, who was one of Mrs Pham's oldest clients and the director of a private organisation, the Thien Su Company. I met him several times later and got a chance to know more about his work. Mr Tung's company specialises in construction. It is a family-owned business, as most of the members come from a large kinship group. As Mr Tung explained, his company works mainly for government projects. When tenders are called by the government, Mr Tung's company participates in the tendering process and competes with other

companies to win contracts. When I asked him why he worshipped the Hung Kings and why he encouraged his whole company to follow that practice, he told me:

I formerly worked for ten years for a government construction project. The project director was the first person who took me to the Hung Temple. Our project team went there at the beginning of every year to perform rituals to the Kings and pray for a good working year. Many other state organisations maintained the same habit. So I followed that tradition. Every year I took the company leaders to the Hung Temple at the beginning and the end of the year to perform the ritual to the Hung Kings.

Mr Tung's explanation reflects the state's approach towards the Hung Temple and suggests it has an influence on individual practice. Now, however, he continues to visit the temple for religious rituals. He takes co-workers on these visits so that his company can benefit from the Kings' blessings. On one such occasion, Mrs Pham was guiding the people in Mr Tung's company to display their offerings and put them on the altar. Their generous offerings included: Hanoi speciality fruits, chicken with sticky rice, betel nuts, square and round cakes and votive papers (see plate 24). As I listened to Mrs Pham pray to the Kings, I learnt that the Thien Su Company had been successful that year; they secured a big project and earned a lot of money. On this occasion, the Hung Kings were being thanked for their support. Later, after the ritual, I asked Mr Tung how he knew it was the Hung Kings that helped the company. He shared with me a story that I had partly heard before from Mrs Pham.



**Plate 24: Offerings for private ritual to the Hung Kings**

The story begins at a time when he was exhausted after a series of meetings with householders to discuss a process to clear land for a new project. The company wanted to persuade over a hundred householders to sign a compensation contract that would involve them leaving their current land and living in arranged apartments in an adjacent area. Staff in the company had lobbied most of the householders, but the process was delayed by a few people who opposed the project. At the meeting, one old man stood up and said he would refuse any form of compensation and rather die in his old house than leave to go anywhere else. In addition, the workers in the field reported that their bulldozer had broken down while digging the land and that its blade had dug out part of an old coffin. They were scared and had stopped working. Right at that time, Mrs Pham called him and asked what was happening and why the deities were angry with him. Mr Tung said he felt his sweat run along his backbone; he immediately told Mrs. Pham about the struggle with the people and the broken coffin. Mrs. Pham decided that they needed to do two rituals, the first one at the Hung Temple and the second one at the project site.

On the following day, they made a special pilgrimage to the Hung Temple, with Mr Tung bringing along a project contract to report to the deities, as requested by Mrs Pham. After that, Mr Tung held a ritual on the project site to free the dead souls buried under the land. And as he recalled, a miracle happened. The old man he had met in the meeting before stood in his front yard staring at him during the ritual. Gradually, he stepped out of his yard and moved towards Mr Tung. Mr Tung asked to visit the man's house and received silent agreement. In the man's front yard, Mr Tung noticed a small tomb made of old bricks, but appearing clean and well-tended. Mr Tung explained that he was trying to arrange a suitable relocation site for the people, that the project had been approved and that if his company failed this time, another company would take over the project and could act in a worse way towards the people. He asked if the old man would think again and allow the house to be cleared. The old man did not answer directly, but said: 'I have been watching you. Now what are you going to do with the tombs, coffins and wandering souls in this land?' Mr Tung

replied in sincerity that he had done the ritual to comfort the souls and that he would also relocate the tombs and coffins to the cemetery in the next town near the new apartments arranged for the householders. The old man finally said: 'Tell your men, I will leave'.

Mr Tung told me he could not believe his ears. He still could not determine the exact reason that made the man change his mind. The issue causing the delay in the clearance process, according to Mr Tung, came from the householders not wanting to relocate to another zone, but it was probably rooted in the unsolved concerns with the dead people who were buried under that land. It led him to the view that the world is an interconnected complex linking the present with the past, the living with the dead. The obstacle turned out to be solved so smoothly and he believed that the Hung Kings had magically helped him to break down the obstacles, by persuading the dead and influencing the living. And it only happened after he had conducted the ritual to the Hung Kings and prayed about the project. Listening to my conversation with Mr Tung, Mrs Pham was not surprised with the smooth outcome. She said to Mr Tung:

Your company's contract has the state stamp; it makes sense to the living people, but it is nothing to the dead. I asked you to bring it to the Hung Temple to ask the deities' seal on it. The Kings' power then helped you to conquer the power of the souls wandering on that land. But next time you have to remember to report all of your work to the deities in advance.

This account gives a new insight into the symbol of the Hung Kings as powerful deities for their devotees. Through interactions with the Hung Kings and in coping with his business difficulties, Mr Tung has come to believe that the Kings are spiritually powerful. He believed in Mrs Pham's explanation that the Kings' power can conquer other forces that oppose the Kings' decisions. As a devotee, he believes that his business work can be successful, not only because of approval from the state authority, but also because he has behaved appropriately with the Hung Kings and got their blessings.

***Messages of the deities: The story of a politician***

Another story I want to draw on is that of a politician, Mr Kien, whom I met when accompanying Mrs Pham. His story shows the nuanced way in which individuals, and especially a national delegate who was expected to perform appropriately at the Hung Temple, learnt to adjust his behaviour in order to build up a private religious connection to the Kings and gain spiritual blessings.

I met Mr. Kien when I went to the Hung Temple to document a ritual performed for the Hung Kings by city and provincial leaders at the last day of the lunar year in 2012. Later that evening, I followed Mrs Pham to the Hung Temple and was surprised to again meet Mr Kien, a member of the delegation who had been there that afternoon. Mrs Pham explained that his evening pilgrimage was personal (*lễ riêng*) while the previous one was a communal ritual (*lễ chung*). In the private ritual Mr Kien just prayed for himself and his family, while in the previous one he was praying as a representative of the province. Through Mrs Pham, I knew that Mr Kien had been a provincial leader for a long time and he was not religious. But then he met Mrs Pham at the Hung Temple, she had taught him about the power of the Kings and how we should worship the deities appropriately. Since then, Mr Kien and his family had followed Mrs Pham to venerate the Hung Kings for five years.

In the small room of the Top Temple, we all stood surrounding the altar to complete the ritual. Mr Kien and his wife, Mrs Lien, were standing next to Mrs Pham. Mrs Pham prayed and asked the deities to help Mr Kien get the highest number of votes in the selection for chairperson of the directors of his political organisation. Mrs Pham then threw two coins; the two coins faced up. She repeated the prayer and threw the coins again; one coin faced up and one dropped to the ground. This was a bad signal from the deities that implied some very bad news. Mrs Pham picked the coin up and looked at Mr Kien and Mrs Lien. Both of them made three bows towards the altar. Mrs Pham held the coins in her hand and prayed: 'I am praying to you, my Lord! Please give Mr Kien the highest votes in the selection. Is anyone causing a problem?' Mrs Pham threw

the coins and the result was two coins facing down. Seeing this, Mrs Pham exclaimed (to the Kings), 'You are angry!' Mr Kien and Mrs Lien looked nervous and bowed again to the altar while Mrs Pham continued: 'Please forgive us! Is it because of a dead person in the Nguyen family (Mr Kien's family name)' Mrs Pham then threw the coins, which both landed on the plate; one faced up and one down. Mrs Pham asked another question: 'So my Lord, is that the death of a soldier?' Saying this, she threw the coins, which then both landed face down.

This went on for another hour until Mrs Pham determined that it was Mr Kien's dead uncle that was causing the potential hazard for his result at the election. To make it right, Mrs Pham directed Mrs Lien to go and find a pagoda in her husband's hometown and make a ritual to her husband's uncle. Mrs Pham reinterpreted the meanings of the long section 'talking' with the deities through throwing the coins that the uncle had donated money to build that pagoda, but none of his descendants knew that or acknowledged his merit at the pagoda. The result from the ritual implied that the dead relative was not happy and wanted to punish one of his living children, Mr Kien. The required ritual at the pagoda was to comfort his soul and seek a blessing from him. On the way down the mountain, Mrs Pham seemed to be excited. She stressed that the message of the deities had to be heeded immediately.

After that I did not hear what happened to Mr Kien and Mrs Lien until I met Mrs Lien on her pilgrimage to the Hung Temple at the beginning of the following year. At the tea room of the Top Temple, she was sitting with Mrs Pham and Mrs Pham happily reminded me about her:

Do you remember Mrs Lien? She found the pagoda and made the right ritual to her husband's uncle. As a result, her husband got 89% of the vote at the election and became the director of the institute.

I congratulated Mrs Lien on her husband's success and asked her whether they went to another temple to ask for additional support in this election. Mrs Lien shook her head:

No, my husband and I just went to the Hung Temple. You know, the Hung Kings are the national ancestors and guardian deities. The Kings are the

highest spiritual force taking care of people. They are like the ancestors that you worship at home.<sup>49</sup>

This religious interpretation of the role of the Hung Kings is very different to that promulgated by the state in the revolutionary time (see Chapter 2), when visitors just listened to the story of the nation's founding, felt proud of the meritorious contribution of the Kings and promised to contribute to the nation.

The story of Mr Kien gives an interesting insight into perceptions of the Hung Kings that may be held by state officials and the complexity of their religious practice in their struggle between official social role and individual desire. Mr Kien participated in the provincial delegation to fulfil his official role as a politician by participating in a ritual to show appreciation to the Hung Kings. When he went in an official capacity, his group did not pay for the specialist to pray on the group's behalf. The head of the province lead the ritual, expressing their respect and appreciation to the Hung Kings. Then Mr Kien went back to the Hung Temple in the evening with his religious specialist to perform a private ritual seeking a blessing from the deities for his personal work promotion, and thus confirming that he was a religious devotee of the Hung Kings.

These practices shed light on the complex characteristics of Vietnam's post-socialist society where multiple social agendas are in play, intertwining and mutually influencing each other. While the state delegations still uphold the Confucian and Marxist ways of interacting with the supernatural by showing appreciation to ancestors, the individuals of state officers may choose different ways to interact with the deities. Facing the struggles of life, people embrace the perception that the Hung Kings' have spiritual power and through a spiritual relationship with the Kings find that their lives are enhanced. This leads to individuals continuing their religious practices towards the Hung Kings. And, in its

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<sup>49</sup> Mrs Lien talked about worshipping ancestor at home. This refers to a popular and enduring practice among the Viet people. They believe that they have the responsibility to worship the dead members of their family, their lineage ancestors. These dead souls are believed to have the power to intervene in a person's life and alter what could happen, either for a better or a worse result. Worshipping ancestors properly, ensures that the ancestors will bless their descendants and help them live better lives. For more discussion on ancestor worship, see: (Đặng 1996; DiGregorio & Salemink 2007; Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2013).

turn, these practices create more mutual connections between individuals and the sacred Kings. In this process, some people have come to identify themselves as Hung Kings' devotees and practise rituals as a way of fulfilling their religious role with the deities. It is through conducting regular rituals that their sense of identity is transformed.

### ***A new identity***

Mrs Pham's self-narrated life story with her own contradictions and struggles is an intriguing resource to understand 'the dialogic construction of self and the social world' (Endres 2008, p. 36). Her work for the state once gave her a sense of identity as a child of Ho Chi Minh and as one who endeavoured to uphold socialist ideology. But the crisis at work destroyed this. In its place, religious performance became the means of an active transformation of self and helped to form her identity as a religious master. Seeking spiritual justice from the Kings led to a change in Mrs Pham's own perspective on the Hung Kings and as a consequence a change in her interaction with the Hung Temple and the Kings. She came to revere them as powerful deities, in a way which challenges the former understanding of the Kings as just founders of the nation. She now regularly participates in a transformative process that changes the meanings of the Kings into a post-socialist symbol. However, while acknowledging the change in her practice to now worshipping the Hung Kings as deities, Mrs Pham still used the official discourses of the Kings as national ancestors that are worth appreciating.

In changing her understanding of self as a religious master working for the deities, she was determined to transfer the deities' power to her followers, like Mr Tung and Mr Kien, who seek spiritual support through religious rituals. In the process of transforming her identity, Mrs Pham has re-enforced her freedom to employ or leave out certain forms of religious performances. Her choice of rituals helps to maintain her religious authority and importance and reflects her own agency.



In addition, Pham's religious practices to the Hung Kings challenges the former understanding of the Kings as national founders who are historically significant. As a result, Pham now regularly participates in a transformative process that changes the meanings of the Kings into a post socialist symbol. In Mrs Pham and her followers' narratives, the Hung Kings worship is becoming recognised as a normative, even 'orthodox' way of constituting what it is to be Vietnamese.

### **Ms Tri: becoming the daughter of the Hung Kings**

People working at the Office of Heritage Management at the Hung Temple recommended that I should meet Ms Tri, as she is someone who shows great commitment to the Hung Kings through her regular performance of religious activities. After receiving her contact details, I phoned her for verbal consent to participate in my research but she answered without much enthusiasm. Luckily, I then met her visiting the Hung Temple and had an officer at the temple introduce me to her. Only then did she agree to participate in my research and start to talk openly. After many conversations, I gained her trust and friendship. Since Ms Tri was working and living in Cao Nguyen province<sup>50</sup> in the South, I visited her at her house for a few days and also accompanied her in a two-week-long pilgrimage to shrines in several Northern provinces. Ms Tri was a very strong person and she was determined to familiarise me with what I should know in order to understand her religious practices. She allowed me to live in her house with her son, visit her company, and eat out with her friends. We talked whenever she had free time, and she always answered my questions. In this way, Ms Tri became one of my key interlocutors.

Ms Tri came from Roc village near the Hung Temple. She followed her family to the South after a family financial crisis. In the South she undertook higher education and ran her own business. Ms Tri was a single mother with one son who was nearly six years old by the time I visited them. After a few years in the South she started to visit her hometown in the North each year, from where for months she made pilgrimages to various sacred shrines, including the Hung

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<sup>50</sup> The name of the province is a pseudonym.

Temple. People at the Hung Temple emphasised her devotion to the Hung Kings based on her frequent visits to the Temple and her plans to build a temple. However, I will show that Ms Tri's case was worth investigating for more than just the reason of her devotional commitment to the Hung Kings. From the story of her life that follows, I argue that Ms Tri's practices of worship to the Hung Kings helped to constitute her sense of identity.

Ms Tri started the story of her career with a sad memory of life in her home village. Her family was comprised of six brothers and sisters living with her parents. They were all farmers, growing rice and green tea. After the introduction of *Doi Moi* in 1986, when the state changed its policy to allow the private sector into the economy, many entrepreneurs came to her village to buy tea. Ms Tri's father invested the family financial resources and labour into growing more green tea. They produced a good crop and sold the tea at a good price for the first two years. Ms Tri's father decided to borrow more money and hired more labour to expand the area of tea growing. However, many other farmers saw the benefit of selling tea and had also invested in growing tea. They offered lower prices to attract the entrepreneurs. Ms Tri's family could not sell their tea but still had to pay their workers and the interest on the loan. This led the whole family into serious debt. The moneylenders pursued her family relentlessly. Ms Tri said she was deeply angry with both the irresponsible entrepreneurs and the unreasonable moneylenders. She explained that those people all used to be her good neighbours and relatives. But they did not want to be lenient towards her family and so did not give Ms Tri's father enough time to earn the money and repay the loan. So they eventually faced bankruptcy. Ms Tri sadly remembered:

Even family members spoke badly about us claiming that we had broken their trust and that we were 'con men'. We lived each day in poverty and shame. My father became ill and then my mother. We could not stand it any longer.

So in 1995, except for a brother who was asked to stay, the whole family migrated to Cao Nguyen province, a newly emerging economic zone in the South. Ms Tri's father chose Cao Nguyen since they had an uncle who had settled there

some time before. Unlike her father, who continued with farming work, Ms Tri was determined to become a successful businesswoman. She followed the vocation of her uncle who was a factory director and worked for him. She put herself through vocational education in finance and, along with two siblings, worked as an accountant for her uncle's company. They gained experience, got to know the market and saved money, and then in 2000 the five brothers and sisters decided to open their own company distributing construction materials with Ms Tri as its director. The company started with distributing electric wire and lighting equipment and then expanded into providing bitumen for road building.

'Running a business', Ms Tri said, 'needs lots of energy and emotion'. She emphasised that this work was much harder for her for two reasons. The first was that she was a woman working in the construction industry, which was often understood to be a male domain. And second, she was a migrant settling in a strange region away from her birthplace. She asserted that:

My effort had to be triple (that of) the others in order to get to the same level of achievement and recognition. There was so much pressure on me to survive and to gain a position in society.

Her company now buys construction material from factories and sells it to building projects for a profit. They also earn money by providing technical services related to the use of the materials. The work requires constant contact and negotiation with people, including business partners and service clients. When asked, she explained her work to me: 'The nature of my work is distribution; you get the product from the people who make it and deliver to people who need it.' So to have an advantage in competing with other distributors, Ms Tri stressed that trust is the number one value. To gain trust, a distributor must be moral. She needs to make sure that the product is of good quality and the client can get it for the lowest possible price. It means that one must follow the contract, think about the clients' work as much as one's own business and maintain consistent quality of service.

Following those principles, Ms Tri herself often made the first contact with producers who had goods with the cheapest price. She had her own workers transport the materials directly to her clients. She hired specially skilled technicians to support clients in using the products. She offered longer warranties than other companies. She did all of these things to confirm that she was trustworthy and to ensure a long-term relationship with clients. From the way she talked, the keys to success were employing quality workers and ensuring effective management. Ms Tri made it a priority to use family members in running the company. She assigned most of the important positions to her relatives, such as her brother and his wife, her nephew and her niece. She felt she could trust her family members and so that made her feel secure, both at work and when she needed to leave the company for a long time, such as for a month-long pilgrimage.

### ***Religious engagement and transformation of identity***

Ms Tri remembered that in the past she used to go to pagodas or temples sometimes but did not particularly engage in any religious practice. Her attitude toward religion changed after her family set up their own company, which they named, 'Hung Vuong Limited Liability Company' in deference to the Hung Kings. She shared with me a few reasons for that decision. First, the company was family owned and they all came from Roc village near the Hung Temple where villagers worshipped the Hung Kings as their village's guardian spirit. Second, the Hung Kings are the nation's ancestors but the symbol of the Kings is particularly identified with their province of Phu Tho and with the Hung Temple. After the name was agreed upon, the family made a pilgrimage to the Hung Temple and conducted rituals to the Hung Kings to obtain the deities' blessings for their new company.

Ms Tri's initial connection to the Hung Temple arose from her perception of the Kings and the Temple as symbols of her homeland and her family's roots. However, the increasing awareness of the Hung Kings as national ancestors strongly enhanced her company brand. Ms Tri openly showed the attachment to

the Hung Temple and the Kings at her company. For instance, in her office, she displayed a big bronze drum that she had purchased at the Hung Temple. She showed me the altar, which was in a prominent position in the office, and where she had placed a bottle of water and incense sticks brought from the Hung Temple.

Since the initial family pilgrimage to the Temple in 2000, Ms Tri has made pilgrimages to the Hung Temple every year. Besides the religious practices relating to the Hung Kings at the Hung Temple, she was also very open to participating in other religious forms. Ms Tri was a follower of the Mother Goddess religion and practised as a medium. In light of the time demands that all these religious activities entailed, I asked Ms Tri how she carried out her business, for example while being on pilgrimage. She shook her head and smiled as if I had asked an unnecessary question. She explained:

I still can manage the company through the phone and that is the way I do business in the pilgrimage season every year. I tell my business partners about that and assure them about the progress of the work. I have experienced that if I keep doing my religious practices properly, the business will go smoothly.

Ms Tri came to believe that the running of her business was mutually linked with her religious activities. She was confident that the deities blest her. She told me several times:

I always feel that the deities spare a place for me in this land. From the time I recognised it and worshipped the deities I understood how all things were linked together to guide my life.

Ms Tri explained that she began to participate more frequently and actively in various sorts of religious activities. I came to realise that she had the same commitment to practising her religion as she had to her work. For a long time Ms Tri kept doing what she called 'distributing the blessing' (*tiếp phúc*), which is a way of bringing prosperity from the wealthy to the poor. She shared with me some experiences that guide the way she engages with religion.

One time I visited a temple in a rural area in this province. There was no fruit or flowers, not even incense on the altar. I went out and bought bunches of incense to bring back to that temple. From that time, I began

thinking about how I could support remote temples. I observed that at the 'rich temples' in Ho Chi Minh City, on the ritual days, thousands of flowers were pulled off from the altar to be put outside in the yard or garden and hundreds of incense boxes were stored in the corners for years. So I asked the temple keepers from rich temples to allow me to bring the flowers and incense to poorer distant temples. They were very happy to agree. On a number of days, I make long trips from the city to remote towns and villages to distribute flowers and incense boxes.

Over time, Ms Tri came to identify with this new aspect of herself as blessing distributor. Each year, after the Lunar New Year, she would often spend a few weeks or a month on pilgrimages to well-known shrines in the Northern provinces to conduct rituals to the deities.<sup>51</sup> Ms Tri saw those pilgrimages as the chance to carry on caring responsibilities towards the deities.

These practices became as important as those in her business career since her frequent pilgrimages to the North in the early years of the 2000s. In the other words, Ms Tri's perception of self was transformed from that of a purely ambitious businesswoman to someone who is both businesswoman and religious practitioner. As I continue to show, this emerging sense of self led her to a wide range of activities, connecting her to new people and places. Through these ongoing practices, Ms Tri constantly engaged with her new world and further developed her new way of being.

### ***Developing religious identity: planning to build a temple***

Ms Tri planned to build a temple for the Hung Kings in the Cao Nguyen province, a plan she has pursued for nearly ten years. Her uncle had long shared with her his desire to build a temple for the Hung Kings on his company's land. He had built a statue of the first Hung King in the company's front yard and placed an incense bowl in front of it. However, he kept delaying building the temple because he felt that the company land was not a suitable location for it. Ms Tri

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<sup>51</sup> The shrines that Ms Tri visited were various and included such places as the Hung Temple and the temple in her home village, the famous Buddhist site at Huong pagoda, the sites of gods and goddesses in the Mother Goddess religion. In addition, Ms Tri also committed herself to be a medium for the Mother Goddess religion. She practiced mediumship under the lead of a master, but then became a master herself, with followers from family members, friends and business partners.

told me that her idea of building the temple came partly from her uncle's unfinished desire. In addition, she wanted to continue her father's efforts to make a connection with their homeland. Her father, since his migration to the South in the 1990s, had been very active in setting up the Roc villagers' Club in the Cao Nguyen province. He and his wife also brought soil, water and incense from the Hung Temple to their house in the South for their religious worship. Ms Tri contended that the Hung Kings had long wanted to move into the South. However, they could not find a trustworthy person to do this and so they had chosen her for the task.

After Ms Tri had visited numerous temples in the country, she came to the decision that the Hung Temple she would build would be a unique one. So far, the state has been active in expanding the worship of the Hung Kings and supporting the building of new Hung Temples in the southern provinces. But the work had not been done properly. Ms Tri felt that most temples dedicated to the Hung Kings in the South have been built in the southern style, which is very different from that of the original Hung Temple in Phu Tho. Hence, Ms Tri desired to construct a temple on her own; one that was similar to the authentic Hung Temple in her home province, where people could worship the Hung Kings, along with other prominent Vietnamese gods and spirits.

Ms Tri believes that the deities guided her in all her temple building tasks. She contended, for instance, that they were instrumental in her purchase of land for the new temple. The plot was on a hill by a large river in the South. The temple construction plans ran into a major problem, however, when Ms Tri was instructed by the provincial court to give up the land for a cemetery, a project that was approved after her purchase of the hillside property. She rejected the court's decision because she believed that the deities had chosen the land for her to build the temple on. So, she tried to persuade the project manager, Mr Vuong, to change his mind. For one week she went to his office each day and waited outside to see him. As she narrated to me later, the manager did not let her in for the first two days.

On the third day, his secretary told me to go inside and see him in the meeting room. He came in, sat down, and told me: 'Go home! You can have the same or bigger land in any other place in this province. But leave your hill for my project; I had a plan with it, and it has been approved. Do not waste your time with me' and he walked out. Everything happened in three minutes and I did not have chance to say a word, or even to show him any type of reaction.

Ms Tri left the office in tears. Friends listened to her story in sympathy. Mr Vuong was well known in this province to be a paternalistic man who did not like women working outside the house and doing 'men's work' such as in business. He was also an authoritarian leader. Everyone found it difficult to persuade him to change his mind. That night, Ms Tri could not sleep. She said, 'I told myself to calm down; I have the legitimate power from the deities. They have approved my project; I must keep up my belief'. She went back to Mr Vuong's office for seven days until Mr Vuong finally agreed to see her. This time she started the conversation as follows:

I heard that you plan to build a cemetery because the province asked you to do this project to protect the land's spiritual power. But I have the same motivation with my project. The deities have chosen the sacred land and guided me to find out the sacred land by myself and I had the administrative approval before your project. Once I bought the land, I prepared the building design; and I have held the ritual to ask permission from the deities to build the temple. Now please see my project as part of the broad picture represented by your project. Don't you think that this is the deities' plan for you, and that my Hung Temple can actually fit in with your project?

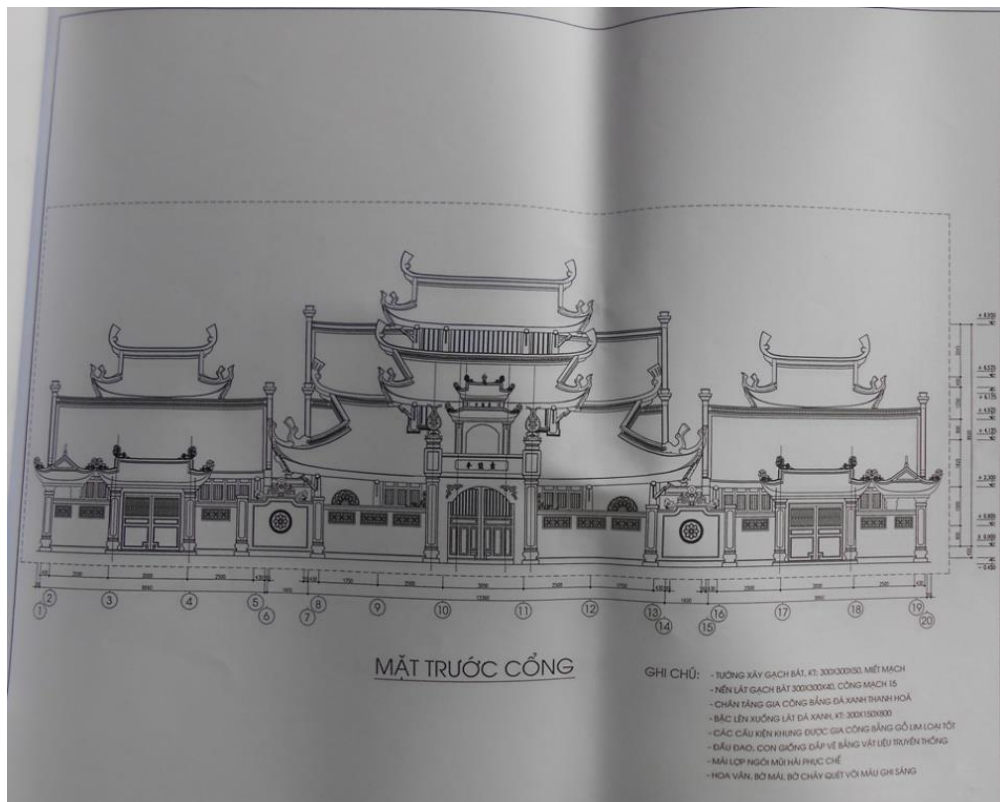
Ms Tri slowed down her voice and turned her face toward me. 'I thought the deities came to my body at that time', she said and then continued: 'I felt a power in my voice, and I do not know why tears were coming from my eyes, although I did feel angry rather than miserable at the time'. On reflection Ms Tri saw it as the deities' magical power being given to her. She added: 'My sincere heart to serve the deities was the power that won Mr Vuong's heart'.

The relationship between Ms Tri and Mr Vuong changed dramatically; she said it was like a miracle. Ms Tri recalled Mr Vuong's words: 'From the time I met you, I have brought more religion into my project'. Ms Tri explained to me that Mr



Vuong not only gave land for her to build the temple but also decided to build a pagoda and two other temples in his cemetery project. In addition, Mr Vuong became her biggest business client whose contract brought her enormous amounts of money that she would use for the building of the Hung Temple.

Spiritually, Ms Tri has come to identify herself as the daughter of the Hung Kings. Though she said, 'all Vietnamese are descendants of the Hung Kings', labelling herself as 'daughter' indicates a source of pride, from which she perceives she has rights as well as responsibilities. In her role, she wanted to 'correct' the way people in the South worship the Hung Kings by offering an authentic model of the original Hung Temple. She committed herself to this task and was confident that she had the authority transferred from the Kings to her to undertake this.



**Figure 7: The design for the new Hung Temple in the South**

In every step of the building plan, Ms Tri was very careful because she wanted her temple to be known by a large number of people and to be recognised by the state. For example, to build an authentic temple, Ms Tri worked directly with the managers of the Hung Temple in Phu Tho to have contacts of architects of the

Culture Studies Institute who then helped her to produce the temple design (see Figure 7), one that was exactly the same as the Top Temple on the Nghia Linh Mountain. Also, she planned to obtain all the materials from the North to build the southern temple.

To make the new Hung Temple unique and spiritually powerful, Ms Tri undertook hundreds of pilgrimages to temples throughout the country. At each temple, she performed the ritual and brought home some incense sticks from that temple's incense bowl. She has stored the incense sticks from each temple in separate bowls in a temple near her house. When she can successfully build the new Hung Temple, she plans to move all these bowls to the new temple. By doing this, she believed that all the Vietnamese gods and spirits will be invited to come together at one temple. This is important for her as she explained to me:

The incense roots in each temple are a symbol of the power of that deity. I want to build a temple that gathers the sacred power of all the deities. That will be the temple that stores the displays the world of Vietnamese gods and spirits in which the Hung Kings are worshipped at the main altar.

The desire to serve the Hung Kings has led her to engage further in the world of Vietnamese gods and spirits and made her, as she said about herself, 'not an intellectual but an experiential expert of the religious world'. The label of 'Hung Kings' daughter' indicates special proximity and connection between Ms Tri and the Kings. Serving the deities through pilgrimage and ritual gives her a sense of agency, a belief that she is empowered to overcome all the hardships and complete the temple building task, which she thinks has been assigned to her by the Hung Kings. Spending months and years working with people and organisations related to the Hung Temple and temple building, she gained much knowledge and built a strong social network in this field. This, as I will show in the following section, enhances her social capital and constructs her religious identity in public.

### ***Undertaking a pilgrimage: religious identity in public***

Being the Hung Kings' daughter, Ms Tri felt that coming to the Hung Kings' anniversary each year was obligatory for her. She saw the festival, not only as a

great opportunity to introduce the Hung Kings to her friends, but also as an occasion when it was specially important for her to pray for the Kings' blessings. To further understand how pilgrimage practices revealed her sense of self and identity, I accompanied her to the Hung Temple festival in 2013.

Two days before the main day of the Hung Kings anniversary (the eighth day of the third lunar month), we left Ms Tri's house for a two-week visit to the North. Ms Tri was accompanied by her son, as usual, and her niece and her niece's husband as well as friends from her group of Mother Goddess devotees. These friends looked excited since they had not visited the Hung Temple for quite a long time. One woman in the group had never been to the Temple before. Ms Tri explained that by accompanying them, she was helping them conduct the ritual because without her, they could not even access the Temple site on the festival days.

We drove to Ho Chi Minh City Airport and checked in for the flight to Hanoi. On the plane, while people chatted about the temples they were going to visit, Ms Tri made a phone call to a business partner, also a leading person in the Cao Nguyen province. She wanted to arrange a meeting with him on the following day about a business contract, as she knew he was going to the Hung Temple festival on that day. She smiled happily as she ended the call and said, 'Do not worry. Visit the Hung Kings first and our business will be fine'.

After the three-hour flight, we arrived at Hanoi Airport. We gathered our luggage and headed to the door while Ms Tri made a phone call to the driver she had hired in advance from her home village. Ten minutes later, a car stopped in front of us and drove us to Viet Tri city. It was already 5 pm. Our experienced driver used short cuts to avoid the traffic jam that was normal on festival days. Meanwhile, Ms Tri made another phone call to her sister-in-law to have her pick us up at the gate to the Hung Temple. She then asked the driver to stop at a big store to prepare the offerings. It took her one hour to carefully choose each piece of fruit and wrap the offerings beautifully in a big basket.

When we arrived at the gate of the temple, Ms Tri's sister-in-law was already waiting for us. She worked for the local commune's Office of Culture in Ms Tri's home village. She joined us in the car and when we approached the barrier she showed a card to the security officer. The barrier was quickly released for us to enter and we drove straight to the Hung Temple Square. We got out of the car and found ourselves in the middle of a sea of people visiting the Temple. Ms Tri made a further phone call and spoke to a person, saying:

I am visiting the Hung Temple with some friends from the South and will conduct the ritual tonight. Can you tell the security man to let us come into the sanctum sanctorum room? Thank you!

This sanctum sanctorum room, as I knew, was highly restricted. Only those who have the approval of the temple managers can access the room, such as state delegations or provincial official visitors. Some people, with their special connections with temple managers, the security people, or the temple keepers, can still some access the room. Ms Tri is one of the exceptions who can access the room since they have special connection with temple staff. She turned to me and explained:

I just wanted a word from an authority to be sure. The security man knows me well.

When we started our trip up Nghia Linh Mountain it was already 9:00 pm. We quickly passed the Lower and Middle Temples to head off to the Top Temple. Once we reached the Top Temple, we sat down at the chairs in front of the Temple for a short rest. After a while, Ms Tri took the tray of fruits from the porter, carefully checked the fruits and brought the tray into the Temple. She smiled and greeted the security officer who then opened the sanctum sanctorum room for us.

In the worship room, Ms Tri placed the offering tray at the middle altar, put the one note of five hundreds thousands (VND) on the trays of four altars and asked people to gather at the middle one. She reminded her son to keep his hands in the prayer position and everyone in the group prayed silently. Ms Tri and his son finished her prayers long after the others had left the room. Then she carefully

checked the position of the offering tray again to make sure that it was not too obvious and did not take up too large a part of the altar. Then she left the room with her son. We went down along the path on the other side of the mountain, talking to each other about all sorts of topics around pilgrimages that they had taken with Ms Tri to temples throughout the country. Ms Tri's friends felt lucky that they were going with Ms Tri who could arrange access to all the shrines of the Temple much easier than other people who lacked a strong network at the Temple. It was nearly midnight when we got into the car to go home.

As the visit demonstrates, Ms Tri sees the Hung Temple as a familiar place where she is comfortable and at which she has strong network. This network allows her to arrange the fastest travel and to access all the shrines—even the secret room at the Top Temple. The pilgrimage reflects her experience and practices of self-making. As Taylor (2004) suggests, pilgrimage practices in these circumstances are mostly linked to women's self-identity and negotiation of their social status.

Through Ms Tri's case study, I have looked at 'an individual's actions, thoughts, and experiences... as an account of how an individual constructs and positions her own self within the cultural web of meaning' (Endres 2008, p. 56). Ms Tri's story offers an intimate account of diverse practices of interaction with the Hung Kings and the Hung Temple. As a village-born businesswoman, Ms Tri began her religious encounter with the Temple by borrowing the symbol of the Kings in branding her company. Through frequent pilgrimages and increasing religious engagement, her understanding of the Kings changed so that she came to see them as powerful deities who can give her power to be successful in business. From that, she came to identify herself not only as a businesswoman, but also one who distributes blessings. Furthermore, she came to describe herself as the Kings' daughter, as someone who is blessed and given the power to carry out the Kings' desires.

In addition, Ms Tri stressed that her interaction with the Hung Kings made her a 'good' Vietnamese. While the state has been building more Hung Temples and encouraging people to appreciate the Hung Kings, her desire was to do this more

effectively. By building an authentic and unique Hung Temple in the South, she believed that she was introducing the Hung Kings to more people in a better way than the existing Hung Temples. Alongside this effort, Ms Tri always tried to pass on knowledge about the Hung Kings to other people. Evidence of this was her interactions with her business partner and with the friends who accompanied her to the Hung Temple on the festival night.

### **Discussion: Linking religious engagement, identity and agency**

In this chapter, I have used the experiences of two women to show how people connect to the Hung Kings, and how their understandings of the deities have developed over time. In the process, I have shown how the changed relationships with the deities have led to transformations of these people's sense of self; their sense of who they are and how they fit into the world.

While Mrs Pham's case study explores how religiosity becomes a healing means for a powerless woman, Ms Tri's case opens up a new view of how religiosity can enhance both one's business life and personal standing with others. Both Ms Tri and Mrs Pham, from different walks of life, have come to identify themselves with the Hung Kings. More than that, their stories reveal the capacity of individuals to create new identities through practising existing cultural forms. Mrs Pham's and Ms Tri's self-reflective stories illuminate how individuals 'struggle to constitute themselves as particular kinds of actors and persons vis-à-vis others within and against powerful socio-political and cultural worlds' (Skinner, Pach & Holland 1998, p. 5), and 'how in turn individual selves shape the cultural worlds in which they live' (Endres 2008, p. 35).

The case of Mrs Pham illustrates how an administrative official went from being a marginalised employee in the service of the temple's bureaucracy to being a person who believes in the spiritual powers of the Hung Kings and who can communicate with them as a medium. This transformation has led to a significant change in how she sees herself, and in how others see her. More specifically, Mrs Pham is now a woman who commands respect from temple employees as well as from her patrons—people whom she has helped through

her communion with the Hung Kings. While the state's framing of the Hung Kings and their significance influences some elements of how she perceives their role and importance in contemporary Vietnam, she now has developed a more amplified and experience-based understanding of their spiritual and religious powers through the maintenance of everyday rituals. These personal experiences have gone on to shape the perceptions that other people have of the Hung Kings, and their ability to appreciate the deities' potency. As a result, women like Mrs Pham are now agents whose actions and beliefs have encouraged others to embrace the Hung Kings, and to see themselves as devotees. Mrs Pham's story is therefore emblematic of how individual actors, through their transforming identities, contribute to the rise of the prominence of the Hung Kings and importance of the Hung Temple in contemporary Vietnam.

The case of Ms Tri illustrates how a village-born woman with a farming background has become a successful businesswoman through communion with the Hung Kings. As a migrant and a female, things have not always been easy for Ms Tri. To navigate a competitive market, she has come to rely upon the deities as guardian spirits. In the process, she has seen that as her devotion to the Hung Kings increases, so too does her success in business. This has led to an interesting set of beliefs and practices that have influenced how Ms Tri sees herself, and how others see her. For instance, Ms Tri now puts as much emphasis on practices of devotion and ritual worship to the Hung Kings as she does on the daily maintenance of her company. This is because, to her mind, business only runs smoothly when one has the blessings of the Hung Kings. Her positive experiences, and the extent of her devotion to the Hung Kings, have increased the trust and respect that she receives from others. At the same time, Ms Tri has come to understand that she has a profound responsibility towards the Hung Kings and she desires to increase their notoriety and worship by the Vietnamese people. It is for this reason that she has worked to distribute the deities' blessings and to create a replica of the main Hung Temple in the South. These actions are firmly driven by her faith. They also reflect her growing sense of self as someone who has the capacity to expand the reverence for the Hung Kings. In

the process, she has moved beyond the limitations she once experienced as a female businesswoman. She now sees herself first and foremost as the Hung Kings' daughter. Business has become a way for her to fulfil her destiny as their daughter, and not merely a means to augment her career.

The examples of Mrs Pham and Ms Tri show us how people interact with the Hung Kings and the Hung Temple in ways that the state might not have anticipated a few decades back. Their examples also show the added value of thinking with notions of identity and agency in relation to the rise of religious practices in contemporary Vietnam. While people might at first turn to the Hung Kings because of the state discourse on their importance, or because they selfishly desire the deities' blessings, these are not the only interactions that now occur. Over time, as people come to visit temples dedicated to the Hung Kings more frequently, they have a growing sense of the Kings' powers and some people have come to see themselves as real devotees. This causes a significant shift in individual actions, practices, and identities. Such changes are anthropologically and sociologically important. As identities shift in relation to the Hung Kings, or in relation to the role that religion has in Vietnam more broadly, so too do the possibilities for what it means to be Vietnamese. As Holland et al. explain, identities are 'important bases from which people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being' (1998, pp. 4-5). It is, therefore, through the understanding of individual practices that we get a glimpse into the new ways of being religious and Vietnamese that are emerging. I argue that the exploration of the Hung Kings is a useful way to begin understanding some of these possibilities.

The next chapter is thematically distinct from the preceding ones. I hone in on moments of festival-based performance, wherein all sorts of groups and social actors come to the Hung Temple and enact their various roles and purposes. The seemingly chaotic and contradictory nature of this place-based event will provide discussions on collective and contentious practices.



## Chapter 5 Performance, *communitas* and contentious practices at the festival of the Hung Temple

Sacredness is calling all Vietnamese, reminding them of the Hung Kings' anniversary. In 2012, UNESCO inscribed the worship of the Hung Kings in Phu Tho on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. [This means that] the Vietnamese ancestors and the traditional devotion to them have become [known] and celebrated by people and states all over the world.

(Opening speech at the opening ceremony at the Hung Temple festival in 2013)

The preceding chapters have investigated the Hung Temple and the worship of the Hung Kings from a range of perspectives. I have shown how the Hung Temple came to occupy a particular place in the imagination of the nation and examined what the restrictions and opportunities this conceptualisation means for the people who reside at the site. This has involved tracing the history of the Hung Temple and the worship of the Hung Kings. I have also explored the devotional practice of local people and those who become committed followers of the Hung Kings. The Hung Temple and the worship of the Hung Kings has become the centre of a matrix of relationships between individuals, the region and the nation. As a result, the Temple emerges as the site of a unique complex social entity.

This chapter shows how the multiple elements of this entity interact. My analysis focuses on the anniversary of the national ancestors, the so-called Hung Temple festival. On the one hand, I focus on the performance aspect of the festival to see how it creates a stage for all the actors. On the other hand, I highlight the diversity of these actors. The actors include groups of visitors, villagers and state representatives who all attend the festival but do so for different purposes, engaging in different activities and experiences. I show how these practices come together to achieve a certain degree of communality, for which I use the term *communitas* (Turner 1969). I also discuss to what extent the differing values, experiences, meanings and contentious practices of the participants work against producing a sense of *communitas*.

### **Performance, *communitas* and contentious practice**

Culture is created from time to time, but it is performed all the time. Once it is created, constant performance keeps the culture alive. Doing culture is a performance whether it is the industrial or business processes we do in work hours, or ritual, or preparing a meal (Bohannon, cited in Palmer & Jankowiak 1996, p. 225).

Performance is an important term in many anthropological works (Beeman 1993; Kapferer 1986; MacAloon 1984b; Rogers 1998).<sup>52</sup> Performance can refer to both 'public, highly conventionalised, authentic, spectacular, theatrical, or ritualised events' (Palmer & Jankowiak 1996, p. 225) and 'cultural behaviour at any level, including mundane everyday events' (ibid.). Schechner, for example, sees that 'there is a unifiable realm of performance that included ritual, theatre, dance, music, sport, play, social drama, and various popular entertainments' (1988, p. 257). Victor Turner in his classic work, *The anthropology of performance*, provides a broad definition in which performance is seen as the 'basic stuff of social life' (1988, p. 81). He sees performance as including such mundane communicative phenomena as 'speech behaviour' and 'the presentation of self in everyday life' as well as 'state drama or social drama' or as an essential element of 'the human process' (ibid.).

Performance as such includes the dimension of expression. In his research in the south of India, Singer approaches performances as 'modes of communication'. These 'cultural media[s]' include not only spoken language, but also 'song, dance, acting out, and graphic and plastic arts—combined in many ways to express and communicate the content of Indian culture' (1972, pp. 76-77). Expression in performance reflects a diversity of things selected—inclusions and exclusions. Davis, in her study of parade in Philadelphia, sees it as defining 'who can be a social actor and what subjects and ideas are available for communication and consideration'; hence the images are selected and the way it is performed reflect the message communicated and propose social relations (Davis 1986, p. 16).

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<sup>52</sup> For a detail literature of studies of theatre and spectacle performances, see Beeman (1993).

The process of producing expression cannot be kept separate from experience. As Davis explains, the defining images of performers' choice 'in turn shape the actions and alternatives people can imagine and propose' (1986, p. 6). Palmer and Jankowiak (1996) see the notion of imagery to explain the role of experience in relation to expression. When we observe performances, 'we experience them as mental imagery' and when we self-consciously monitor our own performances, 'we re-experience the imagery that we think they project to audiences' (ibid., p. 226).

Performers collaborate in providing expressions for a particular experience; it is a co-constructed practice (Santiago-Irizarry 2015). Palmer and Jankowiak see that performance constructs a bond among performers (1996). The bond gives them the feeling of belonging to one group, which is the sense of communality. It is 'collective effervescence' in Durkheim's sense (1915). Also, when this feeling is expressed in performance and perceived by the audience, then it produces another feeling called *communitas*.

The term *communitas* was used significantly by anthropologist Victor Turner. Following on from the work of French folklorist van Gennep on rites of passage (1960), Turner noted that during the ritual performance, the ritual subjects are all treated equally. This deprives them of all distinguishing characteristics of social structure, thus constituting 'a community or comity of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions' (Turner 1967, p. 100). During a period of seclusion, the ritual subjects are 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1987), in a close-knit community in which they are treated as equals. The process creates a generic bond and a sentiment of connection between them. An example Turner gave later was the temporary relationship arising between pilgrims, as they share a feeling of comradeship while engaging in a pilgrimage (1988, pp. 15, 44). He called this state of being, *communitas*.

*Communitas* is at the centre of Turner's theoretical framework in his study of performance. He differentiated between ideological, normative and existential

*communitas* (Turner 1974, pp. 79-81).<sup>53</sup> This concept has been influential in shaping the work of later scholars in the area of pilgrimage, ritual and other performative genres (Di Giovine 2011; MacAloon 1984b). In his later work, Turner applied this concept in the study of 'performative genres'. Also, the terms liminality and *communitas* have been used as significant tools to analyse festivity, carnival, drama, and performance (MacAloon 1984b). Davis (1984) showed existential *communitas* among participants in a festive form called 'charivari' in Geneva. MacAloon (1984a) studied the Olympic Games from the approach of liminality and spectacle. He said:

Olympism is a master example of what Victor Turner calls ideological *communitas*, a claim and a plea for 'seeing through and behind' the political, racial, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries that divide humans from one another, not by erasing them from the consciousness of the actors, but by demonstrating a deeper commonality that undergirds the normative order and makes it possible (pp. 266-67).

Holmes-Rodman (2004) studied pilgrims' reflexive experiences in a pilgrimage to El Santuario de Chimayo in northern Mexico. She revealed the feeling of liminality among female pilgrims, which generated *communitas*. This happened as the women in her group of pilgrims tended each other's blisters, sang together on the road and comforted one another in their exhaustion. Studying a Singapore National Day parade, Kong and Yeoh see this very large performance as a spectacle of national identity which gives its participants, and its audience, a sense of belonging and national pride (Kong & Yeoh 1997). More recently, Plancke (2014) asserts that a Congolese song-dance performance creates a 'sense of community'. The dances are essentially 'collective events'; for instance, they can only be organised once the performers all agreed to organise it (p. 656), and so construct the celebration of a shared joy, or a feeling of *communitas* among musicians, dancers, singers and people who participate.

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<sup>53</sup>Turner (1974) distinguished three types of *communitas* in society: (1) existential or spontaneous *communitas*, which is free from all structural demands and is fully spontaneous and immediate; (2) normative *communitas*, which is organised into a social system; and (3) ideological *communitas*, which refers to utopian models of societies based on existential *communitas* and is also situated within the structural realm.

Later studies of pilgrimage and ritual have critiqued Turner's theory of *communitas*. Studying pilgrimage in China, Sangren, argues that pilgrims do not escape structure or transcend society. Instead, by reproducing salient 'collective representations' through pilgrimage, they dialectically reproduce society (1987, p. 129). Likewise, British anthropologists Eade and Sallnow argue that each specific pilgrimage has its particular social context and its 'historically and culturally specific behaviours and meaning' (1991, pp. 3, 5).

These critics represent another approach to performance, holding that within performance there is the potential for contestation. Turner later sees performance as conflicts (1988). Palmer and Jankowiak also see that imagery can be the source of contention for both performers and audience alike. They explain how performers or audience members 'challenge and contest images projected in the performances of others as being untrue, unauthorised, hostile, destabilising, or otherwise inappropriate' (1996, p. 245). Indicative of this, Kong and Yeoh note that in the Singapore National Day parade there are 'alternative readings and resistances' and that there is a certain degree of 'resentment and objection' (1997, p. 235). Or again, Eade and Sallnow (1991) assert that pilgrimages must be viewed as arenas for the conjunction of competing discourses. Eade, in a study about pilgrimage at Lourdes in France, provides a concrete, micro-sociological example of the manner in which pilgrims are, to a limited extent, able to wield their own power to pursue ritual practices in defiance of the wishes of shrine officials, in this case the hospitallers who supervise the bathing of pilgrims (1991).

Following Eade and Sallnow, Coleman and Elsner (1995) maintain that pilgrimage holds the potential for both *communitas* and contestation. As Coleman shows, one of the main sources of criticism of *communitas*, is 'that it failed to take account of the mundane conflicts inherent in pilgrimage' (2002, p. 357). Di Giovine (2011) also sees both *communitas* and contestation in studies of tourism. Using Bourdieu's notion of field (1993), he suggests a 'field of touristic production'. Stakeholders in this field can be groups of site managers, tourists,

tour sponsors or tour guides, but each group has a stake in its production. Their actions are relational. He explains:

Just as these groups often create competing discourses and practices, they may also align with one another when cohesiveness is in their best interest, becoming 'adversaries in collusion' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 79). Perceiving the touristic structure as a field of production therefore can highlight areas in which contestation structurally emerges, as well as present opportunity to foster normative *communitas*. And sometimes there may even occur those events in which groups are brought together in spontaneous, existential *communitas* (Di Giovine 2011, p. 257).

Apart from *communitas*, I propose to add another point of focus, which is contentious practice. By contentious practice I refer to practices that are likely to cause disagreement between actors. This is important to acknowledge because the participants in ritual and festivals often maintain existing social power relations and uphold pre-existing hierarchies. Those that recognise this might struggle among themselves, both implicitly and explicitly. The notion of contentious practice pays attention to these inner and outer manifestations of struggle. As evidence of this, Holland and Lave (2001, 2009) see contentious practice manifesting across long term political-economic struggles while also mediating intimate identities. As they say, it is through practice that history is brought to the present moment, through both intimate, embodied subjectivities and institutionalised and collective activities. All of these domains can be contentious.

As I will show in this chapter, if *communitas* is more likely to be the intensions of the dominant festival organisers, contentious practices can be observed at many levels, in many ways at this national event. Contentious practices can feed into anti-structure moments of *communitas*. Contentious practices are discovered from activities 'behind the scene', or symbolically through structured events.

In this chapter, I adopt notions of *communitas* and contentious practices and the theory of performance to analyse Hung Temple festival's performances, such as ritual, pilgrimage, competition, and spectacle. I will explore how the state tries to create *communitas* through collective practices and how these efforts are

accommodated to some extent while also subverted through what we might call contentious practices. I do this chronologically from the beginning to the end of the Hung Kings death anniversary held in 2013. Before unpacking the event's details, I will provide a quick overview of the anniversary, its significance in the state's discourses, the festival agenda and its participants. After introducing the festival agenda, I will focus on the opening ceremony and the closing ritual, which represent two typical arenas of festival activity. I argue that such performances help us understand how contentious practice manifests at collective events. I do this by exploring the inclusion and exclusion participation of the folk performers, and the marginalisation of a small religious following that was present at the festival.

### **The anniversary festival: agenda and participants**

The 'Hung Temple festival', as the Phu Tho people call it, or the 'Hung Kings death anniversary' (*Giỗ tổ Hùng Vương*), as identified in the official documents of the state, is a commemoration of the Hung Kings that is held at the Temple. Since the early part of the twentieth century, the tenth day of the third lunar month has been the ritual day at the Hung Temple.<sup>54</sup> In 1946, the modern state government of Vietnam recognised it as the Hung Kings' anniversary day and in 2007 made it an official national holiday.

With the occasion becoming a national event, the party-state has produced a political discourse concerning the Hung Kings' anniversary. The anniversary festival is designed to: 1) promote the national cultural tradition and values; 2) enhance patriotism; and 3) create a joyful event in which people can participate and thus contribute to the unity of Vietnam.

The above mentioned purposes reflect the political aspects of the festival. Schechner, in his writing about performance, pointed out that no expressions are ideologically or politically neutral (1986). In a brief discussion of the Hung Kings

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<sup>54</sup> In 1917 the Nguyen Dynasty and the French Colonial Government approved the tenth day of the third lunar month to be the Hung Temple festival day. On this day, the provincial political authorities conduct the ritual to the Hung Kings; just one day before the Hy Cuong village ritual, which is on the eleventh of that month.

in an article that focuses on the promotion of nationalism in numerous Vietnamese festivals, Saleminck notes that the Hung Kings' festival 'concerns a revival, a magnification, and a substantive renewal of an existing ritual for a new, national audience' (2008, p. 278). As he argues, the Hung Kings' anniversary is expected to contribute to the construction of a national identity and to the idea that the present political regime is the legitimate guardian of that identity (ibid.). Similarly, Roszko (2010) argues that the state's sponsorship of the commemoration of historical figures, such as the soldiers who died in the fight for the border islands like Hoang Sa and Truong Sa, promotes a message of national identity and sovereignty.

This chapter looks at the Hung Temple festival as a public event set in a particular time and place, with the participation of the state, organisations and individuals, hence a collective practice involving a wide variety of performances. On one hand, my research questions the message being projected through the festival massive performances and, on the other hand, the diversity of participants and their contentious practices.

### ***The festival agenda***

Each year, in preparation for the Hung Temple festival, an organising team is established at the start of that year. In 2013, the organising group comprised provincial leaders from Phu Tho and eight other provinces to plan for the event. The organising group works for a long time, carefully planning to help ensure that the aims of the festival are realised; it uses an enormous amount of human and financial resources from the Phu Tho province. At that time the province takes on the role of the 'elder brother' of the whole nation<sup>55</sup> by welcoming people from all over the country and by encouraging the celebration of national identity.

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<sup>55</sup> Here the notion that Vietnamese people would think of the province as the 'elder brother' is consistent with villages around the Hung Mountain being described in the legend of the Hung Kings as 'the elder sons', who have responsibility to take care of the ancestors' tombs and temples (see Chapter 1). It is also consistent with the Vietnamese patriarchal tradition, that the elder son in the family shoulders the task of maintaining the family's tradition.



Although there is one day designated for the national anniversary ritual at Hung Temple festival, the activities occur over a number of days. The anniversary in 2013 was held during one week in April (from the fourth to the tenth day of the third lunar month) and activities such as rituals and other performances occurred on every day of the week in Viet Tri city as well as at the Hung Temple site. On the fifth day (of the lunar month), Viet Tri city held a ritual at the Hung Temple. The following day, a ritual was conducted at the Lac Long Quan Temple and another one at the Au Co Temple. On the ninth day, representatives from the eight provinces that had helped co-organise the event performed a ritual to the Hung Kings at the Top Temple. Finally, on the tenth day, a national ritual was conducted at the main shrines on Nghia Linh Mountain.

Performances also occurred in various locations at the Temple site on Nghia Linh Mountain, in surrounding villages and in nearby Viet Tri city. Some of these performances lasted for one or two days while others continued throughout the festival. There were art exhibitions and folk performances on display every day of the festival. Some remarkable cultural activities required hundreds or even thousands of participants. On the opening day, there was a folk culture parade throughout the city in the morning, which involved two thousands artists. In the evening of the same day, an opening ceremony was held at the Hung Temple Festival Centre, which is at a large square at the foot of Nghia Linh Mountain. This was followed by a fireworks display, which from their response, appeared to thrill the thousands of people who attended.

The performances also included provincial and national public competitions. For instance, people representing villages around the Hung Temple participated in a palanquin procession competition<sup>56</sup> at the Hung Temple Festival Centre and a boat race at the junction of the two rivers beside Viet Tri city. Meanwhile, competitors from many provinces in North Vietnam came for a cooking competition to prepare sticky rice square and round cakes. A Badminton

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<sup>56</sup> The competition requires people from villages surrounding the site of the Hung Temple to gather at the Hung Temple square. The ritual team from each village then performs a palanquin procession around the square. The winner is the village judged to have the best palanquin and the best procession.

National Cup contest was also held during the seven days of the festival. These events attracted numerous competitors and were highlighted as a part of the celebration activities.

The Hung Temple and Viet Tri city were well decorated a month before the festival. Festival flags, panels, posters, banners were hung at all the gates leading to the city, along the main roads, and in public areas such as at the stadium and government house, as well as within the Hung Temple site. Famous sayings about the Hung Temple were written on the street banners, such as: 'wherever one travels, one would not forget the ancestral anniversary on the tenth of the third lunar month' or a slogan about the city, such as: 'Viet Tri, the city of two heritages'.<sup>57</sup>

The broad-scale of activities that required a large number of participants had the potential to bring about a *communitas* experience for participants and audiences, as witnessed by MacAloon in his studies of the Olympics. He observed that 'the Games were designed to provide predictable *communitas* experiences on a broad scale' (1984b, pp. 266-267). Through the Hung Temple festival agenda, the event organisers aimed to use the co-participation of parts of the national population in the same activities at the same times and at the same places, to create a spectacle of the 'nation'.

### ***Visitors and their motivations***

The festival involves a large gathering of people with the numbers attending increasing each year, especially after the government decided in 2007 to give workers one day off with pay for the festival. Organisers estimated that 3 million people visited the Temple for the festival in 2010 and about 4 million people in 2013, while in 2015 the numbers for the festival grew to around 8 million (Hoang

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<sup>57</sup>Viet Tri city was proclaimed by its people as 'the city of two heritages' following special recognitions of local heritage by UNESCO. The first heritage recognised was that of *Xoan* Singing (*Hat Xoan*), a folk singing practice, which originated in Phu Tho province. UNESCO added *Xoan* singing to the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in the year 2011 (UNESCO 2011). Then, in 2012, UNESCO added the worship of the Hung Kings in Phu Tho to the same list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO 2012).

2015). In 2013, I saw masses of people going to the Hung Temple day and night during the festival, creating a non-stop flow of visitors.

Various groups of pilgrims attend the festival, such as family groups, work colleagues, neighbours, friends or mixtures of these. Groups go to the festival for many reasons and their activities are varied. Some may not have been before and want to be there for just one time. Others, like some groups of students, go for the entertainment at the festival and do not pay much attention to the rituals to the deities. Such people visit the Hung Temple festival for a short time and then they head off for secular activities, such as visiting family or seeing friends.



**Plate 25: The Ta family group at the Hung Temple festival in 2013**

Meanwhile, there are others who go on a regular basis because they regard a visit to the Temple as important or as a part of their perceived duty. Among the people I interviewed in 2013, some were members of religious associations, some were from other organisations and some were members of family groups. For a number of these people, their relationship to the Temple and the Hung Kings had been established for a long time and maintained through frequent pilgrimages to the Temple. In addition to undertaking ritual to the Kings, these people also saw the visit as a chance for their members to gather together and share in a group activity.

Among the interlocutors who explained the importance they attached to the festival, I met the Ta family, a group of around thirty people (see Plate 25). The head of the family told me that they travel from a province in the South to the Hung Temple every year for the festival ritual. They have maintained this activity for a number of years because family finances made it possible and because they saw it as a helpful activity to educate younger family members in an important family value, that of respect for national and family ancestors.

At the festival I met some groups who have different devotional practices, such as Buddhists, people who practise the Mother Goddess religion, and members of some new religious movements (the latter coming under close surveillance from the festival security team). One of these new groups called themselves the Dragon and Fairy Cult (*Đạo Rồng Tiên*). They brought with them statues of an elephant and a horse, as well as images of the Dragon King and the Fairy, Ho Chi Minh and the Buddha. Mrs Binh, their group leader and founder, explained to me about their beliefs and practices. She said that they worshipped the Dragon King and the Fairy as ancestors; they also worshipped historical national heroes, and they followed the lessons of Buddhism. The items they brought for this performance at the Hung Temple square were typical of those seen in festivals in Viet villages (such as statues of an elephant and a horse); some symbolised their venerated figures (for example, Ho Chi Minh and Buddha). They performed a series of rituals with dancing and singing at the square at Hung Temple Festival Centre, which attracted a large circle of observers (see Plate 26). They had their members carefully film their activities. Mrs Binh told me that she had sent a letter to the festival organisers one month beforehand to ask permission to perform ritual at the Hung Temple festival. She said that the organisers replied to her, confirming that she and her group could visit the Temple and perform at the square but not at the Top Temple. However, they still could bring their offerings to the Temples as other pilgrims do.

Their performance, I observed, included two parts; one part was an artistic performance about Vietnamese national history and the other was the reading of a ritual speech to the Hung Kings. These parts imitated components of the

official celebration of the national anniversary. It was, their founder explained, to introduce people to the way cult members perceive the national history and identity, and to the values of their devotional practices.



**Plate 26: Members of the Dragon and Fairy Cult group perform at the Hung Temple festival in 2013**

While I took a photo of the group and talked with their founder, a man came up to me and said that this group was ‘not an official religion recognised by the government’ and that I should not put a photo of them in the media. (This man, I knew later when seeing him talking to the head of the religious group, was a plain clothes policeman. He thought I was a journalist and was taking photos for the news). As I noticed later, television programs about the festival did not mention the Dragon and Fairy Cult group although the group occupied the square of Hung Temple Festival Centre for a number of hours on the anniversary day and their performance attracted a large number of curious spectators.

Also, the Phu Tho television station reported the views of people going to the festival but highlighted comments from those who felt that they were undertaking a pilgrimage to the ancestral Temple along with other members of the nation. There were several stories about those who had visited the festival.

For example, a woman said that she was happy to see that many people were travelling to the Temple and making the tribute to the Temple, just like her (Bản tin tối 2013b). The voices of different people sharing the same experience at the festival were displayed in a coherent way so that the reporter could conclude that ‘the festival is the time for Vietnamese from all over the country to make pilgrimages to the original land of Phu Tho to commemorate their national ancestors’ (ibid.).

The festival space was created by people’s engagement with activities, time and place. While the festival had the potential to produce collectively shared experience among participants, such as in the interpretation constructed by the television reporter, the festival also gave the impression of being a place where there were very large numbers of encounters between individuals. As Taylor observed in the festival of The Lady of the Realm’s Temple in Chau Doc, a southern province of Vietnam:

Among the most prominent experiential dimensions of festival are the dynamics of being in a crowd, the constant provisional nature of association, and the ever-present potential for the forging of new relationships’ (2004, p. 179).

My focus turns now to the performers of the festival program, the majority of whom came from the villages around the Temple site and I consider some of what was included and excluded through the festival program.

### **The village performers: practices of inclusion and exclusion**

Each year, the festival highlights a specific theme and organises its performances around that theme. This theme is celebrated in different ways through festival activities. In 2012, the theme was: ‘The pilgrimage to the origin’ (Đền Hùng 2012b). In 2013, the theme was: ‘Phu Tho, the sacred ancestral land’. While the themes may change, there are a core set of values that are stressed repeatedly every year, highlighting the significance of traditional culture. In 2013, the message frequently stressed in the public media and in the speeches of the organisers was that the people are the bearers and the keepers of the Phu Tho cultural heritage in particular, and of the Vietnamese in general.

The Hung Temple festival in 2013 was particularly significant because in 2012 UNESCO had added the worship of the Hung Kings in Phu Tho to the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO 2012). This had followed the addition by UNESCO, in 2011, of *Xoan* singing to the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (UNESCO 2011). *Xoan* singing and the worship of the Hung Kings are both folk traditions, which have been practised by Phu Tho people for generations. *Xoan* singing has long been integrated into the worship of the Hung Kings at some villages, used as performance to the deities in village communal houses and in village festivals. So in 2013, folk artists and their performances were made the central focus of the Hung Kings anniversary festival.

For instance, 2013 was the first time that a street folk art parade took place in Viet Tri city. Its main idea was to create a spectacle of Phu Tho provincial folk arts to highlight the image of a province that was rich in culture, which had been maintained throughout a long history. The number of non-professional performers and competitors who participated in the event that year was the highest ever. Of the Phu Tho province artists who participated in the street parade, hundreds of these also participated in other activities throughout the festival, such as in the opening ceremony.

The artists, who participated in the street parade, were not professionals but farmers, small traders, students or retirees. Back in their own village, they participated in the communal festival either by conducting the ritual to the Kings or by performing traditional songs or competing in games. A representative of the provincial Department of Culture gave me the program sheet and from it I saw that the 2000 artists involved were from thirteen districts of the Phu Tho province. They had been chosen from hundreds of village ritual teams, singing clubs, or boat racing teams. Having been selected to participate in the event a month beforehand, they had practised throughout the month for the street

parade. A young Muong participant<sup>58</sup>, who was a member of the Yen Lap district team, told me that he and his team were driven there in the morning by the local administration and would be driven back right after the parade, even without visiting the Hung Temple. Many other people told me that they would stay in the afternoon to visit the Hung Temple because this was a rare chance for them to do so. When I asked them out of curiosity whether they would go to the evening celebrations at the Temple, most of them said they were unable to do so because they were not given an entry card due to a limit on numbers. The organising group issues an entry card for only certain categories of participants and the numbers in each group are limited. As a researcher, I myself had managed to secure such an entry card only after going through a drawn out administrative process several weeks before the festival.



**Plate 27: The *Tro Tram* performance in the Tu Xa village festival 2013 (left) and the *Xoan* singing performance on a Viet Tri city street during the Hung Temple festival in 2013 (right)**

I went to the opening ceremony on the evening of the first day of the festival. On the way to the stage, I recognised a group of actors sitting on the side of the stage, as the performers at the festival of Tu Xa village (see Plate 27), which I had previously attended. At that time, I had talked with them about their village, their festival and their performance. One of my interlocutors on that occasions—the music player of the group—recognised me and waved to me. He looked a bit tired and drunk; I assumed it was the result of a hard afternoon practising on

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<sup>58</sup> The Muong people are an ethnic minority group in Phu Tho province. They live in mostly hilly or mountainous areas, distant from Viet Tri. They are considered to have a close relationship with the Viet people, sharing the same ancient language and culture.



stage and a dinner feast afterwards. I greeted him and he smiled proudly, saying: 'Look! I am the 'UNESCO man'. I performed my village's *Tro Tram*<sup>59</sup>, which is very traditional, very Vietnamese'. The year before, he and his team had been invited to Hanoi to perform, at an event sponsored by UNESCO, for delegations of ambassadors from all over the world, to help them understand the worship of the Hung Kings. 'You hear', he raised his voice and sang this familiar song in the *Tro Tram*:

Oh oh, the old year has gone; the New Year comes, I play a song for you,  
hey!/ Boys, keep studying well/ Girls, maintain your weaving skills/ Now,  
the work in the field is finished, let's go to the festival! Let's enjoy the  
spring!/ Boys of twenty years of age, girls of eighteen, you are in the spring  
of your life/ Let's go out hand in hand.

The music player turned to his performing partner sitting alongside him and continued his song: 'Now let me ask you girl! What is moving in my pants?' His partner, a male actor dressed as a female character, sang in response, 'You asked, and then let me answer. In your pants the moving thing is the pestle'.<sup>60</sup> The music player turned around to the performer in the female role and sang with a teasing tone, 'Who makes your breast go out, your bum stick out and your back lower, hey?' We all laughed cheerfully at the references to sex and fertility in the song, which is also the overall message of *Tro Tram* ritual and performance. Then we quickly said goodbye as the whole team was being called to prepare for the ceremony that I was about to observe.

### ***Performing the national identity***

From a position at the highest point at the back of the square at the Hung Temple Festival Centre, I looked straight down onto the stage and could see the many people who came for the opening ceremony. The national leaders, guests from other countries, as well as those from Hanoi and other provinces, sat in the

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<sup>59</sup> The *Tro Tram* performance is one of many typical festival performances in the villages in Phu Tho province. The main aim of this performance is to celebrate fertility by creating humorous sexual interpretations of human activities such as teaching, farming, fishing, weaving, and trade.

<sup>60</sup> The use of the word 'pestle' (rather than 'penis') was intentional. It refers to a wooden tool used with a mortar to grind rice. The pestle and the mortar are used as symbols referring to fertility in many Vietnamese cultural contexts.

front. Behind them were people from the seven villages around the Hung Temple, sitting in groups. There would have been more than three thousand people in the audience.

The stage was lit up and when the music was turned on a line of ritual delegates came towards the centre of the stage and performed as if they were conducting the ritual to the Hung Kings at the deities' altar. As I sat, a song began that spoke of pilgrimage and ritual at the Hung Temple and how it encapsulated all the dreams of the Vietnamese. After the song was over the Master of Ceremonies (MC) said that this ceremony was a special event that was being attended by many leading figures in the party, the state and the government, as well as by a representative from the UNESCO office in Vietnam, along with guests from many other countries. Sitting around me were people from Viet Tri city and the towns and villages of Phu Tho province. They showed their enthusiasm by listening to the MC's introduction and pointing out to each other who was who in the first line of chairs in the audience. For many of these local people, this was probably their first and only chance of seeing their national leaders in person and nearby.

In part one of the ceremony there were speeches about the worship of the Hung Kings in Phu Tho and the significance of that worship. The UNESCO representative delivered a World Heritage certificate to the president of Phu Tho and stressed that she was pleased to know that the intergovernmental committee of UNESCO had decided that the Hung Kings' worship ritual satisfied the criteria for inclusion in the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. She shared her experience of the festival:

We converged today to pay homage to the Hung Kings...At the festival we enjoyed the sounds of the bronze drum, the grinding of rice performance, the burning of incense, the procession to the Temple and the beautiful *Xoan* singing. It has been an exciting and meaningful experience.

In response, the Minister of Culture spoke about the plan that had been devised to incorporate government organisations at all administrative levels and the local communities in preserving and promoting worship of the Hung Kings. After him, the President of Vietnam reconfirmed the significance of valuing the national

devotion to the Hung Kings. The President encouraged the Vietnamese people to be proud of themselves, saying that they had made a contribution to a beautiful practice that reflects an important aspect of the cultural diversity of humanity. He said:

This celebration is a reminder of how important solidarity and unity is for this country. It is also an important occasion to again recognise our principle value of being diverse but united in culture.

The audience clapped their hands after the speech and a short fireworks display followed to mark the closing of the first part of the ceremony. I could hear cheerful sounds from the audience, especially the villagers. From the light of the stage and the fireworks, I saw faces smiling with pride. In that moment, as I watched people celebrate, one could almost sense the emerging of *communitas*.

The MC introduced the celebrations that would follow telling the audience that more than 1300 performers would take part, most being Phu Tho people. The whole performance was named, 'The sacred origin, the homeland of the Hung Kings'. The long performance was broken into three sections: re-enacting the legend of the origin of the Vietnamese, summarising the history of Vietnam and praising Phu Tho as the sacred landscape. It portrayed people maintaining their rich culture through their everyday lives.



Plate 28: The opening performance at the Hung Temple festival of 2013

All performers walked around the stage and each one performed, accompanied by music and a commentary provided by the festival organisers. I saw the team of *Tro Tram* performers on the stage. They walked in behind the *Xoan* singers, around the middle of the performance (see Plate 28). The music was accompanied by a voice introducing Phu Tho land and its people. As I watched the *Tro Tram* performance at the centre of the stage, I heard the commentator saying:

The Vietnamese bring with them their devotion everywhere they go. They bring with them a handful of soil from the Hung King's tomb, a cup of water from the princess's temple, a root of the incense from their ancestor's altar...This symbolises the tradition of the people's unity to build and protect the nation. They have maintained their values for themselves and for others. [These values are] truth, goodness, and beauty. They emphasise tolerance and selflessness; seriousness, generosity, sincerity, diligence and kindness; [they also emphasise] talent and virtue. These values become our unchangeable tradition, embedded in the lifestyle of the villages where the Hung Kings are worshipped.

I saw the UNESCO man playing his musical instrument, dancing around the actor in the female role and singing with a flirtatious expression on his face. I could not hear him because the commentary was loud, but I could imagine his words: 'Who makes your breast go out, your bum stick out and your back lower, hey?' I saw the person in the role of a teacher turn his angry face toward his five students while the students laughed. I could imagine they were laughing at their teacher and his teaching.

At the same time, there were many other performances taking place on the stage. At the back of the stage, a large LED sign board was playing a video clip with scenes of the Phu Tho hills. The images gave flashes of green tea, of people making rice cakes, and of the president of Phu Tho province performing ritual at the Hung Temple. The audience looked interested in the performance. The villagers were pointing as they saw people from their village. Meanwhile, the foreign guests seemed to be enjoying the colourful clothes and unfamiliar village performances.

The combination of the actors' performances, the screen displays and the narration created a general message for the audience. This message was that Phu Tho has a long history and its people have maintained their social values, while at the same time practising their devotion to the Hung Kings. To explore how this message was generated through different elements of the performance, I compare the actions of the *Tro Tram* performers with the narration that played over their performance.

While the narrator talked about the worship of the Hung Kings, the musician of the *Tro Tram* continued to flirt with the person playing the female role. While the narrator talked about Confucian values as those maintained by the Viet people throughout history, the students of the *Tro Tram* were laughing at the lessons by their teacher, which normally would have incorporated Confucian values. In general, while the narration for the performance was to apprise the audience of the social values in commemorating their ancestors, the *Tro Tram* performance was to celebrate the fertility of nature and people in the spring. The narration was couched in a serious emotional tone, while the *Tro Tram* performance was in a humorous one.

The *Tro Tram* performance was a typical example of the selective exclusion of actions and messages. The audience could see the *Tro Tram* performance, but the content of their actions was downplayed and overlooked. Their voices were not heard, not because the stage was too big or that there was no microphone, but because the music and the narrator was the dominant voice on display; the man's song was not supposed to be heard. The values celebrated in the *Tro Tram* performance were not consistent with those values to be officially presented in the festival. The organisers had constructed a spectacle in which people and their traditional performances were used to create new meanings out of pre-existing meanings.

My fieldwork here, supports the observation by Saleminck (2007) about the Hue Festival in Vietnam. He considers the distinction between form and symbolic content of ritual and argues that by emphasising cultural form and de-

emphasising symbolic content, the state-authorized organisers have successfully presented an invented representation of national identity by claiming continuity of 'authentic traditional' folk culture. The *Tro Tram* story is an example of what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), where the power of the dominant group (which were the festival organisers as representatives of the state's authority) allowed them to impose their ideology upon the dominated group (in this case, the village performers) without the symbolic violence being recognised or resisted.

### **The national ritual delegation and the structuring of power relations**

The national ritual is the most important part of the Hung Temple festival and it usually provides its grand finale. Because its meaning is significant, it is always filmed for television programs by the provincial and national media. In brief, the national ritual includes a large parade over a long procession route from the bottom of Hung Mountain to its Top Temple, followed by rituals at the Top Temple, at the Hung Kings' tomb and at a stone bas-relief of Ho Chi Minh with Vietnamese soldiers.

The participants in the delegation, the order of each group of members and their actions during the ritual are all strictly designed by the organising team and approved by the Minister of Culture. The structure of the ritual has been maintained after the Ministry of Culture formalised it in 2000 and required that it be followed in every annual national ritual. The prescription included details of the order of different groups, which was followed in 2013. Each group forming part of the delegation had significant symbolic meanings attached.

At the beginning of the procession were eight soldiers; the first two held a national flag and a festival flag, while the following soldiers held wreaths, a basket of flowers and a rifle. A group of young women holding bunches of flowers and trays of offerings followed these soldiers. The soldiers, in the uniform of the modern army, were typical symbols of the modern Vietnamese

nation-state and the two flags were symbols of two values highlighted in the festival event: the nation-state and 'traditional culture'.

The second group in the procession was a hundred young men. Each was dressed in skin-coloured clothes decorated by a sash with turbans decorated with bird feathers on their heads. In their hands each carried a festival flag tied to a long stick. They symbolised the hundred sons of the Mother Au Co and Father Lac Long Quan in the legend of the birth of the Viet people and the Kingdom Van Lang. This group was added to the delegation in 2000, to convey the message that all Vietnamese are brothers with the same parents.

The third group included all the elements of a village ritual team. First, there were women and men in the traditional dress of the northern villages, holding traditional musical instruments in their hands. Then came eight men dressed in the uniform of the Kings' soldiers who held traditional weapons.<sup>61</sup> After them was the palanquin team, including eight men carrying a palanquin together with their team leader. The palanquin represented all the villages which participated in the national ritual. This palanquin was from the Hy Cuong village and on it, Hy Cuong people had placed their separate offerings for the Hung Kings. The last element was that of the village ritual masters. They were twelve old men from Hy Cuong village commune, all of them dressed in the blue clothes worn for ritual purposes. All elements of the third group were a familiar part of traditional village rituals and this group was maintained in the national delegation as a symbol of tradition, thus presenting the national ritual as though it was a practice rooted in the history of the nation. In describing the anniversary ritual, I will refer to this group as 'the village ritual team'.

Lastly came the biggest part of the delegation, the people who were representatives of government, state organisations, the political party, national associations and provincial governments. Members of this section might vary each year and could number up to a thousand people. They all needed to wear

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<sup>61</sup> The eight types of weapons, carried here by the Kings' soldiers are known as *Bát bảo* or *chấp kích*. These weapons are often displayed inside the temples of the Viet people. In a village festival, the weapons are carried in the procession, before the palanquin with gifts for the deities.

formal clothes, but there was no specific requirement of colour or style. The leading five figures included the ritual master (usually the Phu Tho provincial president), a representative of the government, a representative of the Ministry of Culture, a representative of the armed forces, and the head of the Vietnam Fatherland Front (*Mặt trận Tổ Quốc Việt Nam*) (VFF) (Đền Hùng 2013). The VFF is described by the government as 'the political base of people's power'. It is intended to have a significant role in society, promoting 'national solidarity' and 'unity of mind in political and spiritual matters' (Mặt trận 2008). The president of VFF therefore held a compulsory position in the national delegation for the Hung Kings' death anniversary ritual. Having these five at the front of this part of the delegation, was strictly maintained through the years, because of the significance of each position.

During the whole process of the ritual, this delegation was well protected and separated from ordinary visitors. On the night before the anniversary day the police force and the army evacuated all people from the Mountain, except those who had tasks to do. Then, a line of police encircled the boundary to prevent people going up to the protected area. The cleared area included part of the square at the Hung Temple Festival Centre, which was near the main gate to the Hung Temple. It also included the Top and Water Well Temples, as well as the paths leading up and down to them. The cordoned off area also contained the stone bas-relief commemorating Ho Chi Minh and the soldiers. Maintaining this protected area required the deployment of hundreds of police.

On the morning of the national ritual, I arrived at the site at about 6 am. Thousands of people had gathered around the Hung Temple Festival Centre square, but outside the restricted area. In the middle of the square, a group of villagers in traditional clothes, with flags, music instruments and a palanquin had gathered in a single file to prepare for the ritual. Journalists and photographers gathered near the front of the square, close to the main gate to the Temple, preparing their cameras or walking along to find a good position from which to film. Those in the crowd sat, stood, looked around, pointed or chatted with each other. Everyone was waiting patiently. About an hour later, a long line of slowly



moving cars arrived at the Hung Temple Festival Centre. People in the cars got out and walked into the protected area. A group of soldiers and women in long dresses (*áo dài*) went to the front of the line while hundreds of delegates moved to the back of the line. After ten minutes, a fully ordered line of people had been formed, ready for the ritual. At that time, the ritual music was turned on and the line of people started to walk forward to the main gate of the Temple as journalists and media camera operators started to capture the sight. People standing beyond the police line were observing the parade and many took out their phones or cameras to record the scene. The square of Hung Temple Festival Centre became a stage and the walking delegation became the centre of attention (see Plate 29). Members of the delegation walked in time with the music, maintained their order and proceeded through the main gate of the Temple and up to the Top Temple at the peak of Nghia Linh Mountain.



**Plate 29: The procession of the national ritual at the Hung Kings death anniversary festival**

This 'religious spectacle' (Taylor 2008), full of images and symbols, was well captured and reproduced through the media. The long procession imitated the form of a 'traditional' village ritual with modifications by the state. It represented a sense of continuity of cultural customs which reassured the audience that what

they were seeing was an essential part of Vietnamese cultural identity. The ritual walking gave to people, who were in that ritual time and space, a sense of engagement, whether they were members of the delegation, or just standing beyond the police fence watching from the edge of the square. This was evident in the way all the people watching stood still and attended in silence. This moment realised Turner's 'existential *communitas*' (Turner 1988), which is free from all structural demands and is fully spontaneous and immediate. My observation here is comparable to what MacAloon observed at the Olympic Games. At the moment 'the Olympic flame was extinguished and the Olympic flag lowered and solemnly carried from the stadium...the assembled thousands and the space that they occupied were free to produce an extraordinary expression of spontaneous *communitas*' (1984a, p. 253).

The ritual delegation finally reached the Top Temple where another stage had been prepared at the Temple yard. The two soldiers holding the flags stood on each side of the temple gate throughout the whole time of the ritual there. The girls brought the flowers and their offerings into the Temple. The hundred 'sons' stood in a square-shaped line to mark a boundary within the Temple's yard, marking out the edges of the stage. The palanquin was set aside in the yard outside of the 'stage' and the village's offerings were taken into the Temple through the side door. The village ritual team stood on each side of the stage and created a space for the national delegation to step forward and occupy the whole main area of the stage. In the front line were the most senior leaders and the Phu Tho president, who wore the clothes of a ritual master. The journalists, police and ritual organisers stood around the yard, beyond the boundary of the stage from where they could film and take photographs. This organisation of people remained during the ritual at the Top Temple, even for the most important parts, which were conducted inside the secret room of the Temple by selected members of the national delegation.

The ritual began outside the Top Temple with a staff member burning incense and placing it in the incense bowl. In the role of ritual master, the provincial president went forward to read the ritual prayer (*chúc vãn*) (see Plate 30). Apart

from music playing in the background, there was silence and everyone stayed in the same position for the entire ten minutes of the prayer. Everyone seemed to listen. A gong and drum were sounded at breaks in the prayer to emphasise the rhythmic flow of the words.



**Plate 30: The Phu Tho province president reads the ritual prayer outside the Top Temple**

The ritual prayer at the National Ritual to the Hung Kings was appropriated from one found in village festivals. The reading of the ritual prayer by the ritual master is one of the most important ritual actions at such festivals. By reciting the prayer, the ‘community’, represented by the ritual master, is communicating with the deities. The ritual prayer used in the national ritual in 2013 was written by a national leader Professor Vu Khieu in 2010, in the Vietnamese modern language instead of the traditional Sino Nom<sup>62</sup>. This version then became the official document to be read at the Hung Kings’ anniversary national ritual. In summary, the prayer refers to the outstanding position of the Hung Kings as the founders of the nation and why the Vietnamese people organise the national

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<sup>62</sup> The traditional prayer was written in Sino Nom, following a strict form. The Sino Nom prayers have distinct vocabulary, syntax and content which are difficult to understand for popular Vietnamese who use vernacular Vietnamese. The ritual prayer for Hung Temple festival was written based on the form of a Sino Nom ritual prayer, however using the vocabulary and syntax that are familiar with the modern Vietnamese. The content is also appropriated to be more like a speech.

ritual in order to pay tribute to them. The prayer goes on to say that the modern Vietnamese people, as well as the party, government and state, agree to protect and develop the country. The Kings, as the sacred deities, can give their powerful blessings to the whole nation. The content of the speech is illustrated in the following short extract:

Celebrate the present day, the bronze drums sound up, mountains and rivers  
join in

(When) the bronze drum sounds, heaven and earth are filled with the  
sacred air.

All people celebrate the anniversary of the death of the Hung Kings,  
The whole nation is happy on the ritual day....

How great were our national ancestors! They set up the country with  
countless blessings.

How brilliant was Uncle Ho who passed the lessons of our ancestors onto  
us.

We promise:

To make our country strong and wealthy,

To be friendly and live peacefully with people all over the world,

Gratefully! Gratefully! Gratefully!

After the prayer, the ritual master and four senior leaders from the national delegation went into the sanctum sanctorum room of the Temple to conduct the ritual at the Kings' altar. Other people in the group of national delegates then took turns to walk in and conduct prayers in the secret room. This ritual at the Top Temple was then followed by a ritual at the Hung Kings' tomb and another at the stone bas-relief of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese soldiers. The national ritual then concluded. The police fence was taken down and people quickly rushed up the mountain, bringing the Temple site back to its usual crowded state.

Anagnost (1994), in studying Chinese religion, uses the notion of the 'politics of ritual displacement' when talking about the appropriation of existing ritual in socialist countries. Ritual displacement refers to the action of replacing popular rituals conducted by people as part of their everyday life by new modes of ritual

constructed by the state, in which elements considered superstitious are erased and replaced by narratives attuned to the state's political ideology (ibid., p. 222). The change in the rituals to the Hung Kings, evident in the displacement of the village ritual team and the ritual prayer in the new national celebration, is an example of the state authorising certain public practices to legitimise its dominance in the social structure.

### **Summary of festival observations**

I have described the Hung Kings' anniversary festival as a very large celebratory performance of the Vietnamese state which clearly illustrated the rise in the popularity of the Hung Kings in contemporary Vietnam.

Considering the festival as a social space, we see practices arising out of different fields such as religion, cultural production and politics. Each field has its own fundamental beliefs and values but all of these practices happen within the festival time and space. Here, there is the opportunity for *communitas* to arise among participants and spectators at the anniversary ritual, but also the potential for tensions to arise between actors.

The goals intended by the state authority, namely solidarity among people, a common experience of being Vietnamese and an assurance of the power of the nation-state, were all achieved to a certain level. Through setting up a festival time and space, with a very large organised event, including rituals, competitions and performances, a *liminality* was produced where actors were together in a 'here and now'. There were moments of existential (or spontaneous) and normative *communitas*. The spectacle of the national ritual created sacred moments that allowed the audience to imagine that they were all somehow involved in the ritual. The ritual prayer read by the ritual master, listened to by thousands of people at the site and potentially millions of Vietnamese people in their homes, encouraged them to think about having a common 'community' through a shared practice. These emotions reveal 'a deeper commonality that undergirds the normative order' (MacAloon 1984a, p. 267), which is the ideological *communitas* of Vietnamese festivity.

Among the festival crowd some participants had different experiences. For example, the Ta family travelled from the South to visit the Temple to worship the national ancestors and to enhance family bonds. The village man singing on the big stage was himself the owner and bearer of a village festival practice that he shared with a large audience of fellow Vietnamese and foreign guests. From his perspective, the national ritual of worship to the Hung Kings elevated him from a villager to a meaningful actor on the world stage. Students who sought entertainment at the festival, or villagers who came to the street parade and watched the sporting competitions, also found satisfaction in visiting the festival. In their unique personal attachments to the place and the Hung Kings, all these people experienced an emotional sense of 'being Vietnamese', that is, of being citizens of their nation.

### ***Contentious practices at the anniversary festival of the Hung Kings***

In the anniversary festival, people found different ways to attach themselves to the places of celebration and the deities, using different practices which were meaningful to them. However, these personal meaning-making practices did not necessarily lead to a shared collective experience or a unique sense of identity. In fact, the data suggests that the idea that people at this festival have a harmonious and unique experience of national identity is just a myth. There are diverse meaning-making practices that are contentious, since they have potentialities for both implicit and explicit contestations in the festival practices. This is evident in my data in a number of ways.

First, the practices at the festival showed how the state has taken over control of the worship of the Hung Kings and how that control is being exerted and extended. The highly structured organisation of the ritual delegation shows how the state has intentionally adopted the people's traditional forms and values for its invented ritual. The order sets out which representatives are at which position and which traditional customs (in the view of the organisers) are to be maintained and practised. At the start of the ritual procession to the Top Temple, the villagers stood first at the Hung Temple Festival Centre square and before the

representatives of the state, reflecting the fact that the local people were the first practitioners of worship of the Hung Kings. However, the politicians from the national delegation came forward to take centre stage for the most important parts of the ritual at the Top Temple. This change of order, where national leaders occupy the key physical place on the stage and takeover of the recitation of the ritual prayer, clearly reflect action by the state to legitimise its authority, at the expense of that of the villagers.

Second, exclusions are found in the festival performances. The festival organisers deliberately used people, performance, place and time to impose their own meanings on the event. Meanwhile, they de-emphasised the unwanted values and meanings that have been traditionally embedded in the performance and performers. I have shown how the village ritual team, while physically present for the national ritual, was used as a form of decoration for the ritual delegation and an on-stage frame for the real actor in play—the state. The village performers are actually used as tools on the stage of the state performance; their appearance is marginalised and their role taken over by the others.

Following on from the above, my third point is that, while engagement with the festival may bring to some participants the feeling that they can improve their social standing, the social hierarchies are actually being reproduced. An example is that of the Muong artists who were invited to the city to perform in the great street parade but the organisers made transport arrangements which resulted in them actually leaving the city without being able to go to the Hung Temple. Another illustration came from the story of the UNESCO man from Tro Tram village, who believed that he was elevated to a new stance of recognition, but the commentary was organised to ensure that his singing words could not be heard. Consistent with Bourdieu's argument on social reproduction (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), the festival practices show how the dominant position of the powerful is preserved (*ibid.*, pp. 139-140). At the surface, this public event seems to create a sense of 'togetherness' regardless of class differences or social hierarchy. It is observed that ordinary people can be at the same place with their national leaders, who they usually only see on public media. It is also observed

that the national leaders join the old villagers in the procession and that they stand side by side with them to conduct the ritual. However, the positioning and actions of the leaders of the official delegation at the ritual shows that these main actors are the more powerful figures. Furthermore, the whole ritual area is well separated away and protected from ordinary people. This hierarchy is assumed and reproduced in the ways in which festival practices are interpreted. A further example is the way the media captured the festival activities. Its portrayal of the flow of pilgrims, the national ritual procession and the reading of the ritual prayer emphasised the role of the national leaders (Bản tin tối 2013b).

My fourth point is that, as the consequence of social reproduction, symbolic violence exists in festival practices and that there are at least implicit contestations and therefore, no real feeling of equality. Symbolic violence could be observed not only in the example of the *Tro Tram* performers, but also at other times throughout the festival. For instance, during the national ritual process at the Top Temple, when the President of Phu Tho province was reading the ritual prayer, the village ritual team stood aside on the stage, separate from the main actor. The president of the province, acting as the representative of the state, took over the symbolic power of the position of ritual master, thereby demonstrating the social power of the dominant group. The potential for contention is shown by the police having to erect a fence to prevent ordinary people coming up Hung Mountain during the national ritual. While this ritual was in process, ordinary people were not allowed to enter the protected area (see Plate 31 left). Once the fence was taken down and this boundary imposed by the dominant state organisation removed, people rushed up the mountain from all possible directions, jammed together, uncontrolled, without boundaries (see Plate 31 right). A further example of symbolic violence concerns the Dragon and Fairy Cult group whose practices were intentionally restricted by the police and the festival organisers, with permission for them to perform at the Top Temple refused.





**Plate 31: The main gate of the Hung Temple, showing the area kept clear of people before the national ritual (left) and the throngs of people approaching the gate after the police fence was removed (right) (Hung Temple festival in 2013)**

I have shown that people experience different meaningful practices in the anniversary festival. Their experiences bring feelings of achievement to the participants and their participation in the festival enhances the sense of agency for them. The villagers, for instance, still have a place in the national ritual where they can give their offerings to the deities (on their palanquin). The Dragon and Fairy Cult group was still able to perform their rituals at the Hung Temple Festival Centre and attract hundreds of people. In other words, while the structures of social hierarchy are reproduced through the festival activities, there is room for people to navigate those structures and satisfy their own purposes. The collective practice at the festival of the Hung Temple, therefore, does not refer to a collective identity or a unified experience. Rather, the Hung Kings' anniversary festival enables a variety of attachments and contentious practices.

## **Chapter 6      The rise of the Hung Temple: concluding observations**

The focus of this thesis has been the rise of the Hung Temple in contemporary Vietnam. It has shown how various historical and social forces come together in the actions of particular people to result in the rise of the Hung Temple. The investigation of these practices has contributed to a greater understanding of contemporary Vietnam and its people. In this concluding chapter, I will revisit the key discussions and conclusions of my thesis before considering the possibility of expanding the scope of inquiry by referring to some recent observations in a different context.

This thesis provided an ethnographic examination of the Temple complex and its associated social practices within a period of religious revival. It employed practice theory to offer a holistic yet critical discussion of the existing literature, which has paid little attention to the ongoing practices at the Hung Temple. The examination highlighted the influence of past histories, and especially the diversity of situated practices undertaken by various groups of actors, each with their own interests. Using practice theory as a guide, I focussed on the activities of people who frequent the Hung Temple. Each chapter has shown a particular aspect of the relationship that different social actors have with the Temple complex.

The introduction to the thesis explained how the Hung Temple went from being a temple to worship a regional leader to a temple dedicated to a dynasty of kings, regarded as founders of the kingdom of the Viet people. The feudal kings had rewritten the story of the Hong Bang clan into the history of the Viet people to make the Hung Kings the initial, quasi-mythical rulers of the Viet kingdom. The Temple continued to gain the attention of colonial scholars and governments as a symbol of the origin of the Vietnamese people. This usage was further developed in modern independent Vietnam.

I argued in Chapter 2 that the modern state has played a driving role in building the symbolism of the Hung Kings as the nation's founders. Influential state agents constructed the Hung Temple as a significant site of commemoration of the nation's origin and one that is used to facilitate the performances of nationalism. I have shown three ways that have been employed in state-led place-making practices at the Hung Temple: the construction of narrative topology, the visits of state delegations to the Temple and the writing of entries in visitor books.

Since *Doi Moi*, the Temple site has been extensively renovated; new sacred constructions have expanded the meaning of the site and modern instruments and technology have been employed to emphasise its identity as both a religious and national commemorative site. I contend that these changes construct the Hung Temple as a sacred site that enabled imaginations of Vietnamese identity and of Vietnamese nationhood.

State delegations visiting the Temple perform what the state wants to model for the nation's citizens. Their actions at the Temple prominently feature displays of reverence, prayer and the burning of incense to the Hung Kings. This performance of religiosity helps to acknowledge the veneration to the national ancestors as an enduring tradition. In addition, when delegates leave their written entries in the Temple visitor books, they express their various emotions of being at a site of national origin in the presence of the sacred Kings. Through practices, such as these rituals of veneration and written comments, the state praises the historical and moral value of people's devotional practice toward the deities. The state also constructs the Temple as a spiritual and cultural focal point for a new post-socialist national identity. The rise of the Hung Temple in Vietnam has been propelled by these top down political strategies.

For a period of half a century, the investment of the state in the Hung Temple has resulted in the development of a bureaucratic institution at the Temple that has affected the livelihood of thousands of people around the site. Chapter 3 looked in detail at this bureaucratic institution to argue that the bureaucratic

practices at the Temple were informed by the specificity of actors' social standing and their personal interests. Bureaucratic management, though institutionalised in association with state concepts, was affected by local politics. It also maintained some practices that reflect the significance of regionally important social relationships and familial networks. In the interplay between bureaucrats and non-bureaucrats alike, the scope of their exchanges was also affected by several spiritual, social and economic factors operating in, and around, the Temple. The examination of these everyday exchanges illustrated the diverse strategies employed by people to leverage the institutionalised system for their own gain.

In everyday practice, administrators, temple keepers and non-bureaucrats demonstrated their different understandings of bureaucracy. Administrators and those closely associated with bureaucracy tried to follow administrative practices but also acknowledged the influence of kinship networks and village ties in work placements and promotions. Their practices of policy implementation did not always comply with the administrative regulations as laid out by the state. Temple keepers, employed temporarily at the Temple, combined their administration responsibilities with feelings of social honour and spiritual obligation in their everyday interactions with temple staff and visitors at the Temple complex. They also maximised their work position to augment their income for themselves and their families. The non-bureaucrats, such as shop keepers, closely observed and discussed the ways in which people obtained contracts through kinship networks and social or financial ties rather than through official administrative processes. People could move out of the system. For example, Mr Tien made use of the Hung Temple forest to raise bees for a living.

The rise of the Hung Temple created more channels for people to connect with the Hung Kings and some have gradually taken advantage of this to cultivate a spiritual bond with the Kings as powerful deities. In Chapter 4, I investigated these religious practices through two selected life stories, those of Mrs Pham and Ms. Tri. I argued that the Hung Temple enabled practices of identity

formation for Hung King devotees. This identity formation, in turn, enabled new realms of agency and social positioning for the devotees.

Mrs Pham used to be influenced by the state's perception of the Hung Temple and the Hung Kings. In coping with work difficulties and during a life crisis, she sought blessings from the Kings as powerful deities. As she drew confidence from the bond with and knowledge of the Hung Kings, she formed an identity for herself as a religious specialist. In this role she was determined to serve the Kings through her own and her followers' veneration activities. In the process, Mrs. Pham became known for her powers of communion with the Hung Kings and her services came to be sought out by a large number of people. This continued to expand her financial and social standing. Her work also touched the lives of others and helped them to understand the value and cosmic powers of the Hung Kings.

Ms Tri recognised the Hung Kings as famous national figures and she chose to show her respect by naming her company after them. She also saw it as a strategy to promote her business. Frequent engagements with the world of gods and spirits, however, changed her perception and she came to believe more fully in the guiding role of the deities in her work and life. Over time, she began to identify herself as the daughter of the Hung Kings and she took on the responsibility given by the deities to build a Hung Temple in the South. Meanwhile, Ms Tri's efforts on behalf of the Hung Kings continued to have a correspondingly positive impact on the strength of her business. The more she prioritised devotion to the Hung Kings, and made this devotion publicly known, the more her business prospered. This prioritisation may also have enabled her to succeed in a male-dominated industry. The result was a positive feedback loop for Ms Tri, and for the people who observed her. Through her success, as with the example of Mrs. Pham, others came to understand more and more the power of the Hung Kings.

I have used the experiences of these two women to show how people connect to the Hung Kings, and how their understandings of the deities changed over time.

In the process, I have shown how these changed relationships led to transformations of their sense of self, their sense of who they are and how they fit in the world. Both the stories of Mrs Pham and Ms Tri showed the capacity of individuals to form new identities for themselves through existing cultural practices. The self-reflections of Mrs Pham and Ms Tri illuminated how individuals 'struggle to constitute themselves as particular kinds of actors and persons vis-à-vis others within and against powerful socio-political and cultural worlds' (Skinner, Pach & Holland 1998, p. 5), and 'how in turn individual selves shape the cultural worlds in which they live' (Endres 2008, p. 35).

Having examined different aspects of social connections and interactions of different groups of actors with the Hung Temple, I focused in Chapter 5 on the Hung Temple festival. This event is the paramount moment when the various structural and historical forces combine to promote the Hung Temple as a site of national unity. I explored in this chapter how particular performances and ritual practices at the Hung Kings anniversary come together in an attempt to evoke an imagination of the nation and to encourage Vietnamese people to be proud citizens. The massive performance that required thousands of participants highlighted the themes of national identity and national unity. In addition, the well organised national ritual promoted the position of the party-state in maintaining the shared customs and values. In examining the festival flows and crowds, I showed that the events, at some level, helped to achieve the purpose of enhancing the feelings of comradeship, of togetherness, or of *communitas* among the Vietnamese.

However, my data also focused on differences among participants and their activities at the Hung Kings anniversary. Ms Tri in Chapter 5 and Nga described in the Prelude are two among many devotees who felt obligated to conduct the rituals to the Kings at this festival time, but not on the actual anniversary day. They used their position as local people living near the Temple to access the site at a time when they can get all access to the Temple without being disrupted by the festival crowds. The village artists were invited to participate at the opening ceremony, which made them feel proud. Their featured performance also

enhanced their notoriety. However, while they appeared on the stage, the content and context of their performance were excluded and replaced by the prepared words and music of the official organisers. Finally, the national delegates and political leaders were featured in the last segment of the program yet became the main actors and occupied the most important space of the anniversary celebration. Their role was made prominent by the police force that protected the delegation from the ordinary people and through the way the various channels of the public media privileged their attendance. These practices, on the one hand, embraced different meanings and values, and on the other hand, structured each group in a particular position of social order. Fitting in with Bourdieu's argument on social reproduction (1992), the festival practices showed the preservation of social hierarchies and the continued dominance of the nation's most powerful social actors (*ibid.*, pp. 139-140). The hierarchy prioritised in the anniversary celebration is simultaneously reproduced in the official interpretation of the festival practices disseminated via television and other media reports.

Overall, three groups of people were important in promoting the rise of the Hung Temple. State politicians, the people working at the Hung Temple and the people venerating the Hung Kings were the main groups of actors that I showed in this thesis to be involved in constructing the Hung Temple as a historically, culturally and religiously significant place of veneration. In looking at their actions, I emphasised the complexity of the Hung Temple practices. I also demonstrated how the diversity of actors involved in the Hung Temple helped to change several social practices. These observations demonstrated that frequent engagement with Temple practices helped people gain a growing sense of their agency and it caused a significant shift in individual actions, practices and identities. Meanwhile, and to restate this significant observation, I also illustrated how social hierarchy was reproduced in order to affirm the position of the nation's most powerful actors. Such illustrations are anthropologically and sociologically important. They show the analytical value of looking at the rise of the Hung Temple through theories of practice.

The analysis of the practices at the Hung Temple provides me with a standpoint to speculate on further developments. In the years following my intensive fieldwork, the public media continued to report on the state's investment in the Hung Temple anniversary festival and the increasing numbers of people participating in the festival (Lê 2016). In my ongoing conversations with key interlocutors, I heard about the expansion of the site and the new constructions going on at the Temple. These observations confirmed my analysis and suggest that in the near future, the Vietnamese will continue to promote the Temple in order to foster practices that help construct national and personal identities.

### **Beyond the temple: seeking connections with the Hung Kings**

The story of the Hung Kings is no longer limited to the country of Vietnam. While studying in South Australia and writing my thesis, I came to know many Australian Vietnamese people who had settled in South Australia over the last half a century. On one occasion, I observed their conduct at the Hung Kings' death anniversary in Adelaide. This led me to pose some interesting further research questions, which provide promising directions for investigation for others interested in the significance and worship of the Hung Kings. I provide these observations as a part of this conclusion to indicate how my study could be expanded and amplified by continued scholarship.

The Vietnamese Culture Centre was established in Adelaide in the 1990s and the centre committee established a communal house where they organised all the collective activities for the local Viet community. According to Mr Hien, a senior member of the committee of the Vietnamese Culture Centre, there is a sizeable Viet community in South Australia. He explained that many of these people migrated to South Australia in the 1970s and 1980s as 'boat people' refugees. These migrants were often South Vietnamese who sailed from the country after the fall of Saigon (now known as Ho Chi Minh City) in 1975. Mr Hien told me that since the late 1980s, these Vietnamese people have gathered together to organise traditional festivals, such as the Hung Kings death anniversary. Since the



1990s, the number of Vietnamese in South Australia has increased as later generations of Vietnamese migrated for education or business purposes.

I visited the communal house of the Vietnamese Culture Centre on the Hung Kings anniversary day in 2015. A domestic house had been renovated to serve as the community house. Inside the house, there was a stage that had been set up like the inside of a temple. In the centre of a stage was a big altar for the Hung Kings with two types of traditional weapons (*bát khỉ*) on each side, and a range of festival flags. On a big banner hung on the wall over the altar was written: 'The Hung Kings death anniversary, South Australia'. The smell of burning incense filled the air and made the house feel less of a functional place and more like the temples I saw in Vietnam. The anniversary agenda included major items that were similar to a festival in Vietnam comprising: a ritual, speeches by leading delegates and celebratory performances, followed by eating and drinking. The whole program was led by an MC, a senior man formally attired in a black suit. Throughout the event, he spoke first in Vietnamese and then in English.

To begin, a team of senior men in traditional long dresses conducted the ritual with Vietnamese words and music. I could recognise some familiar patterns in the ritual. The prayer, though, was significantly different; since its latter part was to report to the Hung Kings about the Viet people living in South Australia. What particularly came to my attention were the words of the MC after the ritual. He said that he had a story to share with the audience, to help everyone understand the significance of the Hung Kings and the lessons they pass on to the Vietnamese today. He pointed to a watermelon on the altar and said:

On the altar you see the red watermelon that we offer to the Hung Kings. Watermelon is a traditional offering we make to our ancestors as a symbol of good luck and happiness. This story is about the origin of the watermelon.

After this, he proceeded to tell the following story, which I give in summarised form:

It was the dynasty of the third Hung King. The King's daughter wanted to marry an adopted son of the King, originally a poor boy. His name was An Tiem. He then became the son-in-law of the King. Some jealous people

created some bad rumours saying that An Tiem had a political ambition to assume the royal power of the Hung King and that this would threaten the dynasty. This came to the Hung King's ears; he became angry and exiled An Tiem and his family to an island faraway in the East Sea. Everybody thought that An Tiem and his family would die of hunger.

One day on the island, when An Tiem saw a bird drop off some black seeds onto the sand, he thought that people could eat what the birds eat. So he planted the seeds, which sprouted, and a green fruit came out of the plant. The fruit inside was red with a smooth texture and a sweet taste. An Tiem and his family ate the fruit and survived. He engraved his name on the hard skin of the fruit and put a number of them into the sea. Some of the fruit reached the shore [of Vietnam] and was brought to the Hung King. The King understood that his daughter and son-in-law were alive. He changed his mind and decided to let An Tiem and his family return. An Tiem was reinstated into the royal family. After his father-in-law died he inherited the throne and became the next Hung King.

The story of the Hung King's son-in-law and the red watermelon caught my attention because it was different from the version I had often heard in Vietnam. The An Tiem that I knew of was not accused of plotting against the King and he did not get the throne in the end. While being surprised with the plot, I was especially interested in the way the MC told it and interpreted its meanings. His account made me think of the audience who listened to the story and who had experienced something similar to An Tiem. They had to get on a boat and travel to a great island far from their country of origin. As happened in the story, many of them had managed to survive very well while away from their homeland. But maybe some of them might have been wishing to return to their country one day. On the occasion of the Hung Kings death anniversary the story of An Tiem was employed differently in South Australia in order to convey a distinct message. While, similar to the version told in Vietnam, the South Australian story was told to convey a common sense of connection to Vietnam despite the audience's (potentially temporary) separation from the mainland.

The MC then went on to introduce a performance by singers whose songs were meant to remind the people of the stories of the Hung Kings. The first singer was a senior woman about 70 years old. She performed a southern traditional rhythm (*vọng cổ*) with new lyrics in Vietnamese. While the performances

continued on the stage, food was brought to the tables and people started moving around, taking food and drink and 'catching up' with each other. Some of the words of a song caught my attention; they seemed especially noteworthy:

This afternoon in South Australia, on the green hill, I looked up at the sky. A bird flying over reminded me of my homeland. New Year comes with sadness and the miserable feeling of being homesick. My homeland, I want to return there one day.

This new lyric reminded me that we were in South Australia, not at the Hung Temple in Phu Tho in Vietnam. Even though the arrangement of the ceremonial space had familiar patterns to what is found in Vietnam, the ritual, the story and the performances had many different elements that made my experience of the event complicated and unique.

The anniversary in South Australia still highlighted the worship to the Hung Kings and shared values, but it also offered new ways of constructing place, nation and Vietnamese identity. Instead of referring to the specific Hung Temple in Phu Tho, the events and performances referred to a 'homeland' in Saigon and to the whole Vietnam. The An Tiem story, told with a revised plot, added to the understanding of these migrants' Vietnamese identity through the symbol of the watermelon and the exiled son living on a distant island.

These observations add another layer for potential consideration in future research. The driving question I posed for my thesis is still valid even in this new context and could be modified to read: How do various structural and historical forces come together to result in the rise of the Hung Kings among Vietnamese people living overseas? How, moreover, do Hung King veneration practices conducted overseas contribute to understandings of what it means to be Vietnamese in the contemporary era? Although these questions are not yet answered, we can say with some certainty that people will continue to draw upon the symbolism of the Hung Kings and the Hung Temple to construct notions of national origin, personal identity, and what it means to be part of a Viet community.

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