

**Crossing the River: an Ethnohistorical Study of Ancestor Worship in Two Central
Vietnamese Villages**

by

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Abstract

Phuoc Yen and Duong Son are two neighbouring villages in central Vietnam. Phuoc Yen is a “traditional” Vietnamese village, in the religious sense, in that its residents practice a mixture of Pure Land Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, deity worship and animism. Across the Bo River from Phuoc Yen is the village of Duong Son, one of only two entirely Catholic villages in the province of Thua Thien Hue. This thesis examines the practice of ancestor worship in these two villages within its contemporary and historical contexts. Comparing material cultural and ritual expressions of ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son reveals both similarities and differences – differences which shed light on the histories of Buddhism and Catholicism in Vietnam. This thesis also examines the transformations that ancestor worship in the villages has undergone over the last four decades. Vietnam’s rapidly changing economic landscape, state policies regarding ritual life, the Catholic Church’s theology since the Second Vatican Council, and migration (internal and external to Vietnam) are discussed as forces contributing to the transformation of ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son, and the making of these localities into “global villages.”

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Editorial Note

Vietnamese is a tonal language that uses the Roman alphabet and diacritical marks.

Although it is routine for scholars writing about Vietnam for English-speaking audiences

to omit diacritical marks -- because their readers find them difficult to manage -- the

author would have preferred to have included diacritical marks for the benefit of

Vietnamese readers. Unfortunately, due to limitations in the word-processing software of

the author, diacritical marks have been omitted in this text. I apologize to my

Vietnamese readers for this omission.

I use the Wade-Giles system of romanization for Chinese terms appearing in the

text.

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For my grandparents
Nguyen Muu & Ho Thi Le

Chapter 1: Introduction

An archaeology of the problem

On a grey rainy day just before the Christmas of 2002, I found myself on a tour of my ancestral village, Phuoc Yen, with Mr. Nguyen Van Lieu, my father's fourth cousin.¹ Phuoc Yen is a rural village located eleven kilometers north of the city of Hue, in the district of Quang Tho, province of Thua Thien Hue, Vietnam. Having been born in my mother's hometown near Ho Chi Minh City, and coming to Canada at the age of one-and-a-half, I grew up knowing little about Phuoc Yen, the central Vietnamese village where my father was born and where his parents continue to live.

As the oldest person in the village, my grandfather, Nguyen Muu, is frequently called upon to preside at weddings, funerals, local feast days, and gravesite consecrations in Phuoc Yen. For years, he has also held the honorary title of *khuon truong*, making him the titular head of Phuoc Yen's Buddhist pagoda. Also, as my grandfather is the most senior man in the Nguyen Van family lineage, my grandparents' house doubles as an ancestral temple where the descendants of the lineage gather once a year to remember those who came before them. The genealogical register (*gia pha*) of the Nguyen Van lineage is kept in a dusty box on the ancestral shrine of my grandparents' house. My name, and those of my brother and my cousins, make up the most recent entries in this book, listed as the eleventh generation of Nguyen Van's to descend from a common ancestor.

¹ In Vietnamese, as in Chinese, last names come before first names, with middle names inserted between them. Someone introduced as Mr. Nguyen Van Lieu, for instance, would have the last name Nguyen, the middle name Van and the first name Lieu. If one chooses not to use the full name to refer to a person, then the standard mode of reference is to use the person's title and their first name, rather than their last name, as in English; in this case, we would use Mr. Lieu, not Mr. Nguyen, as an English speaker might expect.

On my first trip to Vietnam in 1999, as a tourist, I became friends with Mr. Lieu, who, in addition to being a rice farmer, was the village leader (*ap truong*) of Phuoc Yen from 1965 to 1975, and has been an active member of the Buddhist pagoda since his youth. When I returned five years later, as a fledgling oral historian, Mr. Lieu was generous enough to be my guide and teacher in this process.

Prior to my second trip to Vietnam, my father told me a story about a village called Duong Son, located on the other side of the Bo River from Phuoc Yen.

“Duong Son is the only Catholic village in the entire region,” he said.²

“A hundred percent Catholic! They’re famous for their Christmas Eve celebrations. Big parties that go on all night: singing, a giant manger, paper lanterns everywhere. Even the Buddhists go to check it out. And you know, it’s the only village that the Viet Cong were never able to infiltrate during the war.”

I was intrigued, and filed my father’s story away until my walking tour of Phuoc Yen with Mr. Lieu that December afternoon. As Mr. Lieu was showing me the bullet holes in the side of the old primary school, markings left by skirmishes between the Viet Minh and French colonial forces, I asked about Duong Son.

“Of course I know Duong Son!” Mr. Lieu said, “I hid there every night for years during the American War!”

He continued his story by saying that Duong Son had earned a reputation among the surrounding villages as a place of sanctuary for people fleeing from the Viet Minh during the First and Second Indochina Wars. Those who were either pro-French or pro-

² My father was almost correct. There is, in fact, one other village that is entirely Catholic in Thua Thien Hue, and it is Ha Uc, a seaside community similar to Duong Son in its socio-cultural organization. There are other villages in the province where Catholics live alongside non-Catholics within the same village, but Duong Son and Ha Uc are the only villages that are exclusively Catholic.

South Vietnam knew they could always find refuge in Duong Son when communist forces infiltrated their village, as they invariably did during these years. During the American war, Mr. Lieu and one of my father's brothers, both soldiers in the South Vietnamese army, as well as members of Mr. Lieu's family, were among those who frequently crossed the Bo River and received sanctuary in Duong Son. Almost every night for several years, they were sheltered and fed in the house of one Mr. Phan, and this experience cemented the life-long friendship between Mr. Lieu and the Phan family.

[Figure 1]

In her youth, Ms. Phan Thi Kien, the daughter of Mr. Lieu's benefactor, was a rice wine vendor, traveling frequently to neighbouring villages, selling the bottles of the spirits brewed in her family home. As an itinerant wine vendor, Ms. Kien came to know the village of Phuoc Yen better than some of its own residents, and also developed a lasting friendship with my paternal grandmother. During our first meeting, Ms. Kien reminisced enthusiastically about the friendship between her father and my grandfather, both of them soldiers in the pro-colonial armed forces. Ms. Kien's mother had been a daughter of the Hoang lineage from Phuoc Yen who converted to Catholicism when she crossed the Bo River and married Ms. Kien's father. As a result of their maternal ties with Phuoc Yen, the Phans have always felt very close to the people of my father's village.³ [Figure 2]

The telling of this story, and my first trips to Duong Son, took place during the 12th lunar month (*thang chap*), a month that is dedicated primarily to *việc hieu* (works of

³ There have been a few marriages between people in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son in recent generations, usually resulting in the person from Phuoc Yen converting to Catholicism, as Ms. Kien's mother did. In general, villagers in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son practice village endogamy. Increasingly, however, residents of the village are choosing marriage partners from other locations, including neighboring villages, cities, and even overseas Vietnamese.

filial piety) in Phuoc Yen, as in many other communities in Vietnam.⁴ As I was coming to know people in Duong Son, and the history of their unique village, I was also observing, for the first time, lineage ancestor worship ceremonies in Phuoc Yen, and had become fascinated by the importance of these rituals, and other material expressions of filial piety (shrines, gravesites, lineage memorial structures) in the village.⁵

During these early trips to Duong Son, I observed that the Catholic villagers there also took the business of remembering their ancestors very seriously, through rituals and memorial architecture that were both similar and different than what I had seen in Phuoc Yen. Among the most striking contrasts I noticed between the two villages were the differences in their memorial geography – their cemeteries and gravesites. These differences will be described and analysed more fully in the third chapter. Suffice to say, these differences led me to ask *why?*

Why did the cemeteries in the two villages look so different? Why were the graves in Duong Son organized neatly into rows enclosed within the walls of a proper cemetery on the edge of the village, while the gravesites of Phuoc Yen sprawled chaotically, apparently unregulated, over so many acres of farmland? What was the story behind this difference? And could this difference tell us anything about the religious

⁴ Filial piety is discussed in greater detail later on in this chapter, in the section on ancestor worship. Briefly, filial piety (*hieu*) is a cardinal virtue within Vietnam and other countries of East and Southeast Asia. At its most basic level, filial piety entails obedience and respect for parents, grandparents, elder siblings and relations. It is not enough, however, simply to have these inner sentiments, but a person possessing filial piety must express it through actions. According to Charlotte Ikels, four main ways that filial piety is expressed are: 1. supporting parents and providing for parents' material and emotional needs in life; 2. subordination, i.e., deferring to their judgment; 3. continuing the family line through having children, especially male children; and, 4. reverence towards parents while they are living and conducting proper rituals for them after they die. A good introduction to filial piety and its expressions in contemporary East Asian life can be found in the volume *Filial piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia*, edited by Charlotte Ikels (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁵ A definition of ancestor worship as a belief, ethics and cultural practice is offered on pages 13 – 18.

history of Vietnam? These questions formed the nucleus of the present study. [Figures 3-6]

I began conducting field research in the summer of 2004 with these questions in mind. I suspected that Max Weber's theories on Christianity and bureaucracy might help explain the differences I had observed between the memorial geographies of the two villages.⁶ The goal of my field research, however, was neither to validate nor invalidate a particular theory, but rather, to understand a set of social phenomena that I found interesting – social phenomena that had not yet received the attention of other scholars.⁷

⁶ Max Weber's corpus of works on the sociology of religion -- consisting of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, and *The Religion of India: the Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* -- was aimed at systematically relating economic mentality and religious ethics in the major world religions to support the thesis, first articulated in *The Protestant Ethic*, that ideational factors were decisive in the birth of rational entrepreneurial capitalism in Western Europe in the 17th century. In comparing the religions of the world, and assessing their impact on economy and society, Weber categorized religions in terms of being inner-worldly and outer-worldly, world-transforming and world-accommodating, rational and less-than-rational, modern and traditional. In Weber's view, among the world religions, Protestantism was most conducive to the development of modern capitalism because it demanded that believers transform the world as an expression of obedience to a supramundane God. This world-transforming mentality, which subjects all aspects of life to methodical rationalization, was essential for the development of bourgeois capitalism. Weber further argued, in *The Religion of China* and *The Religion of India*, that neither Buddhism, Confucianism nor Taoism possessed this world-transforming spirit that was evident in Protestantism, but rather, were world-accommodating.

Although I disagree with many aspects of Weber's work on the sociology of religion -- particularly his Eurocentrism and the binary categories of analysis that he employs -- I find his argument that Protestant ethics gives rise to a particular form of modern, rationalized bureaucracy and a world-transforming ethos to remain persuasive. Furthermore, I think it is possible to categorize Roman Catholicism in a similar way. Roman Catholicism also exhorts believers to transform the material world, and the Church's hierarchy, based on centralized control and subordination, could even be viewed as a precursor to modern bureaucracy. When I observed the differences between the cemeteries in Duong Son and Phuoc Yen, Weber's analytical categories seemed applicable. Duong Son's cemetery exhibits the signs of rationalization and bureaucratic management characteristic of Catholicism, while Phuoc Yen's unregulated, unenclosed cemetery expresses, in a material way, the lack of rationalized bureaucracy that is characteristic of Buddhism.

An excellent introduction to Weber's work on sociology of religion can be found in Randall Collins, *Max Weber: A Skeleton Key* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1986). For those who wish to consult the original texts, see: Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952); Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, ed., & trans., Hans H. Gerth (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1951); Weber, *The Religion of India: the Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, ed., & trans., Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958).

⁷ Among the social phenomena I speak of is the existence of an entirely Catholic village within a mainly Buddhist province of Vietnam. Although there is a sizable body of literature on Vietnamese villages, there are very few studies on Catholic villages like Duong Son. Nguyen Phan Hoang's 1986 article, "Buoc Dau

For this reason, I conducted my field research with the intention of gathering stories and observations about ritual life and ceremonial architecture and how these had changed over time. Returning from the field, I sifted through the data to see what patterns and clusters of themes would emerge. Most of the theorizing within this thesis took place only once I returned from the field, and is the result of letting the clusters of themes from the field research enter into a dialogue with scholarly works from a variety of disciplines: history, anthropology, religious studies, and political theory.

Purpose

Following Michel Foucault, my project begins with the observation and description of a social practice. I follow with an attempt to understand this practice in its historical context and eventually gesture towards broader theoretical arguments.⁸ My goal is to use the stories of people in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son to track changes to ancestor worship practices in these villages over the last four decades, and to offer an interpretation of what these changes might mean – that is, to determine what they can tell us about the relationships between religion and culture, between church and state, between global and national institutions and local cultural agents. This thesis is not a comprehensive ethnography of the villages themselves, nor their respective religious lives. Instead, I use an analytical strategy similar to the one employed in Hy Van

Tim Hieu Ve Mot lang Thien Chua Giao Thoi Can Dai: Lang Luu Phuong” [A First Step Towards Investigating a Christian Village in Contemporary Times: Luu Phuong Village] is the only work of this nature.

⁸ Initially, my investigative approach was inspired by the opening of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, in which Foucault describes two scenarios of criminal punishment in early modern Europe. After describing these scenarios in great detail, telling us that a period of eighty years separates them, Foucault proceeds to account for the changes, and from this explanation, makes a more far-reaching argument about the nature of modernity.

Luong's *Revolution in the Village*: relating events on the micro-level with long-term social, economic and cultural trends, and interweaving oral histories and structural analysis.⁹ My approach is also inspired by Stanley Tambiah's study of Thai Buddhism, in which he recognizes the distinction between global religions (their cultures and institutions) and their local expressions, and directs his analysis towards examining the continuities and transformations of a world religion at the local level.¹⁰

This thesis is divided in five parts. In the remainder of the introduction, I provide an overview of ancestor worship as a system of belief and a social practice, and describe the social, economic and spiritual lives of the villages of Phuoc Yen and Doung Son. The second chapter, on methodology, details the theoretical foundations of my ethnographic fieldwork, describes the fieldwork experience, and discusses a number of ethical issues I encountered while in the field. The third chapter is a presentation of the findings of my fieldwork conducted during the summer of 2004 in the two villages. Here I compare contemporary practices of ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son. In this chapter, I describe the contemporary spiritual geographies of each village, give an overview of current ancestor worship practices, discuss the role of religious clergy in ancestor worship, and analyze the subjectivity of community members in relations to these practices.¹¹ Comparing ancestor worship in the two villages reveals many similarities in the forms and the function of this practice. At the same time, important differences are also apparent, such as people's motivations for worshipping ancestors;

⁹ Hy Van Luong, *Revolution in the Village: Tradition and Transformation in North Viet Nam, 1925-1988*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992).

¹⁰ S.J. Tambiah. *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults of North-east Thailand*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 374. I was introduced to Tambiah's approach through the work of anthropologist Alexander Soucy, who has studied Buddhism in north Vietnam. See Alexander Soucy "The problem with key informants." *Anthropological Forum*, Vol. 10, No. 2, (2000) 179-199.

¹¹ I use the term "spiritual geography" to emphasize that my mapping of the villages in Chapter 3 focuses on sites and features within the villages that are related to the numinous.

their understandings of the relationship between the living and the dead; and, the roles of clergy at the local level, and of the religious institution at the national and global level, in regulating ancestor worship. The comparisons drawn in the third chapter form the basis of the analyses in chapters four and five.

In Chapter 4, I situate contemporary ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son in its historical context, analysing how these practices have changed through interaction with nationalist ideologies (including Marxism) and globalizing world religions (Buddhism and Catholicism). This chapter draws heavily upon the testimony of villagers in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son to tell the story of changing religious practices. The main characters in this story are four “forces of transformation” that have contributed, at different times, to the contraction and expansion of ancestor worship in the villages. These four forces are: state policies regarding ritual life; economic conditions in Vietnam since the revolution; the Catholic church’s stance towards ancestor worship; and, migration within Vietnam and internationally.

In the fifth and final chapter, I summarize the key findings of the research, discuss the implications of the data presented, and point to possibilities for further research. I also discuss three theoretical contributions of the research drawn from the mapping of contemporary ancestor worship practices in the villages (Chapter 3) and the examination of their historical development since 1964 (Chapter 4).

The first of these three points is that remarkable parallels existed between the ends and means used by the Catholic Church (since the 17th century) socialist government (since 1954) and to reform ritual life in Vietnam. At different points in Vietnam’s history, the Catholic Church and the socialist state have attempted to ban or limit ancestor

worship because they each considered it to be superstitious. Ancestor worship posed a problem to creating the type of people needed (good Catholics or good socialist citizens) for the kind of societies that Church and state authorities were trying to create. However, as the evidence presented in Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrates, Church and state attempts to simplify or annihilate ancestor worship met with only limited success, and today, ancestor worship is more robust than it has been since the American War. For reasons explained in Chapter 4, both Church and state have had to accommodate the practice of ancestor worship to varying degrees.

The recent accommodation of ancestor worship by the Catholic Church, I argue, is evidence of the dialectical relationship between religion and culture. This is the second theoretical conclusion of the research. Comparing contemporary practices of ancestor worship in Duong Son (one of only two Catholic villages in all of Thua Thien Hue) and Buddhist Phuoc Yen (a traditional Vietnamese village with regards to ancestor worship), we can see that ancestor worship in Duong Son has been significantly transformed through its interaction with Catholicism. At the same time, in accommodating ancestor worship, Catholic theology in Vietnam has also been transformed. For ancestor worship to shift from being a cultural practice that was once prohibited in Vietnam (1742-1964) to a practice that it now actively encouraged by the Church's hierarchy, Catholic theology has been reinterpreted, or inculturated, to the Vietnamese context. Likewise, in the process of becoming the country's most dominant religion, Buddhism also had to accommodate ancestor worship, philosophically and practically, when it arrived in Vietnam in the first centuries CE. Also as in the case of Catholicism, Buddhism was

transformed through this interaction, and also exerted a transformative influence on ancestor worship in turn. Herein lies the dialectic between religion and culture.

The third implication of this research is that it contributes to a burgeoning literature on the globalization that recognizes the linkages between local cultural practices and transnational institutions and flows of capital, persons and ideas. As the evidence in Chapter 3 and 4 suggests, the villages of Phuoc Yen and Duong Son do not, and perhaps have never, conformed to the model of the Vietnamese village suggested by Gerald Hickey in his still classic study of Vietnamese village life, which presents “the” Vietnamese village as a community characterized by its “distinctness, smallness, all-providing self-sufficiency and homogeneity,” jealously guarding its way of life behind a bamboo hedge.¹² By taking into account the impact of national and transnational flows and institutions on ancestor worship in the villages, this research supports the more recent model of village studies in Vietnam, pioneered by Hy Van Luong, which treats the villages as historicized places that are deeply linked to supra-local processes. In my final chapter, I read ancestor worship (rituals and material culture) in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son as sites of interaction: between local beliefs and customs, transnational flows of capital, and the pretensions of religious institutions aspiring to universality. This analysis is informed by an analytical approach that political theorist Warren Magnusson describes as “reading the global *through* the local,” a strategy that “privileges the site itself rather than the interpretive frame [brought] to it.”¹³

The particular sites that are the focus of this thesis are worthy of study for a number of reasons. Among Vietnam’s three major regions, central Vietnam is the region

¹² Gerald Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 267.

¹³ Warren Magnusson and Kerena Shaw, *A Political Space*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), viii.

that has received the least scholarly attention. The American War helped to cement the image of Vietnam as a country consisting of two parts (north and south) in the imagination of non-Vietnamese observers. Ask any Vietnamese, however, about the regions of Vietnam, and they will tell you that there are three regions: north (*bac*), central (*trung*) and south (*nam*).¹⁴ Even today, however, when academics go looking for Vietnamese politics or Vietnamese history, they tend to go to the economic and political centers of Vietnam in the north (Hanoi) or the south (Ho Chi Minh City). The neglect of central Vietnam is unfortunate, considering its importance within Vietnamese history and culture. Historian Shawn McHale offers a thoughtful and nuanced assessment of this region when he writes:

The Hue area is quintessentially Vietnamese because, paradoxically, it draws on multiple streams of Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese influences. This region, once a frontier, where Nguyen rulers drew on Vietnamese, highlander, and Cham cultural streams, shows that the search for an essential Vietnamese culture is doomed to fail.¹⁵

The Hue area also merits special attention from scholars of Vietnamese religion – and those who study ancestor worship, in particular. The dead, and especially the cult of lonely spirits (*co hon*) – those unfortunate souls who died traumatically, or without proper burial or mourning rituals -- are particularly present in Hue and central Vietnam.

¹⁴ Vietnamese historian Tran Trong Kim attributes the consciousness of Vietnam as a country with three regions to the history of French colonization. In *Viet Nam Su Luoc Vol. II* [History of Vietnam, Vol. II], he writes, “Before this [the treaty of 1874], Viet Nam, from north to south, had a more unified character than other countries. In terms of history, tradition, and language, it was all one. These days (as a result of the treaty) it has become three regions: the South, the Central, the North, each has its own policies and its own laws, as if it were three different countries.” (page 312. My translation from the Vietnamese) During the period of French colonization, the French divided the territory of Viet Nam into three administrative units: Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. The Vietnamese, in turn, internalized these divisions and made them their own. The persistence of this tripartite division of Vietnam within popular Vietnamese discourse could be interpreted as an example of the “colonization of consciousness” discussed by Jean and John Comaroff in *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa, Vol. 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Shawn Frederick McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 66.

Duong Phuoc Thu, a journalist and scholar of central Vietnamese villages, attributes this phenomenon to the influence of Cham culture in the Hue area.¹⁶ I suspect that Hue's lack of industrialization has also contributed to the strength of ancestor worship within the region.¹⁷ I hope this thesis will contribute to scholarly understanding of religious life in this important, but neglected, region of Vietnam.

There are two additional gaps within the literature to which this thesis speaks: the first concerns Vietnamese village life; the second, Vietnamese religions. I will deal with these gaps in turn. Despite recent trends towards higher levels of urbanization, Vietnam remains a nation of villages. As historian Nguyen The Anh writes, "much has been made of the village at all times as the basic unit of Vietnamese society, as the major reference point for the Vietnamese people's behaviour and for its socio-political characteristics."¹⁸

Within Vietnam, there currently exists an extensive body of studies on particular villages, usually of the ethnographic variety, that are not deeply historicized.¹⁹ However, there

¹⁶ Duong Phuoc Thu, personal interview, 13 July 2004.

¹⁷ As Nguyen Khac Vien's sociological study of ancestor worship shows, this cultural practice tends to suffer with increasing levels of urbanization. Thua Thien Hue is still a largely agricultural province, and even in the city of Hue proper, businesses and government operations are much smaller than in the north and south of Vietnam. The smaller scale of bureaucratic management has afforded city dwellers greater flexibility in working schedules, an indispensable condition for ancestor worship, which requires a significant investment of time, especially since death anniversaries, funerals and other rituals, are often held in the middle of a work-day. Furthermore, the small size of Hue has allowed people to commute easily to and from their home villages, even if they now reside in the city. Being able to return to their ancestral lands, and other memorial sites, such as lineage temples, is crucial to the maintenance of the cult of ancestors.

¹⁸ Nguyen The Anh, "Village versus State: The Evolution of State-Local Relations in Vietnam until 1945" *Southeast Asian Studies*, 41 (June 2003), 102.

¹⁹ There is an ever increasing body of monographs (*dia chi*) of villages in Vietnam which generally follow a similar organizational structure, beginning with a brief history of the village, then moving on to describe its physical geography, socio-economic organization, and cultural life. Some monographs also include sections focusing on the history and impact of the revolution on village life. The following are a number of better-known studies of villages in Thua Thien Hue: Bui Thi Tan, *Ve Hai Lang Nghe Truyen Thong Phu Bai va Hien Luong* [Regarding Two Traditional Artisanal Villages: Phu Bai and Hien Luong] (Hue: Nha Xuat Ban Thuan Hoa, 1999); Huynh Dinh Ket, Van Dinh Trien and Tran Dinh Toi, *Dia Chi van Hoa Xa Quang Thai* [Monograph on the Culture of Quang Thai Village] (Hue: Nha Xuat Ban Thuan Hoa, 2000); Huynh Huu Hien, *Hien Luong Chi Luoc* [History of Hien Luong] (Hue: So Van Hoa Thong Tin Thua Thien Hue, 1991). A monograph of this type has also been written for Phuoc Yen: Le Van Thuyen, ed. *Lang*

remain remarkably few works on Vietnamese villages written by scholars outside of Vietnam. The dislocations caused by successive wars, and the challenge of accessing of documentary evidence, are among the reasons for the paucity of studies on Vietnamese villages to date. As John Kleinen states, “[o]ur knowledge of the Vietnamese countryside during colonial domination and under the administration of the Communist Party has been scanty.”²⁰

Up until the early 1990’s, there were only a handful of book-length studies on Vietnamese villages that had been written or translated into English. The most important among these were Gerald Hickey’s *Village in Vietnam*, François Houtart and Genevieve Lemercinier’s *Hai Van*, William Trullinger’s *Village at War*, and Hy Van Luong’s *Revolution in the Village*.²¹ These studies tended to fall into two categories: comprehensive socio-statistical ethnographies of villages that lacked historicization (Hickey and Houtart), or historical studies that focused on the revolutionary process within villages (Trullinger and Luong). Published in 1992, Luong’s study was considered ground-breaking for the way it combined micro-history with sophisticated theoretical analysis and related events at the local level with large-scale processes of social change. This thesis follows the examples of *Revolution in the Village*, and more recent studies on

Phuoc Yen: Huong Chi Luoc Bien [A Brief History of the Village of Phuoc Yen] (Hue: Museum of Hue, 1994).

²⁰ John Kleinen, *Facing the Future, Reviving the Past: A Study of Social Change in a Northern Vietnamese Village* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), 3.

²¹ Gerald Hickey, *Village in Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964); Francois Houtart and Genevieve Lemercinier, *Hai Van: Life in a Vietnamese Commune* (London: Zed Books, 1984); Hy Van Luong, *Revolution in the Village: Tradition and Transformation in North Viet Nam, 1925-1988* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992); James Walker Trullinger *Village at War* (New York: Longman, 1980)

social change in Vietnamese villages, in its effort to make linkages between the local and supra-local processes, and treat the villages it studies as historicized places.²²

Colonialism and the anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century continue to be the topics that receive the most attention from historians of Vietnam, both inside and outside the country. Unfortunately, scholarly preoccupation with wars and revolutions has left many important aspects of life in Vietnam understudied; among these aspects, religion is certainly one. Although works by anthropologists working in Vietnam have contributed significantly to filling the gap in understanding Vietnamese religions as they are lived and practiced both today and in the past, significant gaps remain in the literature. Most surprisingly, among the neglected topics are Buddhism and Catholicism, two major religions of Vietnam.

Given that Buddhism has been so important to Vietnamese history and culture, historian Shawn McHale remarks, with perplexity, that “[t]he history of Buddhism [in Vietnam] before the twentieth century has often been ill served by scholars, and its transformation in the twentieth century has been little studied.”²³ In keeping with the

²² These recent works include Kleinen’s *Facing the Future* (1999) and Bernhard Dahm and Vincent J.H. Houben, *Vietnamese Villages in Transition: Background and Consequences of Reform Policies in Rural Vietnam* (Passau: Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Passau University, 1999).

²³ Shawn Frederick McHale, *Print and Power*, 216-7. For an introduction to Vietnamese Buddhism, see Thich Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967) and Nguyen Tai Thu, *The History of Vietnamese Buddhism* (Hanoi, Social Sciences Publishing House, 1992). Nguyen Tu Cuong provides a fascinating analysis of the history of Buddhist sects in Vietnam and interrogates the commonly held view that Zen is the most dominant among these in Nguyen Cuong Tu “Rethinking Vietnamese Buddhist History: Is the *Thien uyen tap anh* a “Transmission of the Lamp” Text?” in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, K.W. Taylor & John K. Whitmore, ed. (New York: SEAP Cornell, 1995). For the impacts of Buddhism on medieval Vietnamese political thought, see Nguyen The Anh “From Indra to Maitreya: Buddhist Influence in Vietnamese Political Thought,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 33 (June 2002): 225-241, and Nguyen The Anh, “Le bouddhisme dans la pensée politique du Viet-Nam traditionnel,” *Bulletin de L’Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient* 89(2002):127-143. Several authors have also turned their attention to the practice of Buddhism in contemporary Vietnam; see: Thien Do, “The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity: Buddhism in Contemporary Vietnam,” in *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia* ed. Ian Harris (London: Continuum, 1999): 254-283, and Alexander Soucy, “The problem with key informants,” *Anthropological Forum*, 10:2 (2000): 179-199.

aforementioned preoccupation with studying the revolutionary process in Vietnam, a number of historians and anthropologists have studied Hoa Hao, a millenarian Buddhist sect that was particularly active in anti-colonial activity in the Mekong delta during the early twentieth century.²⁴ Similar studies on millenarian religion and peasant mobilization have focused on Cao Dai, a highly syncretistic religion also practiced in Southwest Vietnam, that combines elements of Buddhism, Christianity, and other elements of culture and philosophy both East and West.²⁵ However, with the exception of a few recent anthropological works, few studies examine popular Buddhism in the twentieth century, outside of its relationship to anti-colonial politics.²⁶

At the same time, the history of Catholicism in Vietnam has been even more severely neglected by scholars of Vietnam. Cao Huy Thuan's *Les Missionnaires et la Politique Coloniale Française au Viet Nam (1857-1914)* is an important work which details the role of French missionaries and Vietnamese Catholics in France's colonial project.²⁷ Another important author is Peter C. Phan, a priest and theologian who has written several excellent works on this subject, including *Mission and Catechesis: Alexander de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-century Vietnam* and *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, which, while well-known within theological circles, receive far too little attention within Vietnamese studies more

²⁴ See Hue Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983) and Philip Taylor, "Apocalypse Now? Hoa Hao Buddhism emerging from the shadows of war," *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 12:3 (Dec 2001): 339-354.

²⁵ See Jayne Susan Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Viet Nam* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1981).

²⁶ See Thien Do, *Vietnamese Supernaturalism: Views from the southern region* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); and Alexander Soucy, "The problem with key informants."

²⁷ Cao Huy Thuan, *Giao Si Thua Sai va Chinh Sach Thuoc Dia cua Phap tai Viet Nam (1857-1914)* [*Les Missionnaires et la Politique Coloniale Française au Viet Nam (1857-1914)*] (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Ton Giao, 2002)

broadly.²⁸ In recent years, scholars of Vietnamese religion and clergy based in American universities have written a number of important doctoral dissertations focusing on issue of inculturation and the dialogue between ancestor worship and Christian doctrine. In particular, Peter De Ta Vo's dissertation, "A Cultural and Theological Foundation for Ancestor Veneration among Catholics in Vietnam," has been invaluable to the present study.²⁹ As in the case of Vietnamese Buddhism, however, there are few if any studies that examine Catholic communities in Vietnam using ethnographic methods.³⁰

A final aim of this thesis is to contribute to our understanding of Buddhism and Catholicism as they are, and have been, practiced within Vietnamese villages.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will provide an overview of ancestor worship in its practical and philosophical dimensions, describe in greater detail the setting of the study (the villages of Phuoc Yen and Duong Son); and situate these villages briefly within the religious history of Vietnam.

²⁸ Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-century Vietnam*. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1998); Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2003).

²⁹ Peter De Ta Vo, "A Cultural and Theological Foundation for Ancestor Veneration among Catholics in Vietnam" (Ph.D. diss, The Catholic University of America, 1999).

³⁰ Despite the gaps in the literature, an increasing number of scholars are turning their attention to studying religion in contemporary Vietnam, as evidenced by two workshops that will be held in August 2005 at the Australian National University in Canberra. According to anthropologist Philip Taylor, the conference's lead organizer, the papers presented at this workshop will include: "the politics of religion, religious revival and globalization, ritual performativity, urban-based spirituality, transnational religions, generational, gendered and ethnic minority religious identities, conversion, sectarian revival and religious cosmopolitanism. These themes will be illustrated in case studies that cover a spectrum of religious forms, including Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, ancestor worship, Christianity, mediumship, spirit worship and pilgrimage." (Email sent to Vietnam Studies Group list-serve, 20 May 2005). Taylor also has a number of articles and books on the subject of popular religion in Vietnam, including: Philip Taylor, "The Goddess, the Ethnologist, the Folklorist and the Cadre: Situating Exegesis of Vietnam's Folk Religion in Time and Place," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 14:3 (2003): 383-401, and Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004). Another recent contribution to the literature on popular religion in Vietnam is Thien Do's *Vietnamese Supernaturalism: Views from the Southern Region* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

Ancestor worship

Ancestor worship is one of the most ubiquitous social practices in East and Southeast Asia. In relation to Vietnam, scholars overwhelmingly agree that ancestor worship, also referred to as “ancestor veneration” and “the cult of the ancestors”, is a “*sine qua non* cultural practice among the Vietnamese.”³¹ The foundation of ancestor worship, according to Nguyen Thanh Huyen, is the belief “that our ancestors are sacred, they go into the eternal world but still live by the side of their descendants, protect the latter against all misfortunes, reward them for their good deeds and blame them for their bad behavior.”³² In the view of Toan Anh, one of Vietnam’s most prolific writers on culture and customs,

It is the belief of Vietnamese people that through ancestor worship, the realm of form and the realm of formlessness are always intimately connected. Worshipping ancestors is precisely the context of encounter between the realm of form and the spiritual world. According to the Vietnamese, death does not signal the end....The body decays but the spirit is indestructible. Our customs also dictate that yin and yang should be treated the same. Whatever the living might need, and whatever the living did, so too the dead. The dead have a “LIFE” in death as the living do on earth. Said differently, the dead also need to eat, drink, spend and have shelter as the living do.³³ [my translation]

Prior to the arrival of the world religions to Vietnam (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity), the original religion of Vietnam was ancestor worship.³⁴ Based on archaeological evidence, including tombs and their artifacts, oracle bones and bronze

³¹ Vo, “A Cultural and Theological Foundation for Ancestor Veneration among Catholics in Vietnam,” 257.

³² Nguyen Thanh Huyen, “The Cult of Ancestors: A Typical Characteristic of the Vietnamese People’s Psychic Life,” *Vietnamese Studies* 43.113 (1994), 48.

³³ Toan Anh, *Phong Tục Thọ Cung trong Gia Đình Việt Nam* [Ancestor Worship Rituals in the Vietnamese Family] (Ho Chi Minh City: Nha Xuất Bản Văn Nghệ Thành Phố Ho Chi Minh, 2001), 9.

³⁴ Missionaries from China and India introduced the Vietnamese to Buddhism around the 2nd CE. Confucianism arrived even earlier, in the 1st BCE, with the Chinese who colonized what is today North Vietnam. However, Confucianism did not become a significant force in Vietnamese social or political life until the 15th century. Catholicism is the most recent arrival to Vietnam among these three world religions, coming only in the late 16th century.

ritual vessels, scholars conjecture that the ancestral religion was practiced in China during the Shang or Yin dynasty, before 1000 BCE.³⁵ Therefore, ancestor worship as a practice predated Confucianism, the philosophical system that has often come to be associated with it.

Through the teachings of the classical Confucian texts -- *The Analects*, *The Doctrine of Mean*, *the Book of Mencius*, *the Book of Filial Piety* and *the Book of Rites* – ancestor worship became a ritual expression of filial piety, a cardinal virtue within the Confucian worldview. Simply put, filial piety is the idea that children should obey and respect their parents (especially fathers and older brothers), care for their parents' every need while living, and honour them in death. In China, "filial piety was the law," and violation of this duty was "considered a most heinous crime."³⁶ In Vietnam, writes Peter De Ta Vo, filial piety is "not only highly valued but is the fundamental virtue and foundation of Vietnamese civilization."³⁷

Although Vietnam was a Buddhist state until the 15th century, its rulers were introduced to Chinese language, political theory, systems of family organization, religious beliefs, and models of authority and governance over the course of one thousand years of Chinese imperial rule (111 BCE-939 CE). After Dai Viet won its independence from China, its leaders were eager to borrow selectively from Chinese models of civil administration, which they readily found in the Confucian classics. Beginning in the 12th century, the emperors of the Ly Dynasty introduced Chinese-style examinations in the recruitment of the civil service, and also established Dai Viet's first Confucian university.

³⁵ Laurence G. Thompson, *Chinese Religion* (New York: Wadsworth, 1996), 31.

³⁶ Vo, "A Cultural and Theological Foundation for Ancestor Veneration among Catholics in Vietnam," 154.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

These Buddhist emperors of Vietnam looked to Confucianism as a model of governance and human ethics, but took little notice of the metaphysical interests that Chinese Confucian scholars had been developing since the 10th century. The devotion of the Viet people and their rulers to Buddhism and their tolerance of eclecticism meant that “Confucianism in Vietnam never gained the status it acquired in China but has largely remained an official superstructure amidst a Vietnamese reality permeated with Buddhism and other religious practices.”³⁸

The Ming occupation of Vietnam from 1407 to 1428 gave further impetus to the Confucianization of Vietnamese society already underway. The next Vietnamese dynasty, the Le (1428-1788), would continue this process, using law and education to Confucianize and Sincize Vietnamese society. Nguyen The Anh writes:

The Le consequently broke with the Buddhist tradition of the Ly and the Tran, moving to replace Buddhism as the court-favoured ethical system and weaken its hold over the population by encouraging the dicta of Confucianism via a Sincised bureaucratic apparatus.³⁹

Dai Viet’s “Neo-Confucian revolution” reached its height under the reign of Le Thanh Tong (r. 1460-1497), who had a messianic drive to reform Dai Viet society, and took the Neo-Confucian Ming Dynasty as his model. Thanh Tong’s list of reforms were extensive and included the adoption of key features of the Ming political administration; the expansion of the examination system; the establishment of Confucian schools in the countryside; and the creation of the Le law code, which sought to reform individual

³⁸ Olga Dror, “Translator’s Introduction” in Father Adriano di St. Thecla, *Opusculum de Sectis apud Sinenses et Tunkinenses (A Small Treatise on the Sects among the Chinese and Tonkinese): A Study of Religion in China and North Vietnam in the Eighteenth Century*. (New York: SEAP Cornell, 2002), 40.

³⁹ Nguyen The Anh, “From Indra to Maitreya: Buddhist Influence in Vietnamese Political Thought,” 235.

behaviour and familial relations using the Chinese patriarchal model inspired by the orthodox classic, the *Li Ji* (Book of Rites).⁴⁰

The most recent governmental attempt to Confucianize Vietnamese society took place in the 19th century under the Nguyen emperors, who emulated the Chinese model more closely than emperors of any other Vietnamese dynasty.⁴¹ During this period, Nguyen rulers and the elites were well versed in Chinese classics, and referred to these texts frequently, using them as their primary guide to civil administration. According to Alexander Woodside, even Vietnamese historiography under the Nguyen was “something of an affluent of Chinese historiography.”⁴² The Nguyen law code also attempted to Sinify individual and familial conduct through the regulation of family relations and ritual activities. These are some of the historical reasons why ancestor worship in Vietnam bears such strong resemblances to Chinese ancestor worship.

Nguyen Khac Vien describes ancestor worship as a system of ethics as well as “an ensemble of beliefs or ideas accepted by the overwhelming part of society...[which is] concretized by ritual practices: anniversaries, funeral, mourning, wedding rites, etc.”⁴³

Toan Anh writes:

When parents and elders are still living, children and descendents ought to support them, obey their teachings, do things to please them, and live in such a way that makes them happy.

When they die, apart from taking care of the funeral and burial, descendents ought to worship them, just as they worshiped ancestors in the past.⁴⁴ [my translation]

⁴⁰ Ibid., 236

⁴¹ Alexander B. Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (Harvard University Press, 1988), 27-28.

⁴² Ibid., 20.

⁴³ Nguyen Khac Vien, “Enlarged Family, Lineage, Cult of Ancestors,” *Vietnamese Studies* 43.113 (1994), 13.

⁴⁴ Toan Anh, *Phong Tuc Tho Cung trong Gia Dinh Viet Nam* [Ancestor Worship Rituals in the Vietnamese Family], 7.

In its most basic form, ancestor worship involves placing an altar within the family home dedicated to the deceased. Ancestral altars usually carry representations of family members (in the form of photographs, paintings, or drawings), incense holders, vases of flowers, offerings of fruit and sweets, and water. It is believed that the spirits of the ancestors reside in the ancestral shrine, and that ancestors watch over and protect their living descendants, whose rightful relationship with their ancestors should involve respect, gratitude and frequent remembrance through ritual performance. Non-Christian ancestor worshippers generally offer incense to their ancestors on the new and full moon of every month, and, depending on their economic means and aesthetic sensibilities, also put out offerings of fruit, candles, and water on the ancestral altar.

An important part of any Vietnamese wedding involves a ceremony involving the bride and groom and their parents before the ancestral altars of both families. People also make offerings of food and incense to ancestors during the Lunar New Year (*Tet*) and during other important life events, such as the birth of a new child in the family or the departure of a family member from the family home. The most frequently held ancestor worship ceremonies are death anniversaries (*ngay ky* or *ngay gio*), held annually on the date of the family member's death. These ceremonies will be described in greater detail in Chapter Three.

As a ritual practice, ancestor worship is both functional and communicative. From a functionalist perspective, ancestor worship strengthens cohesion among families and lineages, and maintains the "male-oriented kinship hierarchy" which characterizes villages in northern and central Vietnam.⁴⁵ Gender roles are clearly demarcated in ancestor worship, with women doing most of the cooking and behind-the-scenes work,

⁴⁵ Hy Van Luong, *Revolution in the Village*, 228.

while men carry out most of the rituals. There is, however, some flexibility within this scheme.⁴⁶ I would also conjecture that, given the common practice of village endogamy in Vietnam, one of the primordial functions of ancestor worship was to prevent marriage between cousins within the same lineage.

Ancestor worship may or may not be predicated on certain beliefs about the supernatural powers of the dead. Some people who practice ancestor worship genuinely believe that their ancestors can enjoy the food being offered on the ancestral shrine, or that the performance or non-performance of certain rites has a direct impact on the spiritual journey of the ancestor and one's own fortunes. On the other hand, there are others who do not hold these beliefs and carry out ancestor worship rituals in the name of tradition, or merely as a way of expressing gratitude to the dead.

A sociological study conducted in Hanoi in the early 1990's confirmed that ancestor worship fulfills the functional role of strengthening family unity, which was particularly apparent during death anniversary celebrations. This same study argues that ancestor worship is used as a medium for the moral education of the young, promoting greater respect, docility and good behaviour from children.⁴⁷

In its communicative aspect, performance of proper ancestor worship is a means of expressing one's moral positions and moral worth to the community. In societies such as Vietnam, where filial piety is a cardinal virtue, performing ancestor worship rituals correctly is a way of showing that one is a good person; it is a means of earning social

⁴⁶ Especially in contemporary Vietnam, it is not unusual to find a woman carrying out a leading role in ancestor worship rites. This often happens in the cases of financially successful women who may fund ancestor worship ceremonies.

⁴⁷ Nguyen Khac Vien, "First Result of Experimental Study: The Cult of Ancestors in Urban Center," *Vietnamese Studies* 43.113 (1994), 24-25.

capital.⁴⁸ Conversely, an inadequate display of filial piety “shows the child to be a significant moral failure and risks censure from kin, friends, and others.”⁴⁹

In ancestor worship, the character of the deceased is not of great importance to the descendents. During death anniversary ceremonies and other rituals, those in attendance rarely discuss particular details of an ancestor’s life, although they may make casual remarks about the person’s physical appearance or their station in the community or within the family. While illustrious ancestors (such as mandarins) do confer honour on the family, ancestors are not worshipped because of their character, but simply because they are one’s ancestors.

The Setting I: Phuoc Yen

Phuoc Yen’s origins date back to the early seventeenth century, when the Nguyen family from Thanh Hoa led their army and a group of Viet colonists on their historic Southward March (*Nam tien*) from the ancestral heartland of the Viet people in the Red River Delta. The Nguyens would eventually settle in Hue and make it the seat of government of Cochinchina, a territory they ruled as a *de facto* sovereign state, even though, officially, they governed as viceroys on behalf of the Le Dynasty in Thang Long (present-day Hanoi). For almost two hundred years, the Nguyens of Cochinchina (*Dang trong*) were in a near constant state of warfare with the state of Tonkin (*Dang ngoai*) to the north, also nominally under the rule of the Le, until Nguyen Anh (the Gia Long emperor) unified the two states into one and called it Viet Nam in 1802.

⁴⁸ Ikels, *Filial Piety: Practice & Discourse in Contemporary East Asia*, 5.

⁴⁹ Shaun Kingsley Malarney, “Weddings and Funerals in Contemporary Vietnam.” in *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind and Soul*, ed. Laurel Kendall and Nguyen Van Huy (University of California Press, 2003), 186.

Before settling on Hue as their seat of government in 1636, the Nguyens spent ten years on the left bank of the Bo River and conducted their affairs from the site of what would later become the village of Phuoc Yen. When the Nguyens moved to Hue, Phuoc Yen became a village like any other.⁵⁰ The Nguyen emperors did recognize Phuoc Yen as their old imperial way-station, however, by hiring generation after generation of its villagers into the food services corps of the Hue court. Mr. Nguyen Dinh Ân, a former resident of Phuoc Yen now living in Houston, remembers that, in his youth, the villagers held a celebration in springtime (*Le te hanh xuan*) to commemorate those individuals who cooked for the imperial court.⁵¹ Central Vietnam's harsh climate and successive wars have destroyed most of the remnants from the early Nguyen settlement.⁵² Nonetheless, the people of Phuoc Yen still proudly remember that their village was once *phu chua* (the palace of the lords).

In 1999, Phuoc Yen had 1,452 inhabitants living in 298 families. Most of the present inhabitants of Phuoc Yen earn their livelihood from agriculture (rice, vegetables and legumes) and animal husbandry (fish farming on the Bo river, and raising pigs and

⁵⁰ Duong Phuoc Thu, *Hue Ten Duong Pho Xua va Nay* [Street Names of Hue Past and Present] (Hue: Nha Xuat Ban Thuan Hoa, 2004), 15-16.

⁵¹ Nguyen Dinh Ân, personal interview, 24 May 2004.

⁵² Villagers remember the location of some of the structures that the Nguyen built from 1626-1636, even though there are no visible traces of the buildings themselves. They can point the location of the leaders' residence (*phu*) and to the cannon platforms (*mo sung*). Some villagers still recall the short phrase *nua phu sang chua* that describes the location of the leaders' residence and the pagoda in relation to the crops that were grown in their respective vicinities. Kouniak roots (*nua*) grew by the leaders' residence (*phu*) while manioc (*sang*) grew by the pagoda (*chua*). Mr. Nguyen Van Phat, a descendent of Phuoc Yen living in Hue, recalls a more elaborate poem that employs the phrase *nua phu sang chua*. The poem reminds villagers never to forget their roots in the village, no matter how successful they may become in the future:

*Dau rang thong che lanh binh
Thi san chua va nua phu
Nghia minh dung quen*

Even if one should command an army
Do not forget one's loyalty to
The manioc of the pagoda and the kouniak of the palace

chickens at home), with a smaller proportion of the population engaged in skilled trades and small businesses.⁵³ Like most traditional Vietnamese villages, Phuoc Yen has a communal house (*dinh*) which is a place to revere local and national spirits, and a Buddhist pagoda (*chua*). [Figures 7 & 8] Shaped like a kidney bean, Phuoc Yen is divided into four neighbourhoods (*giap*), each one having a shrine dedicated to its own protective deity.

The village also has its distinctive ways of celebrating important occasions. Boat racing on the Bo River commonly accompanies major events, such as the inauguration of new ceremonial structures. And every year, on the eve of the Lunar New Year, the villagers hang a self-standing “fairy-swing” (*du tien*) at the gate of the Buddhist pagoda.⁵⁴ Ultimate authority over affairs in Phuoc Yen is vested in the village committee, which is comprised of the *Truong lang* (village leader) and *Pho lang* (vice-leader) who are the local representatives of the state. Additionally, each of the village’s four neighbourhoods (*giap*) has its own leader (*truong giap*) whose function is both ceremonial and practical.⁵⁵

Today, most people in Phuoc Yen identify themselves as Buddhist, which could mean any number of things. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, “popular Buddhism in Vietnam is a mixture of some basic Zen elements and many practices of the Pure Land

⁵³ Nguyen Dinh Phi, *To Trinh ve viec xin cong nhan lang van hoa* [Report regarding application seeking certification as a cultural village] (Phuoc Yen, Vietnam: 2003).

⁵⁴ The tradition of erecting a fairy-swing on the eve of the lunar new year (Tet) is a practice common to some villages of north and central Vietnam. At mid-night on new year’s eve, the swing is released so that the spirits can be the first to play on it. After that, villagers can get on the swing. The swings are believed, by some, to be enchanted. A full description of this and other cultural festivals in Phuoc Yen can be found in Le Van Thuyen, ed. *Lang Phuoc Yen: Huong Chi Luoc Bien* [A Brief History of the Village of Phuoc Yen].

⁵⁵ The neighborhood leaders are responsible for making offerings during the Spring and Fall Rites at the village communal house, organizing the annual commemoration for lonely ghosts in the cemetery to lonely ghosts within their own neighborhood, overseeing sanitation for neighborhood pathways during festival occasions, and other business concerning the affairs of the neighborhood.

(Amidist) sect... a sect of Mahayana Buddhism that is very popular among the masses.”⁵⁶

Practitioners of Amidism are required to keep five precepts (avoidance of killing, stealing, lying, drunkenness, and wrong sexual practices), frequently invoke the Amitabha Sutra, and accumulate merit through the performance of good deeds.

Adherents express their determination to live by these guidelines through a ceremony at a pagoda where they vow to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Yet, although the majority of people in Phuoc Yen consider themselves Buddhist, only a handful have formally taken their refuge.

From the time of its introduction into Vietnam in the 2nd century CE, Buddhism has always been highly syncretic. Certainly, the first four dynasties of Dai Viet (the Dinh, the Le, the Ly and the Tran) all patronized Buddhism, making it Dai Viet’s national religion and a fundamental aspect of national identity. It is important to stress, however, that the Ly and Tran emperors had an ecumenical spirit. The Ly used Chinese style examinations, to a limited extent, in the recruitment of the civil service, and also established Dai Viet’s first Confucian university. Cuong Tu Nguyen highlights 11th century emperor Ly Thanh Tong as an outstanding example of the ecumenist spirit of his age, writing:

Although he was a devout Buddhist, Thanh Tong strongly supported Confucianism and other religions. It was he who had the Cultural Temple (*Van Mieu*) erected, the statues of Confucius and the Duke of Zhou made, the portraits of the seventy-two sages painted to be worshipped all year round.⁵⁷

Given the ecumenical inclinations of the ruling class, Vietnamese Buddhism at this time had a “strong syncretic character, routinely adapting to accommodate older indigenous

⁵⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, 6.

⁵⁷ Nguyen, “Rethinking Vietnamese Buddhist History: Is the *Thien uyen tap anh* a “Transmission of the Lamp” Text?” 111.

beliefs.”⁵⁸ Comparative historian Victor Lieberman describes the religious practice of the Ly monarchs as “heavily animistic, promiscuously eclectic, and non-exclusive,” paralleling China after the 10th century when the “Three Doctrines” synthesis was promoted.⁵⁹ Like Chinese Buddhism, Vietnamese Buddhism had absorbed elements of Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, and folk beliefs. Also like the Chinese, Vietnamese people “selected freely from Pure Land and Zen Buddhism, and showed little interest in defining adherence to a particular sect or school.”⁶⁰

For most villagers in Phuoc Yen, identifying as Buddhist usually means that they *might* display a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha or Avalokiteshvara (Vietnamese: Quan The Am Bo Tat), the bodhisattva of compassion, at the front of their ancestral shrine, and that they endeavour to avoid consuming animal products on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month. During important events such as funerals, and lineage-wide ceremonies for lonely ghosts, they often invite Buddhist monks to chant and preside over offerings to the deceased. In Phuoc Yen, the pagoda-going population is comprised mainly of the young (children and adolescents who participate in the weekly activities of *Gia dinh Phat tu* –The Buddhist Family) and elderly women. These women in particular make up the largest contingent at bi-monthly gatherings at the village pagoda, held on the new and full moons, and are also those most likely to be attendance at monthly *Tho bat quang trai* courses offered by the Buddhist Church of Vietnam.⁶¹

Even for Buddhists who have taken their refuge, however, being Buddhist in Phuoc Yen (and in Vietnam in general) does not preclude participation in other religious

⁵⁸ Nguyen, *History of Vietnamese Buddhism*, 102

⁵⁹ Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830, Vol. 1: Integration on the Mainland* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 357.

⁶⁰ McHale, *Print and Power*, 146.

⁶¹ A twenty four-hour retreat for lay-Buddhists held once a month.

practices, whether they be Taoist, Confucian, or animistic. Rites for the dead – funerals, death anniversaries and special ceremonies – almost always exhibit this fusion of religious influences. A typical funeral in Phuoc Yen will involve elements of each tradition: Buddhist monks chanting, offerings made to the local earth deity (*Tho than dat dai*), with different roles for male and female children -- a nod to Confucian notions about the family. The practice of Buddhism in Phuoc Yen confirms the much commented-upon flexibility and openness of Buddhism as a religion that privileges practice over doctrine, provides “tremendous leeway...for a variety of understandings,” and does little “to correct those who hold less than orthodox understandings.”⁶²

The intense syncretism of religious life in Phuoc Yen is typical of religious life in the villages of the region and in Vietnamese villages in general. This is why a village like Duong Son, located on the other side of the Bo River from Phuoc Yen, is such an anomaly.

The Setting II: Duong Son

In the mid-seventeenth century, about fifty years after the Nguyen Lords began to develop Phuoc Yen across the river, the first Catholic missionaries arrived and began proselytizing in Duong Son. By the end of that century, the whole village had converted to Roman Catholicism, and in 1696 Duong Son was officially entered into the records of the Vatican.⁶³ Since that date, every single resident of Duong Son has been Catholic.

⁶² Soucy, “The Problem with Key Informants,” 187.

⁶³ Pockets of individuals from the surrounding villages also converted to Catholicism, but not in the same numbers as they did in Duong Son. Neither written nor oral sources have attempted to explain why the early inhabitants of Duong Son unanimously adopted Catholicism. This would certainly be a question worthy of further scholarly exploration.

The population of Duong Son in 1996 (the most recent year that a formal population count was done) was 1,100. The main income streams in Duong Son are agriculture, raising silkworms, animal husbandry, making rice wine, small businesses and skilled trades.⁶⁴

As in Phuoc Yen, village endogamy is the common practice in Duong Son. In instances of village exogamy, increasingly common in the last several decades as a result of greater physical mobility, if the individual marrying into the village is not Catholic, he/she almost always converts to Catholicism. Duong Son's Catholicism is particularly striking because the Hue area is known as the capital of Vietnamese Buddhism.⁶⁵ Although there is an active Catholic diocese within the city of Hue itself, Catholicism has a minimal presence in the province's rural areas. Duong Son is one of only two villages in the province that is both village (*lang*) and parish (*giao xu*). In Duong Son, people talk about the village of Duong Son (*lang Duong Son*) and the parish of Duong Son (*giao xu Duong Son*) as though the two were interchangeable. And, for the most part, the village's socio-political identity and its religious identity overlap almost completely.

Entering the main gate of Duong Son, one is first greeted by an imposing yellow church with a pointed steeple, flanked on one side by a dilapidated convent, and on the other, by the parish's activity centre and kindergarden school. [Figure 3] The residential area of Duong Son is divided into eight neighborhoods (*xom*), each named after a patron saint. Until the outbreak of the American War, Duong Son was home to a convent

⁶⁴ Le Thanh Hoang, *Luoc su giao xu Duong Son Tong Giao Phan Hue 1696-1996* [History of Duong Son, Archdiocese of Hue 1696-1996] (Parish of Duong Son: Duong Son, Vietnam, 1996).

⁶⁵ For those interested in the history of Buddhism in the Hue area, an excellent study is: Thich Hai An and Ha Xuan Liem, *Lich Su Phat Giao Xu Hue* [History of Buddhism in the Hue Area] (Ho Chi Minh City: Nha Xuat Ban TP. Ho Chi Minh, 2001).

belonging to the order of the Lovers of the Cross, as well as a *petit seminaire*, dedicated to the formation of novices for the priesthood.

Apart from the administration of agricultural activities, supervised by the three-man Production Team (*Doi san xuat*), and the village market, which is self-regulating, most other aspects of social and cultural life in Duong Son are directed and administered by the parish. Mr. Phan Bon, president of the parish council, says that the parish is involved in “anything that has to do with the lives of the parishioners and the people.”⁶⁶ The most important celebrations in Duong Son are the high-points of the Catholic liturgical year: Christmas, Holy Week and the feast days of the saints. Specific months of the year are consecrated to important figures in the church: March is for St. Joseph; May for the Virgin Mary; June for the Sacred Heart of Jesus; October is Rosary month; and November is the month of All Saints. The month of May begins and ends with special masses dedicated to Mary, and throughout the month, a statue of the Virgin circulates among families in the village who hold nightly prayer meetings in their homes. People in Duong Son also celebrate the lunar new year (*Tet*) as everyone else in Vietnam does, but residents of Duong Son note that *Tet* is not nearly as important to the village’s cultural life as is Christmas.

Duong Son is also distinct among the neighbouring villages because of its relative economic prosperity, historically and into the present. Missionaries taught the villagers of Duong Son how to make rice wine and, for a long time people in Duong Son did well selling bottles of the strong spirits to other villages. During both the First and Second Indochina Wars, residents of Duong Son were vigilant in controlling access to the village in order to prevent the Viet Minh from infiltrating to galvanize anti-colonial support, as

⁶⁶ Phan Bon, personal interview, 2 July 2004.

they did in most Vietnamese villages. As a result of receiving protection from French and American forces during these wars, and the village's own systems of defense, Duong Son was spared many of the ravages of war during Vietnam's long struggle for independence.

Today, the signs of economic development in Duong Son can be seen in the houses of its villagers, most of them made of cement, with a higher proportion of multiple story houses here than in other villages.⁶⁷ All of Duong Son's village pathways have been paved, and it has a modern kindergarten. From kindergarten through high school, Duong Son's students rank among the top students in the district, and in the last ten years, the number of students from Duong Son who go on to university has been several times higher than the national average. As a result of its economic success in the last decade, Duong Son has been the subject of several spotlights on the national television channel, VTV.

Stories old and new

Today, Catholics and non-Catholics in Vietnam live in a state of relatively peaceful co-existence, but this was not always the case. In Duong Son, people tell stories of persecution during the anti-Catholic purges of the 19th century. Under the protective watch of foreign missionaries and native priests, Duong Son flourished until the early 19th century, when its Catholicism became a liability rather than an asset. Unlike their predecessors who tolerated Catholic missionaries, beginning with Emperor Minh Mang

⁶⁷ Remittances from overseas Vietnamese relatives are another important factor in explaining Duong Son's present economic prosperity. In Chapter 4, I explore in greater depth the impact of the Vietnamese diaspora on cultural life in both villages.

(r. 1820-1841), the Nguyen Emperors up until the 1870's viewed the spread of Catholicism as a potential threat to imperial sovereignty.⁶⁸ During his reign, Minh Mang ordered the execution of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Vietnamese Catholics. The bridge where Catholics were often summarily executed several kilometers outside Hue bears the name *Cau chem* (Beheading Bridge) to this day.

Duong Son lost many of its villagers as a result of various anti-Catholic campaigns. In 1994, while in the process of exhuming the remains of their ancestors for reburial in a newly created cemetery, villagers unearthed four skeletons lying in the fetal position, each wearing a rosary. It is believed that these are the remains of four women who were martyred during this period. The people of Duong Son continue to have tense relations with their neighbors in the village of Co Lao, resulting from a historic land dispute (1830-1832) that led members of Co Lao to bring accusations before Minh Mang's court regarding the practice of Catholicism in Duong Son. Seventy-three villagers in Duong Son were charged with various offenses, ranging from vandalism of property in Co Lao to practicing the sinister religion (*ta dao*) of Catholicism. Several leaders of Duong Son were executed and the remaining accused received corporeal punishment.⁶⁹

From its early days on Vietnamese soil, Catholicism has been associated with foreign domination. Catholic missionaries arrived in Vietnam in the mid-1500's and soon obtained permission from the Le Dynasty in the north and the Nguyen in the south to conduct missionary work. The most prominent missionary orders in Vietnam during

⁶⁸ Oscar Salemink, "One country, many journeys", in *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind and Spirit*, ed. Nguyen Van Huy and Laurel Kendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003): 20-51.

⁶⁹ Tran Quang Chu, *Giao Phan Hue 150 nam thanh lap: Hanh Huong Giao Phan: Tap 1* [150th anniversary of the Diocese of Hue: Diocesan Pilgrimage. Vol. 1] (Internally circulated manuscript, 2000).

the early period were the Jesuits and the Paris Foreign Mission Society (Mission Étrangère de Paris or MEP). France's first armed interventions in Vietnam in the mid 1800's were facilitated by the work of missionaries.

Later Nguyen monarchs, particularly Minh Mang, would prohibit Catholicism on the grounds that it was a foreign religion that threatened the political and cultural stability of Vietnam. In the mid 19th century, the Nguyen monarchs enacted anti-Catholic edicts known as *chi du cam dao*, which imposed penalties, including capital punishment on Catholics.⁷⁰ As a result of the Treaty of Sai Gon (1862) the Hue court conceded three provinces of southern coastal Vietnam (Gia Dinh, Dinh Tuong and Bien Hoa) to France, agreed to pay a sizeable indemnity, and promised that Catholicism could be practiced freely throughout Vietnam. Missionaries attempted various times to overthrow the Nguyen dynasty, either through encouraging the people to revolt or by paving the way for European military intervention, teaching their followers that their primary loyalty was to the Christian God and that "the authority of parents and superiors in the indigenous political hierarchy was thus recognized only insofar as it did not contradict divine injunction."⁷¹

Although some Catholics supported both anti-colonial wars, the majority of Catholics supported the French, and later the Americans, during these struggles. As Thich Nhat Hanh observes, the presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem, the Catholic hand-picked by the United States to be the leader of South Vietnam after the country was partitioned in 1954, only served to strengthen "the popular belief that Christianity is the religion of

⁷⁰ Mark W. McLeod, "Nguyen Truong To: A Catholic Reformer in Emperor Tu-duc's Court," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 25 (September 1994), 314.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 323-324.

Westerners and was introduced by them to facilitate the conquest of Vietnam.”⁷² Diem attempted to force the mass conversion of Vietnamese to Catholicism by providing economic incentives to converts. He also promoted Catholics to positions of political power and attempted to marginalize Buddhism through the closure of pagodas and detainment of monks. Diem’s actions led to public protests by Buddhists throughout Vietnam in 1963, and provided part of the impetus for the public self-immolation of seven Buddhist clergy, who soon became martyrs in the consciousness of the majority Buddhist population.⁷³ When remembering the Diem period, people in Phuoc Yen often used the popular verse “*Theo dao co gao ma an*”: You’ll have rice to eat if you convert.

In Phuoc Yen, people tell various stories about Catholic collaboration with colonial power. Mr. Nguyen Dinh An, my father’s first cousin, remembers one day from his childhood when French troops rounded up people from Phuoc Yen whom they suspected of revolutionary activity. They gathered the villagers by the dock of a market called *Cho Ke* and had them walk, one by one, down the road, while several Catholic villagers gave signals from behind the barrels in which they were hiding. A nod from the Catholics indicated that the villager was a Viet Minh, and would result in immediate execution. Villagers say that the three Catholic families were either killed or driven out of Phuoc Yen after this incident, and never returned.⁷⁴ At the present time, there is only one Catholic family in Phuoc Yen, of a man who married a woman from Duong Son and converted to Catholicism as a result of this union.

⁷² Thich Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, 20.

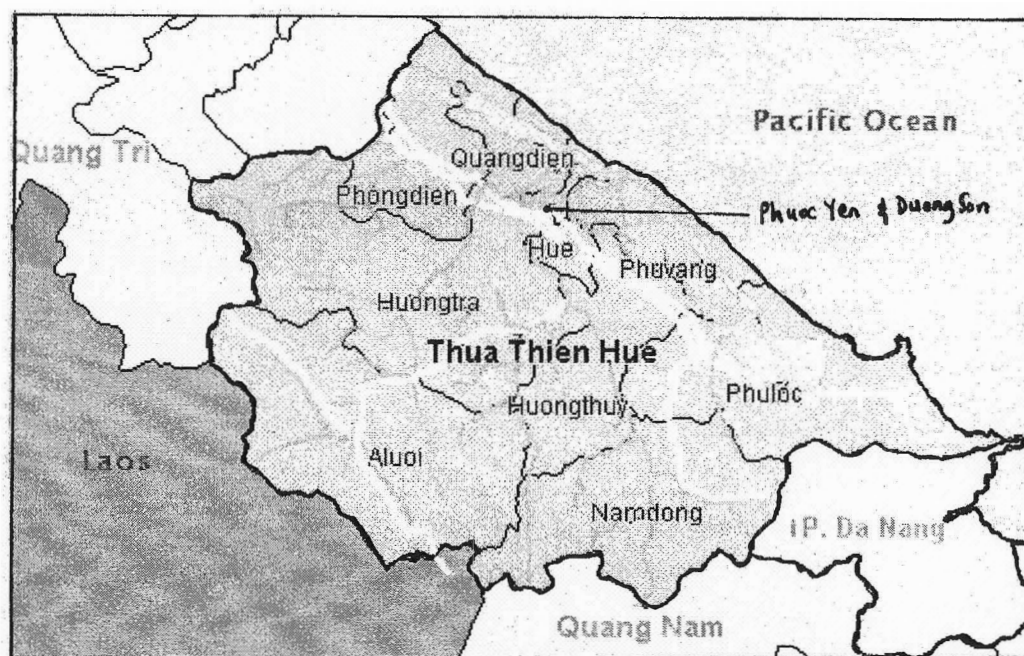
⁷³ Recently, the self-immolation of Vietnamese monks during the Buddhist revolt in 1963 has been re-interpreted not only as a statement against Diem’s religious persecutions, but also as a statement against American imperialism and against the war more generally. See R.T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁷⁴ Nguyen Dinh An, 26 May 2004.

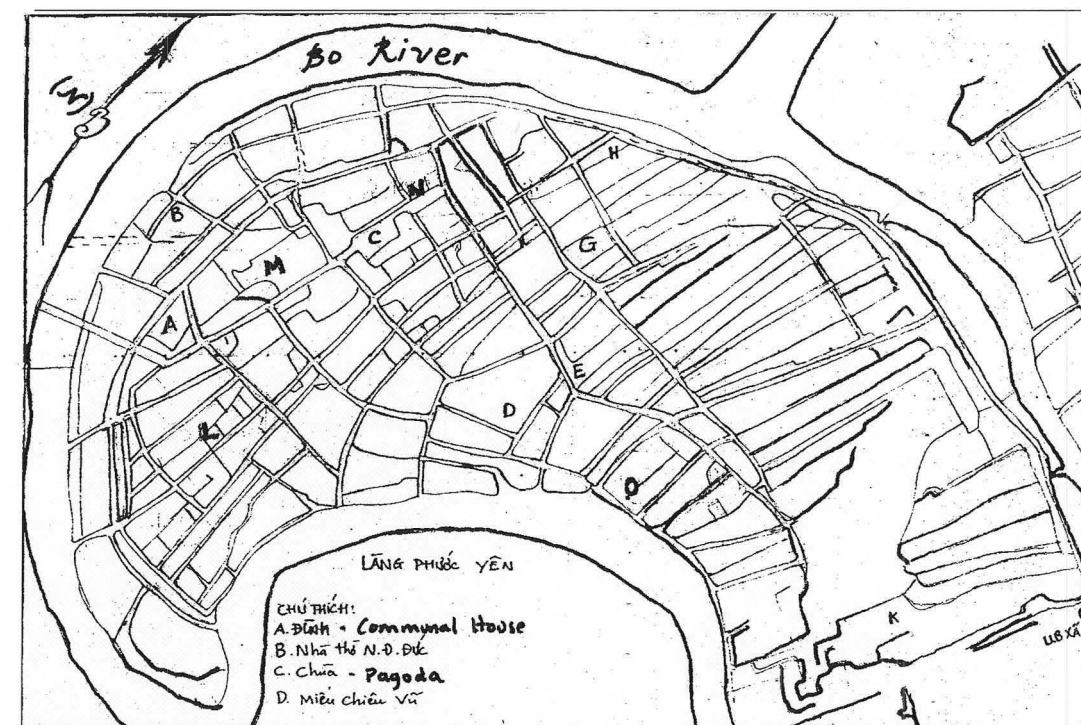
Anti-Catholic sentiment was especially high among the Confucian scholar gentry in Phuoc Yen. Mr. Hoang Van Cuong tells the story of one of his ancestors, one Hoang Van Vinh, who was the village leader (*ly truong*) of Phuoc Yen during the 1940's, when the Catholics were attempting to get a church built in the village. According to Mr. Cuong, Hoang Van Vinh was so determined to prevent the church from being built that, apparently, he said that he had swallowed his own seal (*dau an*). Mr. Vinh's protest came to little effect, given that the French were the governing authorities in the area at the time, and the Catholics went to colonial authorities to override Mr. Vinh's intransigence. The Catholics exacted their revenge on Mr. Vinh by choosing to build their church in a location that would block the good winds (*an huong*) from reaching his home.⁷⁵

In spite of this history of conflict, people in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son today seem to harbour little rancor or bitterness towards one another. Old stories have been replaced by new ones, like the story of Mr. Lieu and the Phan family. In the late 1970's Duong Son consecrated a new church and Phuoc Yen inaugurated a new pagoda – both these structures having been damaged during the American War. Each of these celebrations included neighbours from the other village. This thesis is an attempt to understand contemporary ritual practices and expressions of material culture within the context of these new and old stories, and in so doing, to tell a story of its own.

⁷⁵ Hoang Van Cuong, personal interview, 27 May 2004.

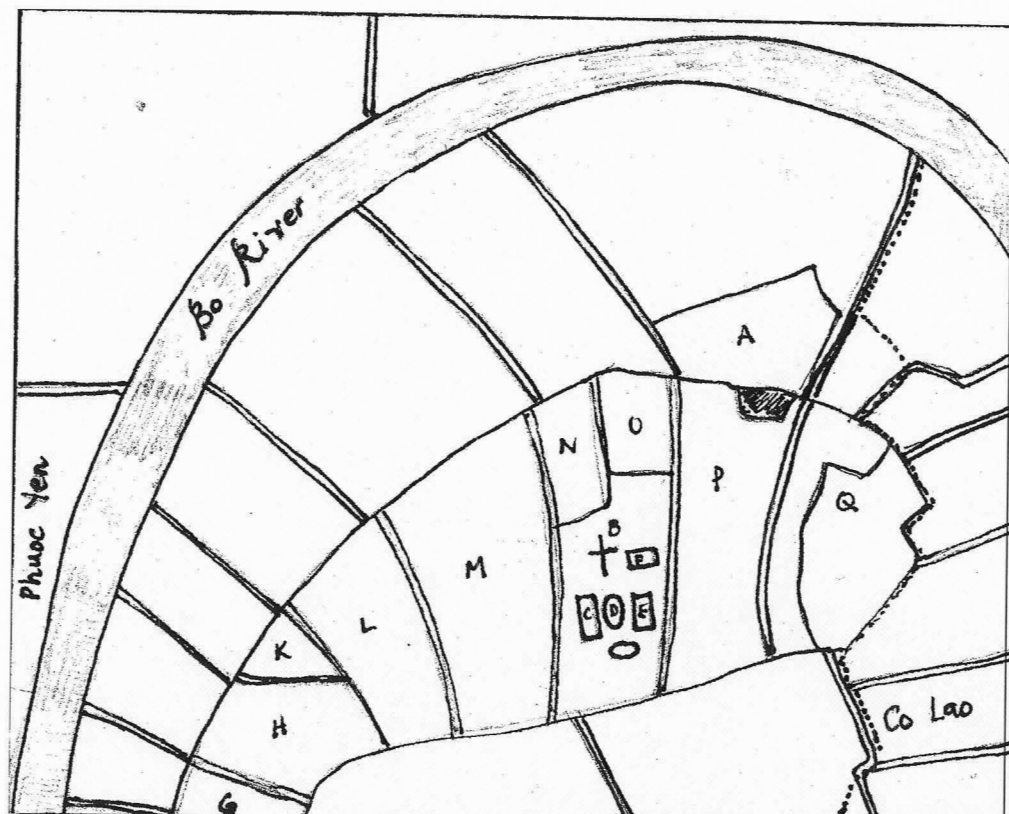


Map 1: Thua Thien Hue Province, Vietnam



Map 2: Village of Phuoc Yen

- | | |
|---|--|
| A. Communal house | H. Site of Nguyen lord's canon stand (c. 1626) |
| B. Shrine to Nguyen Dinh Duc | K. Gravesite of village founder |
| C. Pagoda | L. Southern neighbourhood |
| D. Chiêu Vũ shrine | M. Western neighbourhood |
| E. Shrine to Nguyen Huu Dat | N. Central neighbourhood |
| F. Site of Nguyen lord's warehouse (c.1626) | O. Eastern neighbourhood |



Map 3: Duong Son.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| A. Cemetery | H. Neighbourhood 2 |
| B. Church | K. Neighbourhood 3 |
| C. School | L. Neighbourhood 4 |
| D. Fountain of Our Lady of La Vang | M. & N. Neighbourhood 5 |
| E. Kindergarten | O. Neighbourhood 6 |
| F. House of Unity (Parish Hall) | P. Neighbourhood 7 |
| G. Neighbourhood 1 | Q. Neighbourhood 8 |

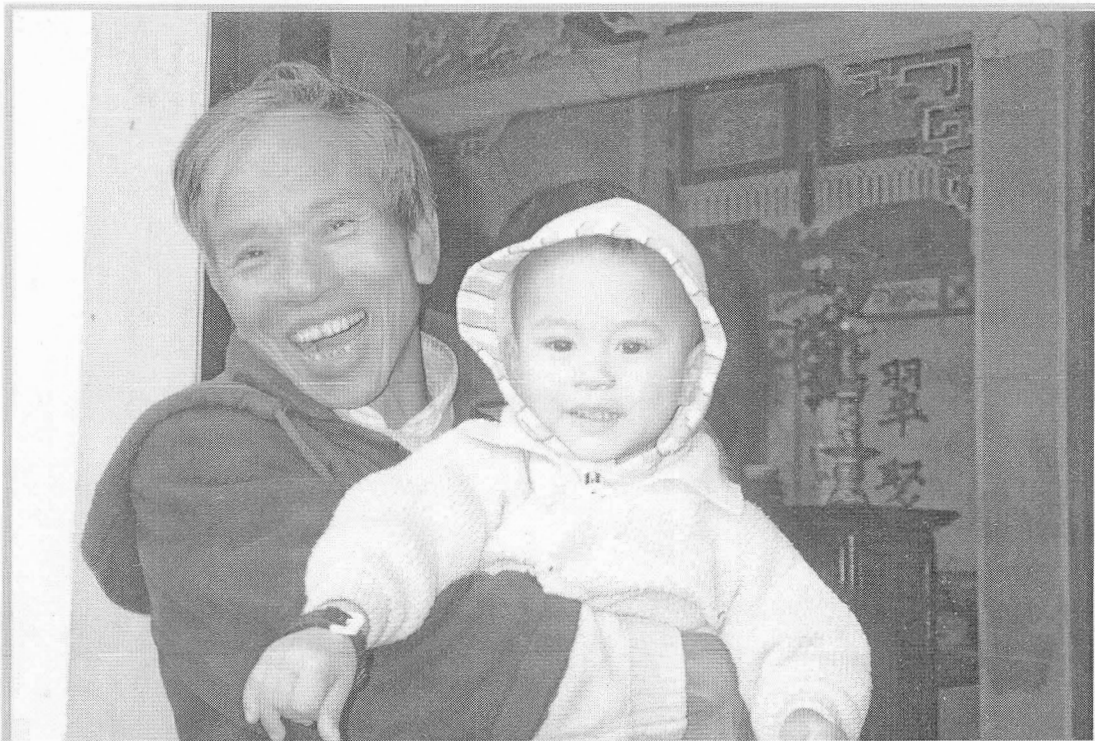


Figure 1: Nguyen Van Lieu and his grandson.



Figure 2: (from left to right) Phan Bon, Phan Thi Kien, Phan Hong An, the author, and Phan Van Duc.



Figure 3: Bo River.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Overview

This chapter provides an overview of, and critical reflections on, the methodology I used to collect and analyze data for this thesis, the bulk of which comes from field research conducted in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son during the summer of 2004. During this time, I lived in the city of Hue and commuted to the villages daily by motorcycle taxi. The chapter's sub-headings roughly mirror my own process of preparing for fieldwork, doing fieldwork, analyzing data, and writing up. In addition to describing the fieldwork process, I also aim to interrogate my own role as ethnographer and deal with ethical issues that I encountered while in the field.

Theoretical foundations

In studying contemporary ancestor worship practices in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son, and their historical development, my approach was ethnographic. Ethnographic fieldwork is a multi-dimensional process that requires the researcher to attend to many factors at once. Interviewing, observing, writing, developing relationships, organizing data, contributing to mundane aspects of communal life: these are all activities that the ethnographer must be prepared to carry out. As a research method, ethnography is “committed to uncovering and depicting indigenous meanings.”⁷⁶ Through immersion in the daily routines of individuals and communities, and participant-observation, the

⁷⁶ Robert E. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 12.

ethnographer seeks to grasp what the “experiences and activities of [participants] *mean to them*.”⁷⁷ [emphasis in the original]

In preparing myself to do fieldwork, I found the following works – a small fraction of what exists in the extant literature on oral history and ethnography – to be of great help. Donald A. Ritchie’s *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* and Valerie Yow’s *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* offer equally thorough, if basic, orientations on methods.⁷⁸ Both texts offered useful advice on conducting interviews, selecting and setting up equipment, archiving data and ensuring that projects conform to current legal and ethical standards. From Alessandro Portelli’s seminal book *The Battle of the Valle Giulia*, I learned to pay attention to the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, and also to attend to the subjectivity of narrators.⁷⁹ Portelli reminds scholars not to get so caught up in *what* is being said that they forget *how* it is being said. Thanks to Kirin Narayan’s important essay “How Native is a “Native” Anthropologist?”⁸⁰ I remained curious, throughout my fieldwork, about the impact that my status as both native and foreign within the villages was having on the data that I gathered. Finally, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw proved to be helpful before I began my research and throughout my time in the field. In particular, I used many of their note-taking strategies and believe that the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁸ Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide, 2nd edition*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Valerie Yow, *Recording oral history: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994).

⁷⁹ Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of the Valle Giulia: oral history and the art of dialogue*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

⁸⁰ Kirin Narayan, “How Native is a “Native” Anthropologist?” *American anthropologist*. 95: 3 (1993): 671-86.

comprehensiveness and descriptiveness of my fieldnotes greatly benefited from their suggestions.

Field research materials

The materials I brought to the field were simple enough: two recorders (a mini-cassette recorder and a digital mini-disk recorder), a camera, notebooks, other basic stationary and a laptop computer. I do believe, however, that of all of the tools within the ethnographer's tool-kit, the ability to really be present with people – to listen with open ears, open mind and open heart – are more important than the most sophisticated technical equipment. This is something that ethnographic field manuals seldom discuss, but is intuitively obvious to the skilled practitioner – to be a good ethnographer, you have to be open and receptive. An important aspect of fieldwork is creating the conditions where you can be open and receptive, a challenging task while doing fieldwork within a culture that may not be your own, or in demanding physical conditions.

Fieldwork

Selecting participants

In each village, there were several key individuals who gave to me generously of their time and knowledge; and through them, I was able to meet other community members and gain access, as an observer/participant, to various familial and communal

ceremonies. Mr. Nguyen Van Lieu,⁸¹ and Mr. Nguyen Dinh Ân,⁸² helped to orient me to the spiritual geography of Phuoc Yen. Also through Mr. Lieu, I was able to attend ceremonies at the Buddhist pagoda, where I was introduced to the other two members of the village's Rites Committee, who would later become important interviewees.⁸³ Mr. Lieu's family – his wife and two of his children – also shared their time and knowledge with me during informal conversations at the Lieu's dinner table. It was through such channels that I met all of my participants in Phuoc Yen. Sometimes, a key interviewee would introduce me to a potential participant at a ceremony; at other times, knowing that I was the granddaughter of Mr. and Mrs. Muu, people would introduce themselves to me, and we would begin a conversation. Therefore, I never had to do any formal "recruiting" of participants for the study.

In Duong Son, I met participants in a similar manner. From previous trips, I had become close friends with the Phan family, who became my key contacts in the village. They, in turn, introduced the parish priest in Duong Son, Father Le Van Hoang, one of the most influential individuals in the community. One of the members of the Phan family, Mr. Phan Bon, is also the present head of the parish council. The Phan family and Father Hoang were invaluable resources, and the Phans in particular, helped me contact other people in Duong Son.

⁸¹ Mr. Lieu, whom I call 'uncle', is my father's fourth cousin and a senior member of the Nguyen Van lineage to which we both belong. Presently a farmer in his early sixties, Mr. Lieu has been an active member in the Buddhist pagoda since his youth, was a South Vietnamese soldier during the American war, participated in the Buddhist revolt in Hue in 1963 and is presently one of the three members of the village Rites Committee.

⁸² Mr. An is my father's first cousin and a former resident of Phuoc Yen. He is now an American citizen, and was in the village on an extended holiday while I was doing field research.

⁸³ The Rites Committee in Phuoc Yen is a group of three men who officiate Buddhist and non-Buddhist rites in the village. The Committee's function and operations will be explained in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Throughout my field research, I found people in both villages extremely accommodating, never hesitating to make themselves available to answer my questions or take me to visit particular monuments. Their own generosity and my particular connections with them (through kinship association in Phuoc Yen, and through a shared religion in Duong Son) likely facilitated this process a great deal.⁸⁴ Furthermore, my study was made easier because of the strong historical consciousness, and the importance that the people place on scholarly achievement, in both villages.⁸⁵ By participating in this study, and supporting my academic project, they were continuing the long Vietnamese tradition of supporting young scholars achieve their goals – scholars who will then bring honour and rewards back to the places whence they came. Furthermore, I was certainly not the first academic to pass through the villages requesting information, and so my activities there did not strike people as completely alien.⁸⁶

Participant observation

Participant observation was possible in a wide range of contexts, from rituals to the activities of everyday life. In Phuoc Yen, these ceremonies included death

⁸⁴ Catholic communities in Vietnam are known for their insularity. Although the Phan family and other villagers in Duong Son have positive relationships with non-Catholics, many interviewees expressed sentiments of Catholic exceptionalism (to be discussed in Chapter Three). As such, my own identification as Catholic immediately established a rapport between myself and the people of Duong Son that would not have existed were I not Catholic.

⁸⁵ Academic achievement is highly valued within Vietnamese culture and parents and families make immense sacrifices for their children's educations.

⁸⁶ On the outskirts of Phuoc Yen lie the ruins of a temple built by the Cham, the people displaced by the Vietnamese during the period of conquest and settlement of the region in the 1600's. It was common knowledge around the village that several years back a team of researchers from a university in Hanoi had been investigating the monument. Likewise, the residents of Duong Son have become somewhat accustomed to outsiders coming to investigate their community. For instance, several years ago, the state television company, VTV, made several news segments featuring Duong Son as a model of social and economic progress.

anniversary ceremonies, funerals, lineage ancestor worship ceremonies, the consecration of lineage houses, and extraordinary rituals that occur with less frequency. An example of such an extraordinary ceremony would be a series of rituals organized by the Nguyen Dinh family (first cousins of my father) which surrounded the moving of the remains of nine members of their family from locations within the village and in Hue, in order to have them re-buried in one site in Phuoc Yen's cemetery. Observing this ceremony was particularly interesting for me, because the family had specifically requested that I take photographs of the proceedings and make prints for them. This would be one of several occasions during which my status as a researcher – or, more correctly, as one of the only people around with a camera – was extremely advantageous.

In Duong Son, I did not attend as many ceremonies as I did Phuoc Yen, partly because there are simply fewer ancestor worship ceremonies held in Duong Son, and partly because of my outsider status in the village. Although people in Duong Son received me with kindness, and had a particular affinity toward me because of my Roman Catholicism, the brief period of time I spent in the village (two months) was not enough to make me an insider. I attended several death anniversary celebrations, but had to rely on descriptions of interviewees for information on other rituals such as funerals and the inauguration of family houses of memory.⁸⁷ I will discuss further how my status as an insider/outsider differed in the two villages in a subsequent section on reflexive ethnography.

⁸⁷ As previously mentioned, lineages traditionally do not have houses for ancestor worship in Duong Son, as they do in Phuoc Yen. In recent years, however, a handful of families in Duong Son have erected family houses of memory (*nha tu duong*) where a small number of their own ancestors are remembered.

Interviewing

Much of the data for this project is drawn from interviews done in the villages.⁸⁸ These interviews usually took place in people's homes, offices (in the case of the parish priest), or within public/familial spaces during rituals. Several interviews were conducted during walks, as key interviewees were orienting me to the major landmarks in the villages.⁸⁹ All interviews were either semi-structured or unstructured. I rarely arrived at someone's home with a formal interview schedule, but instead, had a cluster of questions in my head that I would start off with. I focused on follow-up questions based on what interviewees said. One of the advantages of doing research on material culture, as I was doing, is that material objects make excellent starting points for interviews. In my experience, people generally find it easier to talk about something concrete – like the objects on a shrine, or a particular ritual practice – than about highly personal things (e.g., painful memories) or abstract concepts (e.g., power). Some interviews were tape recorded and augmented with simultaneous jottings; several were recorded without the benefit of jottings; and a significant portion of the interviews (about half) were handwritten because interviewees preferred not to be tape-recorded.

People in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son shared their stories – including painful ones of war and post-war economic hardship openly. I did not, for example, sense any of the “psychological repression” that anthropologist Gavin Smith encountered when he

⁸⁸ In total, I conducted about a dozen hour-long, audio-recorded interviews between the two villages, and an equal number of interviews that were not audio-recorded.

⁸⁹ These walkabouts, as I would think of them, reinforced for me the assertion made by oral historians and anthropologists regarding the importance of places and objects as anchors of memory and stories. See Carolyn Hamilton's “Living by Fluidity: Oral Histories, Material Custodies and the Politics of Archiving,” in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton (Cape Town: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002). and also, Julie Cruikshank and Tatiana Argounova, “Reinscribing Meaning: memory and identity in Sakha Republic (Yakutia),” *Arctic Anthropology* 37:1 (2000): 96-119.

interviewed marginalized people in Andean communities.⁹⁰ Nor did people have any hesitation about my including their first-hand accounts in my M.A. thesis. On a few occasions, people in both villages would speak in whispers, even though there was no one else around, when discussing religious repression in Vietnam. For instance, when a member of Duong Son's parish council talked about being "invited to work" with the local authorities (*bi moi di lam viec*), he would speak in these hushed tones.⁹¹ "Invited to work" is a euphemism for being ordered to the district office to answer questions regarding activities that authorities consider suspicious. My interviewee recounted a story of being "invited to work" with the authorities on account of a Bible study group for couples that was meeting regularly in Duong Son.⁹²

Similarly, several times when I was at the home of an active member of Phuoc Yen's Buddhist pagoda, he would quietly pull me to one side and show me something – a document or a photograph – that he kept hidden. Once, it was the photograph of Le Manh That (a Buddhist scholar) and Tue Si (a Buddhist monk) who had both been imprisoned by the government for over a year. Another time, the item was a letter written by a high-ranking Buddhist abbot in Hue, criticizing the government for its lack of true commitment to religious freedom. Clearly, he realized that it would be inconvenient if certain people knew that he was in possession of these items.

⁹⁰ Gavin Smith, " 'He holds him with a glittering eye': Intellectuals and the re-covering of the Past," in *Memory at the Margins: Essays in Anthropology and World History*, in ed. Gregory Blue (Victoria: World History Caucus, 2002): 1-24.

⁹¹ I have chosen not to reveal the name of the interviewees cited in this and the subsequent paragraph in order to protect their anonymity.

⁹² Anonymous interviewee in Duong Son, personal interview, 21 July 2004. Vietnamese state authorities tend to view meetings of religious groups of any kind (even Bible studies) with a suspicious eye. As such, religious groups must ask for state permission to conduct routine celebrations (Christmas, Wesak, etc.) and to gather for some extraordinary reason, such as conducting a course of some kind.

While the lowered voices and whispers certainly are indicative of the fear interviewees have of the government, their willingness to share these stories with me could be interpreted as a gesture both of trust and resistance, as well as, perhaps, a sign of how much times have changed in Vietnam. I have occasionally wondered whether the hesitance that some interviewees expressed over being tape-recorded might not have been based in a similar kind of fear.

Writing fieldnotes

While in Vietnam I used Kirin Narayan's *Storytellers, Scoundrels and Saints* and Emerson, Fretz and Shaw's *Taking Ethnographic Fieldnotes* as my methodological anchors.⁹³ From the examples and advice provided by these writers, I tried to write fieldnotes that were rich in descriptive detail of scene and place. When I recorded interviews by hand, I would write as much of what the interviewee said as I could, noting verbatim passages in quotation marks for future use. In these transcripts, I also made note of my own questions. At some point during or after each day in the field, I structured one, if not two, opportunities to review my jottings and to flesh out details from the interviews that I had not had a chance to capture in the moment.

⁹³ Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*; Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989)

Audio-recordings

At the beginning of my field research, I tried to audio-record most verbal interactions with people in the villages, but soon found this method impractical. As time progressed, I more frequently chose to write notes by hand during conversations, rather than record them. I never asked why people requested not to be audio-recorded, but I surmise that it may have to do with the nature of living in a semi-authoritarian regime, with limited religious freedom. Modesty might have been another reason. Some interviewees would tell me that what they had to say wasn't all that important, and recommended that we just chat, saying that if I did find what they said worthwhile, we could arrange another conversation that could be audio-recorded.

The decision to audio-record less, as the research progressed, was also a practical one. It is well known that the amount of time consumed in the process of transcribing audio-recorded interviews to written text is immense -- four to six hours, usually, to transcribe one hour of tape. Without the assistance of voice-recognition software (none, to my knowledge, has been designed for the Vietnamese language) or a paid research assistant, I knew that I would be doing all the transcribing (and simultaneous translation from Vietnamese to English) by myself. Knowing that I could only allocate so much time to this process, I eventually came to record only the conversations that I believed would yield rich material for quotations within the thesis. Ideally, I would have chosen to talk to many more interviewees and audio-record many more interactions. However, given the scope of this work, and my awareness of my own capabilities and limitations, I felt that I had to make this pragmatic choice.

Other sources of data from the field

Written materials gathered in the field included maps, the village covenants (*huong uoc*) of Phuoc Yen and Duong Son, applications made by political leaders of Phuoc Yen and Duong Son to district authorities to have the designation of “cultural village” (*lang van hoa*) applied to their villages, and pieces of documentary evidence provided by the parish priest of Duong Son and by the president of the parish council. In other parts of my thesis, I discuss in greater depth the way bureaucratization and systematization have impacted ancestor worship practices in Duong Son. Here, I draw attention to their impacts on data gathering for this project.

Thanks to the meticulous record keeping of Father Hoang and Mr. Phan Bon, I was able to obtain records of ceremonial proceedings and village administrative structures that have greatly helped me to develop an understanding of contemporary social and cultural life in Duong Son.⁹⁴ In Phuoc Yen, people do not conduct ceremonies according to written records, nor are the social and cultural structures of the village documented in a written form to the extent that they are in Duong Son. Members of Phuoc Yen’s Rites Committee occasionally use written texts, such as sutras (*kinh*), during a ceremony, but the ceremony itself has not been pre-scripted in written form, as Catholic ceremonies in Duong Son would be. As a result, it was mainly through conversations and observation that I gained an understanding of social and cultural life in Phuoc Yen, whereas in Duong Son, I could supplement conversations with written materials.

⁹⁴ Records of parish life are filed and stored in Father Hoang’s office. Upon my request, Mr. Bon and Father Hoang gave me access to documents such as the Parish Statutes (*Noi Quy Giao Xu*), scripts used in the annual commemoration of the village founder, held on the eighth day of the first lunar month, and descriptions of responsibility for various parish committees. Father Hoang and Mr. Bon both have computers, and all of these documents were word-processed. Additionally, the parish hall, known as The House of Unity (*Nha Hiep Nhat*) contains flow-charts mapping out village and parish governance structures.

However, even obtaining basic documents such as the village covenant of Phuoc Yen required mediation. These documents are held by the village leader (*truong thon*), who has been known to use his position of authority to extort money from former-Vietnamese nationals (*Viet kieu*) who require his stamp of approval for activities they wish to carry out in the village. It was to my benefit that one of Mr. Lieu's sons was a good friend of the village leader's son, and, in having him accompany me to the village leader's house, I was able to obtain the documents I required without any more payment than a few words of appreciation.

Reflexive ethnography

As in most of the social sciences and humanities, there has been a movement towards greater self-reflexivity within the ethnographic enterprise in recent years. It is no longer considered sufficient for ethnographers just to observe participants; they must now also observe themselves and interrogate how their identity (race, class and gender) and position(s) of power in relation to their participants and communities impact their relationships with participants and ultimately, the data they gather.⁹⁵ The contemporary ethnographer, says Charlotte Aull Davies, "cannot simply take her insider's knowledge to be either unquestionably complete or true."⁹⁶ As ethnography is highly experiential and interactive, it behooves the ethnographer to attend to the particular relationships that develop between herself and her interviewees. Stories, says Alessandro Portelli, are always told to specific people within specific contexts for specific reasons. Furthermore, stories are not so much collected as they are co-created through the rapport between the

⁹⁵ Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A guide to researching selves and others*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 45.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

interviewer and interviewee.⁹⁷ Knowing these things, I attempted to remain alert to my own emotions, and my identity within these communities while doing fieldwork.

As I noted in the introduction, Phuoc Yen is my ancestral village. Of the thirty-two lineages in Phuoc Yen, I belong to the Nguyen Van lineage, of which my grandfather is the ceremonial head (*truong ho*). Vietnamese culture is a culture in which longevity is prized and the elderly are revered. As a result, my grandparents -- the most long-lived people in their respective lineages -- are treated with an added degree of respect and attention, especially by younger generations. It was also significant to my research that Mr. Nguyen Van Lieu, a key participant in the study, was a member of the Rites Committee, and had formerly held political office in the village. Like me, he also belonged to the Nguyen Van lineage. Being able to introduce myself as the granddaughter of Mr. and Mrs. Muu, and/or to have Mr. Lieu accompany on my visits to people certainly encouraged people to open up to my questions.

If my family relations conferred any special status upon me, it was generally manifested in my being granted permission to do things that other young women in the village were not allowed to do. For instance, at lineage ceremonies, I was frequently seated on a mat with the senior women in a lineage, or occasionally even with the men, although never on the central mat where the male elders of the lineage and their sons ate. These kinds of special treatment may also have been the product of my identity as a *Viet kieu* returning to her ancestral village. While my status as the granddaughter of two well-respected members of the community opened doors for me that may have remained closed to those without such connections, I do not think that this aspect of my identity

⁹⁷ Portelli, *The Battle of the Valle Giulia*, 25.

caused potential interviewees to feel coerced into participating in my study.⁹⁸ Certainly, I never considered using the privileges I had for such ends.

In Phuoc Yen and Duong Son, I perceived myself, and I think others perceived me, as a cultural hybrid: both an insider and an outsider, simultaneously “native” and “foreign.” Being a descendent of Phuoc Yen, however, I was more of an insider there than I was in Duong Son. Although I had never lived in the village, my interviewees and I could draw upon a body of shared history. Invariably, a meeting with a potential participant would begin with the person making a statement that established a connection between us: “I went to high school with your father”; “I knew your uncle as a kid”; “Your aunt was a beautiful lady.” My participation in this world of shared meaning made me feel like I could take greater liberties in Phuoc Yen, such as taking photographs at ceremonies or dropping in at people’s homes for conversations – both related and unrelated to my research – at a moment’s notice.

My first introduction to Duong Son came in December 2002, by way of Mr. Lieu. When I walked through the streets of Duong Son, most people responded to me as they would to most other friendly looking Vietnamese strangers: by keeping a polite distance. As an outsider to the village, I was much more conscious of Western scholarly protocols in Duong Son than I was in Phuoc Yen, and felt more inhibited in my capacity as a researcher there than I did in my own village. Whereas I had photographed ceremonies freely in Phuoc Yen, I was much more cautious about taking photographs in Duong Son.

⁹⁸ Although my grandparents are well respected in the village, they do not possess authority over younger generations in any real way. If anything, as all of their children and grandchildren live overseas, they are dependent on the generosity of extended family and friends to care for their daily needs. As such, while I was doing research in Phuoc Yen, I often found myself in the position of expressing gratitude to the people who have been their caretakers.

At the same time, to say that I was either a complete outsider or a dispassionate observer in Duong Son would also be off the mark. In Duong Son, I had multiple identities. My eagerness to learn about Duong Son, the connection shared between my own family and the Phan family, combined with the fact that I am Catholic, immediately endeared me to the Phans, my first contacts in the village. A few days after our first meeting, Ms. Kien asked me to be the godmother of her brother's (Mr. Duc) second-born child. This was before I had any plans to do academic research in Duong Son, and I accepted. In so doing, I became part of the Phan family, in a spiritual sense, and this meant that I was welcomed as a family member when, a year and a half later, I returned to Duong Son as a researcher.

On this first visit to Duong Son, I also developed a friendship with the parish priest, Father Le Van Hoang. His support of my work certainly gave me a degree of credibility that was essential to my work in the village. As with my friendship with the Phan family, my connection with Father Hoang developed in part because of our shared religious background. I would say then without hesitation that my self-identification as Roman Catholic had an impact on the rapport I developed with interviewees in Duong Son.

Because this project grew out of relationships I have developed with people in both villages, I knew from the beginning that it would be impossible to take a detached scholarly stance to the research. At the same time, despite the deep connections I had in both villages – by virtue of kinship in Phuoc Yen and through shared religion in Duong Son – in important ways I remained an outsider in both communities, even in my ancestral village. The very activities involved in ethnography – writing fieldnotes, tape-

recording speech, taking photographs, and asking questions that other people normally would not ask – contributed, in part, in marking me as different within these communities.

Being *Viet kieu* also means that I have been given a whole different set of chances than someone who has lived an entire life in a rural Vietnamese village. My level of education, my height, the fact that I speak English and carry a foreign passport are all things that many people in the villages would wish for themselves or for their children. That I occupied a position of privilege in relation to my interviewees, in these respects, was both obvious and unmistakable.

While it is important to recognize the limitations that being an outsider imposes on the researcher, sometimes the imperfect knowledge of the researcher can also be an asset in the field, as anthropologist Alexander Soucy points out in, “The Problem with Key Informants.” Soucy argues that the anthropologist’s ignorance with regard to language, social expectation and custom can be a positive in that it shifts power dynamics within the field-site, enabling marginalized members of the community to speak. Soucy, for instance, says that he often “seemed to fit into the role of a curious child rather than an expert,” and that this resulted in shifting “the cultural capital on the side of women who were then in a position to speak authoritatively” within a cultural context almost always dominated by male ritual specialists.⁹⁹

Ethical Issues

⁹⁹Soucy, ‘The Problem with Key Informants,’ 186.

Many ethnographers find that, despite having had their projects vetted by the ethical review boards of their university, fieldwork raises ethical questions and dilemmas that they may not have been prepared for, and for which they must improvise responses while in the field. In conducting field research for this project, a few unforeseen ethical challenges arose both in the field, and, later on, during the process of writing up my findings.

While conducting interviews in Duong Son, for instance, I experienced what Kathleen Blee has called the “dilemma of empathy” – a situation in which the researcher’s interviewees assume that the researcher shares their values by virtue of a common basis of identification.¹⁰⁰ People in Duong Son often shared views with me that I believe they would not have shared had I been of another religion. For instance, they often expressed sentiments about the superiority of Catholicism as a religion, because they believed it to be less superstitious than other religions. This was not a view that I shared, but my interviewees seemed to assume that I would understand and be sympathetic to their assessments because I myself am Catholic.

There is, of course, no definitive answer to the question of how a researcher ought to respond in situations such as this, especially when the dilemma of empathy involves interviewees with whom one shares affective bonds outside of the research relationship. My own response was not premeditated but improvised, based on my own desire to be an agent of inter-religious dialogue, and to promote understanding, rather than let misunderstandings grow. From this position, I did occasionally challenge the views of

¹⁰⁰ Kathleen M. Blee, “Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan” *The Journal of American History* (Sept 1993), 605. In Blee’s own dilemma of empathy, individuals she interviewed who had participated in white supremacist groups assumed that Blee, because she was a white woman, would share their racially stereotyped views.

my interviewees, by sharing my own knowledge of other religions and asking them to interrogate where their own perceptions of other religions came from. I do not sense that any of my interviewees shifted their views as a result of my interventions, but I do feel that, as much as possible, I tried to make my own views clear in order to minimize the possibility of what Blee calls a “fraudulent empathy.”

The dilemma of empathy, however, does not end when the researcher hits the stop button on the tape-recorder. Rather, it becomes even more significant during the writing-up stage. In presenting my findings from the field, one of the most vexing ethical issues for me has been what Portelli calls the problem of “restitution.”¹⁰¹ Aware that this knowledge should be returned in some digestible way to the communities from which they are drawn, I have wrestled with how best to do this, given that my thesis will be written in academic English and takes a critical view of what interviewees said. The fact that I have familial and personal ties to both villages far beyond the scope of this research makes the issue of restitution even more complex. How does the researcher balance the need for honest scholarship with the desire to maintain ongoing relationships with participants, who in this case are one’s family and friends?

Charlotte Davies advises ethnographers to remain mindful of two audiences during the write-up phase of their work: their community of scholarly peers, and the communities from which the research was derived. Davies recommends including people from both groups in the write-up phase, for instance, by getting them to read drafts of manuscripts. She considers involving research subjects and end-users to be “extremely important and should be sought and considered” early in the analytical process.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Portelli, *The Battle of the Valle Giulia*, 18.

¹⁰² Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, 228.

I believe that Davies' point is a valid one, but one that can be challenging to put into practice. If the research findings are presented in a language (i.e., English) that research subjects are not familiar with, is the ethnographer responsible for translating drafts into the language of research subjects? In my own case, this ideal was impractical. However, I could envision translating a final copy of my thesis into Vietnamese and distributing it to interested parties in the villages. As well, I have thought that in future trips to Vietnam, I will try to arrange to give some public talks in the village on the outcomes of my research. As it is my intention to remain in close contact with both villages in the future, the likelihood that such restitutionary activities will take place is high.

As for the question of how to write about research subjects who are at the same time one's friends, but who also express views that one does not share (solipsisms of various kinds), I think that the best one can do is to strike a balance between honesty and sensitivity, and try to treat the testimonies of interviewees critically and respectfully.

Chapter 3

Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Phuoc Yen and Duong Son

This chapter presents a comparison of ancestor worship practices in contemporary Phuoc Yen and Duong Son, as they are expressed through material culture and ritual activity. It also examines people's motivations for practicing ancestor worship and the role of the clergy in each village in supporting and regulating these practices. In comparing ancestor worship across these four domains – 1. motivations for ancestor worship; 2. material culture; 3. ritual expressions; and, 4. role of the clergy -- my goal is to show that both similarities and differences exist between ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son. The evidence presented in this chapter demonstrates that ancestor worship is an important aspect of religious and social life in both villages, and serves similar functions in both places: expressing gratitude to the dead and drawing together the living. At the same time, significant differences exist between the villages in relation to people's rationales for worshipping ancestors, how they understand the relationship between the living and the dead, and their conception of ancestors as supernatural beings. As well, in terms of rituals and material culture, ancestor worship is much simpler in Duong Son than Phuoc Yen. Finally, the clergy play significantly different roles in the two villages, and understand their responsibilities, as ritual specialists, in quite distinct ways. I assert that the differences in ancestor worship in the villages can be attributed primarily to the presence of Catholicism in Duong Son since the late 17th century. As in most other aspects of social life in Duong Son, Catholicism has penetrated deeply into the practice of ancestor worship, thereby giving it a different character than ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen, a "typical" Vietnamese village in a religious sense, in that its inhabitants

practice a mixture of Pure Land Buddhism and tutelary deity worship that freely integrates elements of Taoism, Confucianism and animism.

A secondary aim of this chapter is to lay the foundations for Chapters 4 and 5. An understanding of ancestor worship as it exists in the villages at the present time is essential groundwork for Chapter 4, which examines ancestor worship in its historical context, focusing on how the practice has been transformed over the last four decades. The empirical evidence in this chapter also supports the theoretical arguments made in Chapter 5 regarding the dialectical relationship between religion and culture, and the impact of globalization on local cultural practices.

Overview

Since my early visits to Phuoc Yen, I have had the impression that there are as many homes for the dead in my ancestral village as there are for the living. Just try to imagine: in a community with fewer than three hundred family homes, there are thirty-two lineage ancestor houses, an even greater number of houses for branches of lineages, six communal burial areas, not to mention ancestral shrines inside and little shrines outside of every family home dedicated to the deceased. Additionally, families who have ancestors that were high-ranking court officials often maintain a memorial house to their illustrious forbearers. A walk around Phuoc Yen provides ample evidence to support Shaun Malarney's claim that "[t]he dead, in a way, live on everywhere in Vietnam."¹⁰³

Filial piety and ancestor worship are recognized in Phuoc Yen's village covenant, which states that "Worshipping ancestors expresses the principle of 'Drink the water,

¹⁰³ Shaun Kingsley Malarney, "Weddings and Funerals in Contemporary Vietnam," 185.

remember the source' ...[and] villagers should retain the cultural character and traditions that our ancestors left us."¹⁰⁴ Village authorities also take this opportunity to remind the villagers to "Exercise frugality and avoid all superstitious activities." However, beyond these general guidelines, there are few hard-and-fast rules governing material expressions of ancestor worship inside or outside of the home. People in contemporary Phuoc Yen are free to erect ancestral shrines, gravesites and lineage houses in the way that they please, so long as they have received the authorization of the local party officials.

During the Nguyen Dynasty, certain decorative forms – such as dragons and phoenixes – were reserved exclusively for the gravesites of individuals of a particular social rank, such as mandarins or court officials. In postcolonial Vietnam, however, no such rules are in effect, and hence one sees these figures used liberally on all ceremonial architecture in Phuoc Yen and elsewhere.¹⁰⁵ Recognizing the destruction to sacred architecture caused by successive wars, village authorities support the efforts of villagers to reconstruct these monuments.

Although ancestor worship is an integral part of life in Duong Son, the village's memorial landscape is much more barren than Phuoc Yen's. As an exclusively Catholic village, Duong Son has neither a pagoda nor a communal house, essential features of every traditional Vietnamese village with a sizeable non-Catholic population. The village cemetery in Duong Son is the one communal burial area in the village. However, almost all families in Duong Son have an ancestral shrine, although a few families only have shrines to God and other religious icons. There are no lineage houses in Duong Son,

¹⁰⁴ Covenant to create a cultured village, Village of Phuoc Yen, District of Quang Tho, Huong Dien [*Quy uoc xay dung lang van hoa Phuoc Yen Xa Quang Tho, Huong Dien*], 1998, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Duong Phuoc Thu, personal interview, 7 June 2004.

although in the last two decades, a handful of memorial houses have been built by families to their ancestors. About five such houses currently exist in Duong Son.

Rationale for ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son

Phuoc Yen

Residents of Phuoc Yen articulated a number of different motivations for their practices of ancestor worship. When asked why they worship their ancestors, people often invoke the traditional Chinese adage “*am duong nhat ly*” (life death one principle), meaning that one should treat the dead the same way one treats the living.¹⁰⁶ Hence, while one’s ancestors lived, one cared for their material needs, providing them with food and clothing. After they die, pious descendents continue to make offerings to the spirits: providing food on the ancestral shrine and burnt paper money and paper clothing, so that the ancestors will be able to use these objects on their post-corporeal journey. Mr. Nguyen Van Hoat, the leader of the Phuoc Yen Rites Committee, attributes two main functions to the practice: the first is to express gratitude to the ancestors, the second is to provide a context in which to draw together living descendents and increase affective bonds among them.¹⁰⁷ Another member of the Rites Committee, Mr. Nguyen Van Lieu, pointed to the educational function of ancestor worship:

It teaches the young to serve. Would it make sense if your father was kowtowing before the ancestral shrine and you were sitting there playing chess? You also

¹⁰⁶ Nguyen Van Lieu, personal interview, 30 May 2004.

¹⁰⁷ The members of the Rites Committee in Phuoc Yen (*Ban Nghi Le*) are the village’s ritual specialists. The composition and functions of the Committee will be explained in greater detail later on this chapter, in the section on the role of clergy and ritual specialists.

have to jump in there and help out...you watch the ceremonies so you know how to mirror their example...it makes people less aggressive.¹⁰⁸

Tran Thi Chuoi, Mr. Lieu's wife adds, "If I have [anything], then I use it to care for the dead so they can be satisfied...we don't see them, but we still love them and miss them."¹⁰⁹

Another motivation for ancestor worship is the belief that spirits of the dead have a direct impact on the well being of the living. Happy ancestors bless their descendents with health, good luck, wealth and many children (especially boys), whereas disgruntled ancestors can act malevolently. At one burial ceremony I attended, playing cards were sprinkled in the hole that had been dug for the casket. I was told that the cards were meant to keep the spirits busy so that they would not have a reason for pestering the living. Ill health and lack of success in business are sometimes interpreted as signs that the ancestors are displeased with the present generation. In response, the living may try to appease the spirits by performing the proper Buddhist ceremonies to pray for the release (*sieu thoat*) of these spirits. This belief is often used to justify the frequently exorbitant sums spent on gravesites, lineage houses, familial shrines and elaborate rituals. In essence, by taking care of the dead, one takes care of the living.

Duong Son

Similar to Phuoc Yen, in Duong Son, ancestor worship serves the dual function of expressing gratitude towards the deceased while providing an opportunity to strengthen bonds between living family members. However, according to Father Phan Hung, one of Duong Son's two resident priests, there are key differences between Catholic and non-

¹⁰⁸ Nguyen Van Lieu, personal interview, 23 July 2004.

¹⁰⁹ Tran Thi Chuoi, personal interview, 23 July 2004.

Catholic expressions of ancestor worship; differences in “objectives, forms, and means.”

In Father Hung’s view:

When Catholics pray for souls of the deceased, they pray that the souls will return home to God. When Buddhists pray, they pray that the soul will reach nirvana, and also because they fear that the dead can pester the living.¹¹⁰

Mr. Phan Bon, the president of the Duong Son Parish council, described the Catholic motivation for ancestor worship as follows:

The faith of Catholics is that the dead person receives God’s grace. If they are good they go to heaven and so we can ask them to pray for us. We’re not like non-Catholics who will believe anything they encounter.¹¹¹

Whereas many residents of Phuoc Yen believe that ancestors can play jokes on the living and have the power to punish people and animals for hubris by making them sick or lame, interviewees in Duong Son were insistent that ancestors could not become malevolent spirits, and that such a belief is based on fear and superstition. In Duong Son, people do not believe, publicly at least, that the charisma of an ancestor can affect a person’s fortune in a direct way, either for better or for worse. They also asserted that ancestor worship based on fear was irrational. They contrasted the irrational fears held by non-Catholics with their own motivations -- appreciation, gratitude, execution of the fourth commandment to “Honour thy mother and thy father” – which they judged to be superior. “Real filial piety, motivated by love, is something we commend,” said Mr. Phan Van Duc, “but a minority are motivated by fear, and if there is fear then [the ritual activity] does not carry the spirit of filial piety.” Not believing in ghosts or malevolent

¹¹⁰ Phan Hung, personal interview, 28 June 2004.

¹¹¹ Phan Bon, personal interview, 2 July 2004.

spirits also makes Catholic approaches to ancestor worship more “scientific” (*khoa hoc*), according to Mr. Duc.¹¹²

Interviewees in Duong Son often returned to the theme of superstition, reinforcing the view that Catholics were just as concerned for their ancestors as non-Catholics, but that their forms of ancestor worship were not superstitious, whereas those of non-Catholics often were. In an interview at Mr. Duc’s home, he and his brother, Mr. Bon explained to me what they meant when they talked about superstition:

PB: Superstition is doing things that are wrong according to the laws of the Church. Putting out platters of food for the dead is superstitious. The faith of Catholics is that everything must go through God. To communicate directly with the dead is superstitious. Thinking that the dead can do things directly to a person is superstitious.

PD: For instance, there was this man who had never seen a real American dollar in his life. But when he died, they scattered these fake American dollars in the streets, as if he could use them.

At the same time, within the worldview of some residents in Duong Son, ancestors are not completely without the capacity to influence the lives of the living – for the better, at the very least – through their intercessory prayers to God. For some residents of Duong Son, ancestors occupy a place among the men and women of the Catholic Church’s Communion of the Saints. People pray to ancestors as they would to their patron saint, and ask them to intercede on their behalf to the one Christian God.

On one occasion, I arrived at Ms. Phan Thi Kien’s home with a box of chocolate cookies for her niece and nephew. She received the gift with thanks and great enthusiasm. Picking up her one-and-a-half year old niece, she took the box of cookies to the main room and placed it on the ancestral shrine and proceeded to tell me that when she receives something nice, she often offers it first to her ancestors, so that they can

¹¹² Phan Van Duc, personal interview, 2 July 2004.

enjoy it before the living do. She then told me that whenever she has problems, or is weighed down with affliction, she often prays to her deceased mother and father:

“Sometimes living together in a family, sad things occur. And whenever I am sad about something, I pray to my mother. I ask her to help me.”¹¹³

Material culture

Ancestor worship in Vietnam employs a number of essential material objects including gravesites, ancestral shrines within the home, lineage houses, and genealogical registers.¹¹⁴ This section compares the ways people in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son approach these material objects.

Gravesites and cemeteries

Faithfully tending to the gravesites of ancestors is considered an essential expression of filial piety and also an important aspect of ancestor worship. According to Toan Anh: “[i]t is not only that descendents worship ancestors and make offerings to them, but one of the forms they express their reverence is to care for the graves of their ancestors.” [my translation]¹¹⁵

A large portion of Phuoc Yen’s land is dedicated to gravesites, generally found in two areas: *Con da* and *Ngu chuong*. *Con da* cemetery lies at the edge of the village’s eastern neighborhood (*phe dong*) while *Ngu chuong* cemetery actually lies within the neighbouring village of Niem Pho. The village and neighborhood cemeteries occupy a

¹¹³ Phan Thi Kien, 12 July 2004.

¹¹⁴ Toan Anh, *Phong Tuc Tho Cung trong Gia Dinh Viet Nam* [Ancestor Worship Rituals in the Vietnamese Family], Part 1.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

defined area, located near rice-fields, but are not enclosed, and any person of any religion can be buried in these spaces, as well as individuals from outside of the village. The topography of both burial areas is uneven and prone to flooding, with gravesites interspersed among overgrown plant-life and grazing cows. [Figure 4]

Gravesites tend to be circular in design, with a large headstone at one end, and are open at the bottom. Some people choose to erect a tablet before the entrance to the gravesite itself called a *binh phong* in order to block the entry of ill winds or bad spirits. [Figure 5] Additionally, each of Phuoc Yen's four neighborhoods also has a cemetery for people who died in traumatic circumstances – such as war, poisoning, or accidents -- and have been subsequently become lonely ghosts (*co hon*).¹¹⁶ Grave markers for lonely spirits are usually small stone tablets.

While in Phuoc Yen there are a total of six communal burial sites, in Duong Son there is only one. The gated cemetery of Duong Son is consecrated as *dat thanh* (holy ground) and only individuals baptized into the Catholic Church are eligible to be buried within its gates.¹¹⁷ [Figures 6 & 7] Whereas it is political officials who have the final say over who gets to be buried where in Phuoc Yen, all burials in Duong Son's cemetery must be approved by the parish. In these ways, the cemetery of Duong Son conforms to the specifications for proper Catholic cemeteries as delineated by the Synod of Tonkin, convened in 1900, which stated that

a cemetery should be protected with fences, and its ground should be categorized hierarchically so that a worthy place should be reserved for the tomb of the priest

¹¹⁶ In Phuoc Yen, the cemeteries for lonely ghosts are called *co hon*, the same term used to refer to lonely ghosts themselves.

¹¹⁷ Phan Bon, personal interview, 2 July 2004.

as the Roman Ritual indicated...[the priest] should deny burying any public and manifest sinners in the cemetery.¹¹⁸

Ritual language

Until the early 20th century, Chinese characters were used as the written language in Vietnam, and Vietnamese court officials and scholars were schooled in the Chinese language classical texts. The ubiquitous presence of Chinese script in pagodas, temples, gravesites, lineage houses and ancestral shrines testifies to the impact of Chinese civilization on Vietnamese society.

Although no one in contemporary Phuoc Yen reads or writes Chinese with any degree of fluency, this is the language that appears on the majority of sacred architecture and material objects. In contrast to Phuoc Yen, the language of commemorative architecture and ritual in Duong Son is uniformly *quoc ngu*, the system of writing Vietnamese using Roman characters developed in the 17th century missionary Alexandre de Rhodes. The one exception in Duong Son are the gravesites of the village founders, which have been reconstructed within the last ten years, on which the founders' names are written in Chinese script.

Lineage houses

Each of the thirty-two lineages of Phuoc Yen has its own lineage house (*nha tho ho*), and each lineage is further divided into several branches, which may have a separate branch house (*nha tho nhanh*). Lineage houses in Phuoc Yen are concrete structures, about the size of a family home. On the outside, they are generally painted yellow or

¹¹⁸ Vo, "A Cultural and Theological Foundation for Ancestor Veneration among Catholics in Vietnam," 186.

blue, their roofs adorned with mosaic dragons and phoenixes, and have spacious courtyards in front. [Figure 8] Inside, every lineage house usually has three ancestral altars, next to which is a kitchen for preparing ceremonial meals. In the courtyard of the lineage house there is usually a square cement tank for burning offerings of paper money, and a wall to block ill winds (*binh phong*).

While the villagers of Duong Son also identify themselves with lineages, there are no lineage houses or branch houses in Duong Son. In recent years, a handful of families in Duong Son have constructed memorial houses to their particular ancestors (*nha tu duong*). These familial memorial houses resemble family homes, but they are slightly more auspicious looking. [Figure 9] Inside, there is one ancestral altar, rather than three. Mr. Phan Van Duc believes that most people in Duong Son would like to erect similar buildings to their ancestors, but have yet to do so due to lack of money.¹¹⁹

Economically, Duong Son is the richer of the two villages. The lack of memorial structures in Duong Son compared to Phuoc Yen, I would argue, is reflective of different attitudes towards ancestor worship in the two villages. Namely, that people in Phuoc Yen make ancestor worship a higher priority than their neighbours in Duong Son and therefore spend a larger proportion of their incomes on ancestor worship rituals and the material objects that are part of its practice.

Commemoration of the village founder

In most Vietnamese villages the village founder, referred to by the honorary title of *Ngai Khai Canh*, is remembered with a large, elaborately decorated gravesite and an annual ceremony staged by visitors at his gravesite. Phuoc Yen and Duong Son both

¹¹⁹ Phan Van Duc, Personal Interview, June 28, 2004.

have well-elaborated memorial structures for their respective founders. In Phuoc Yen, the village founder's grave lies in the *Ngu chuong* burial area and offerings are made to him on the full moon of the eleventh lunar month. [Figure 10] According to village lore, the founder of Phuoc Yen purposely kept his name a secret, thinking that if he revealed his own name, his descendants might use their connection to him to distinguish themselves from other lineages.¹²⁰

In Duong Son, the village founders are known to be men named Tran and Phan, and their gravesites occupy the central site of the village cemetery. [Figure 11] The commemoration of the *Ngai Khai Canh* of Duong Son takes place on the eighth day of the first lunar month.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Le Van Thuyen, ed. *Lang Phuoc Yen: Huong Chi Luoc Bien* [A Brief History of the Village of Phuoc Yen], 29.

¹²¹ Parish of Duong Son, Archdiocese of Hue, *Noi Quy Giao Xu* [Parish Regulations] (Duong Son, Vietnam, 1997), 3.

Geomancy and astrology in commemorative practice

Residents of Phuoc Yen generally consult with geomancers (*thay dia*) when deciding where to build gravesites and lineage houses, in order to assure that the location conforms to the principles of feng shui (Vietnamese: *phong thuy*). An essential part of the proper performance of ritual activities in Phuoc Yen is choosing the best time and location in which to carry out the ceremonial act. Central Vietnam is prone to flooding in the early fall each year, and it is of primary importance to find a place of rest for one's family members that will not be subject to these inundations. Many villagers believe that those who dare to bury their kin in places that flood will certainly be cursed with bad fortune.¹²²

All Buddhist holidays and rituals related to the supernatural (ancestors and other deities) in Phuoc Yen are marked by the lunar calendar. It is also a general practice to consult an astrologer (or several) to select the best dates and times for ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, inauguration of lineage houses and shrines, burials, and reburials. For example, before the Nguyen Dinh family disinterred and reburied the remains of ten of their family members in May 2004, they had seen three different astrologers in the previous five months before choosing the 16th day of the 4th lunar month for this ceremony. Heeding the instructions of the astrologer, men in the family disinterred all the remains at 2 a.m. and brought them to the new site for reburial at nine, with ceremonial chanting by eleven.¹²³ Death anniversary ceremonies, however, are conducted at the time most convenient for families and their guests, usually in the mid-afternoon.

¹²² Nguyen Van Lieu, personal interview, 23 July 2004.

¹²³ Nguyen Dinh Ân, personal interview, 24 May 2004.

Unlike the situation in Phuoc Yen, in Duong Son, residents are prohibited (as are all Catholics) from consulting geomancers or astrologers for any reason whatsoever, as doing so is considered superstitious. Particular times and dates are not believed to hold particular charisma, nor are certain directions considered either auspicious or unlucky. With the exception of the Vietnamese lunar New Year (*Tet*) and the ceremony in honour of the village founder, all other ceremonial dates – whether they belong to the church or are related to ancestor worship – are marked by the Gregorian calendar in Duong Son.

Ancestral shrines

The ancestral shrine (*ban tho gia tien*) occupies a central place in the main room of any house in rural central Vietnam. In the words of Truong Thin:

The Vietnamese, no matter how poor they may be, always choose the best location in the in the house for the placement of the ancestral shrine....In the countryside, almost all families place the shrine in the central part of the home.¹²⁴ [my translation]

The most important object on any shrine are the wooden tablets bearing the names of the deceased (*bai vi*) wherein their spirits are believed to dwell. In Phuoc Yen, the front of the shrine is the place for offerings of incense, bananas, water, flowers, and, sometimes, a statue of Avalokiteshvara (Vietnamese: Quan The Am Bo Tat), the bodhisattva of compassion. Behind this shrine are additional tables where one finds displayed representations (photos, drawings, paintings) of deceased relations. The most senior ancestor is placed in the middle of this rear altar, while more junior relations, as well as people who have died in recent memory (spouses, children, nieces and nephews) generally occupy side positions. [Figures 12 & 13] As it is believed that the spirits of the

¹²⁴ Truong Thin, *Nghi Le Tho Cung To Tien, Den Chua, Mieu Truyen Thong va Hien Dai* [Traditional and Contemporary Rites Related to Ancestor Worship, the Pagoda, and Spirits] (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Ha Noi, 2004), 15.

ancestors dwell in the shrine, keeping the shrine clean is important. Shrines are cleaned on the first and fifteenth day of every lunar month and offerings of fresh fruit (usually bananas), new flowers, and water are made to the ancestors. On these days of the month, people also place burning sticks of incense on the shrine, as well as in other places in and around the house.¹²⁵

Shrines bearing religious Roman Catholic icons have always been commonplace in Duong Son. In recent years, however, families have begun to create ancestral shrines according to traditional Vietnamese form, with representations of deceased family members, incense and occasionally flowers. A typical shrine in Duong Son is very similar to one in Phuoc Yen, but with Buddhas replaced by icons of Jesus, Mary, the Holy Family and other saints. [Figures 14 & 15] Food, however, is conspicuously absent from ancestral shrines in Duong Son, an important difference that will be explained in the later section on rituals.

Genealogical registers

The ceremonial head of a lineage is usually the holder of the genealogical register (*gia pha*), a book recording the names of all individuals descending from a common ancestor. Some *gia pha* also contain more detailed information on particular ancestors, such as their professions or the years in which they were born. Often, however, it is just names that are recorded. All thirty-two lineages in Phuoc Yen have maintained genealogical registers, most of which have been recopied many times in the last century to replace copies destroyed or lost during wartime. [Figure 16]

¹²⁵ Most homes will have at least three other places where incense is offered on these days: at the home's front gate, on the large concrete tablet at the front of the house (which is placed there to protect the house from evil spirits, within a small shrine that sits in front of the house (in Phuoc Yen, this shrine is usually for the spirit of a deceased aunt, or a local spirit), and then on an altar in the kitchen, for the kitchen God.

The attitudes towards *gia pha* in the two villages today, and historically, differ sharply. In Phuoc Yen, *gia pha* are considered sacred, whereas in Duong Son they are regarded as mere documentary records. In Phuoc Yen, these books are generally kept in a box that sits at the rear of the lineage or branch shrine. On occasions such as lineage and branch memorial days, the box may be brought to the front of the shrine and opened for viewing. Would-be viewers of genealogical registers must request permission from the lineage head, and are expected to be bathed and neatly dressed, and to light incense to the ancestors of the lineage before they consult the book. Individuals in Phuoc Yen say that during wartime, when people abandoned their homes and most of their material possessions and fled to the cities for safety, of all the objects that they made concerted effort to bring with them, the *gia pha* was among the most important.¹²⁶

In Duong Son, only two lineages have retained genealogical registers -- the Phan and the Tran families -- who are the founding lineages of the village. In these cases, genealogical registers are not displayed on lineage or branch altars, but are kept wherever the keeper of the annals sees fit -- which often means in a closet with other odds and sods. Not surprisingly, no rituals are associated with the viewing of these mundane objects.¹²⁷

Interviewees in Duong Son attributed the absence of *gia pha* in their village to the existence of detailed record keeping practices by the parish. The early missionaries in Duong Son introduced a system for keeping sacramental records -- records of baptisms, matrimonies, and deaths -- that continues to be used to this day. Mr. Phan Van Duc asserts that people simply lost the habit of keeping *gia pha* because parish records fulfilled the function of record keeping. As with others in Duong Son, Mr. Duc laments

¹²⁶ Nguyen Van Lieu, personal interview, 23 May 2004.

¹²⁷ Phan Van Duc, personal interview, 28 June 2004.

the loss of this Vietnamese tradition and is currently in the process of reconstructing the *gia pha* for his own lineage.

Ritual Practices

This section compares the most important ancestor worship rituals currently practiced in the villages: death anniversaries, lineage ancestor worship celebrations, and extraordinary rituals. As in the case of material culture, ritual expressions of ancestor worship are much simpler in Duong Son compared to those in Phuoc Yen.

Death anniversaries

Families in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son hold death anniversaries for the parents, and often the grandparents, of the father of the house. Widows commemorate the death anniversaries of their husbands, and families who have lost children often commemorate their death anniversaries as well. At its simplest, a death anniversary in Phuoc Yen involves the family putting out a few plates of food on the ancestral shrine as an offering to the deceased, lighting incense and kowtowing before the ancestral altar. Often, families will invite their closest kin to celebrate a meal with them. A bamboo mat is placed before the ancestral shrine so that guests may kowtow before it upon arrival. A family may request the presence of a member of the village Rites Committee, or Buddhist clergy, to come to chant for the soul of the deceased and to provide them with instruction on how to properly lay out food offerings on the ancestral altar or make offerings to lonely spirits.

Only once the food has spent a certain amount of time on the ancestral shrine is it then taken down from the shrine, and then the living are invited to eat. By waiting for a

period of time, descendents show that they are benefiting from the graces of the ancestors. It is considered both impolite and a source of bad luck to eat food off of a shrine before it has been officially “lowered” (*ha xuong*). The number of guests invited and the particular kinds of foods that are offered are the choice of the family, depending on their particular tastes and their economic means.¹²⁸

In Duong Son, guests do not kowtow before the ancestral altar, and do not offer food to the deceased. Once everyone is gathered in the family home, and the host has said a few words of welcome, people pray (the Our Father and other set Catholic prayers). Then, everyone sits down to eat. As in Phuoc Yen, however, preparation of death anniversary meals is the responsibility of women, while the cleaning of gravesites generally falls upon men.¹²⁹ Men and women generally eat at different tables, although there is a fair degree of mixing of genders.

As in every Catholic church, masses can be said in memory of certain individuals upon the request of close kin. In Duong Son, it is common for people to request that a mass be said in memory of a family member on their death anniversary.¹³⁰ On the whole, ancestor worship rituals in Duong Son are much simpler than rituals performed in non-Catholic villages. Residents of Duong Son are aware of this difference and are proud of it, as I found while speaking to Mr. Phan Bon:

AN: Would you say that Catholic expressions of filial piety differ from those of non-Catholics?

PB: They differ. Catholic filial piety is not expressed by having lavish death anniversaries. Catholics are better in that they spend less on death anniversaries than non-Catholics. The secretary of the district of Huong Toan¹³¹ tells people [in

¹²⁸ Nguyen Van Lieu, personal interview, 26 May 2004.

¹²⁹ Phan Bon, personal interview, 2 July 2004.

¹³⁰ Phan Hung, personal interview, 28 June 2005.

¹³¹ Duong Son is one of the villages of the district of Huong Toan.

the district] that they should emulate Duong Son: “They only remember their ancestors once a year, whereas you have ten death anniversaries a year, and spend money for ten incense holders. No wonder you’re not rich.” Our rituals are not as frilly as those of non-Catholics.¹³²

On occasion, residents of Duong Son are invited to attend the death anniversary ceremonies of non-Catholic relations in other villages, such as Phuoc Yen. For instance, the Phan family who were my key interviewees in Duong Son regularly receive invitations for death anniversaries from the Hoang lineage in Phuoc Yen, from which their mother was a descendent. Today, people in Duong Son attend these ceremonies freely, are able to offer incense and kowtow before ancestral shrines (although they are prohibited to kowtow before icons, such as Buddhist statues), and share in the ritual meal of non-Catholics. This is a significant shift from the situation prior to the Second Vatican Council, when Catholics were told that they could attend such ceremonies, but could not take part in ritual acts such as offering incense, kowtowing, or even sharing food that had been offered on an ancestral shrine.

Lineage ancestor worship commemorations

Phuoc Yen

Each of the thirty-two lineages in Phuoc Yen has a chosen day each year, usually falling within the 11th and the 12th lunar months to commemorate its ancestors. On these feast days, male members of the lineage gather in the lineage house in the early morning, and from there, go to the fields to clean ancestral graves and offer incense. The individuals offering incense may make a short prayer to the ancestor, informing them that

¹³² Phan Bon, personal interview, 2 July 2004.

today is the remembrance day of the lineage (*ngay chap ho*). They will then invite the spirit of the ancestor to join descendants at the lineage house to share in the meal together. Because gravesites are not rationalized in the burial spaces of Phuoc Yen, as they are in Duong Son, locating the gravesites of ancestors takes several hours of wading through mud and over-grown grasses.

Meanwhile, back at the lineage house, wives of lineage members prepare a meal that will be consumed upon their return. Before consuming the ceremonial meal, older men and women in the lineage will put on *ao dai* (traditional long tunic and pants) and kowtow before the altars of the ancestral house. Incense is lit inside the lineage house and again outside at the building's entrance, as a way to invite the spirits of the ancestors to enter (*moi vong linh vao*). Seating arrangements and the division of labour for the ceremonial meal reflect kinship relations as well as age and gender hierarchies. Usually, three bamboo mats are placed on the floor of the lineage house. The central mat is reserved for senior male members of the lineage, with the most senior members seated closest to the entrance of the house, while the most junior members are seated closest to the ancestral shrines. [Figures 17 & 18]

The mat located to their left is for married women who have been invited back to remember their father's lineage.¹³³ Again, the more senior women are seated closest to the entrance. Unlike the wives of men in the lineage, these women are not expected to help in meal preparation, serving, or cleaning up. They are treated as guests, and come only to pay their respects and partake in the ceremonial meal. The mat to the right of the central mat is for younger male members of the lineage and their wives, who are

¹³³ Within the traditional male-based kinship system, when women marry, they leave their own families and become members of their husband's lineage.

responsible for serving the meal and cleaning up afterwards, and eat only once they have served everyone else. As in death anniversary ceremonies, plates of food must first be offered on ancestral shrines before the living are allowed to eat.

Most lineages in Phuoc Yen are further subdivided into branches (*nhanh*), each of which has its own day for worshipping ancestors of their particular branch (*ngay chap nhanh*). Members of the same branch within a lineage claim descent from a common ancestor within the past four or five generations. Each lineage and branch has a ceremonial head (*truong ho* and *truong nhanh* respectively). Some lineages and branches use ancestor worship days as an opportunity to practice mutual assistance through micro-credit systems. Each branch and lineage has a secretary-treasurer, who is responsible for collecting donations from branch and lineage members towards the cost of the rituals, such as the purchase of incense, flowers, and food, and the upkeep of the lineage and branch houses. Money that is left over after expenses have been deducted is lent out to members of the branch who are in need, under the agreement that the borrower will repay his debt to the branch at the following year's ancestor worship event.

Duong Son

There are eight main lineages in Duong Son, of which the Phan and the Tran are the most numerous. The Phan lineage, for example, has fourteen different branches. Among the most significant differences between ancestor worship practices in Duong Son and Phuoc Yen is that in Duong Son, there are no lineage or branch ancestor worship days. Instead, the commemoration of the village founder (on the eighth day of the first

lunar month) functions as a village-wide ancestor worship day.¹³⁴ The village founder's commemoration involves an outdoor mass, held in Duong Son's cemetery, attended by residents of Duong Son. Significantly, the priests officiating at this mass wear the traditional blue tunics (*ao dai*) and ceremonial hats (*khan dong*) when celebrating this mass, rather than their normal vestments. The choice to wear *ao dai* symbolizes the importance of the ceremony as a cultural event more than a religious one.

In 2002, the parish instituted a new tradition. On the night of the seventh day of the first lunar month (the eve of the commemoration), residents of Duong Son gathered at the cemetery for a candlelit prayer vigil, to reflect on their faith and the gospel. In addition to commemorating the founding ancestor, this is also a time for residents of Duong Son to remember the ancestors of their faith (the missionaries and catechists), and the ancestors of their respective lineages.¹³⁵

Extraordinary Ceremonies

Occasionally in Phuoc Yen, lineages and branches organize very large ceremonies spanning four or five days, called *Le cau sieu bat do* or *Le dam chay*, to commemorate members of the lineage who have died through traumatic circumstances, such as war. It is believed that when many members of a lineage have died traumatically, this can bring bad luck on their living descendants. These ceremonies are similar to lineage ancestor

¹³⁴ Parish of Duong Son, Archdiocese of Hue, *Noi Quy Giao Xu* [Parish Regulations] (Duong Son, Vietnam, 1997), 3.

¹³⁵ Phan Bon, personal interview, 2 July 2005. According to Duong Son's parish history, the parish was founded by father Emmanuel Nguyen Van Bon, who worked in the parish from 1672 – 1698. A list of the names and dates of Duong Son's parish priests beginning in 1862 shows that from its founding until the early 20th century, most of the parish priests of Duong Son were of foreign extraction. Beginning with Father Paul Nguyen Van Huon in 1936, however, the parish has been headed by Vietnamese priests. For a complete list, see Le Thanh Hoang, *Luoc su giao xu Duong Son Tong Giao Phan Hue 1696-1996* [History of Duong Son, Archdiocese of Hue 1696-1996], 5-7.

worship ceremonies, but much more elaborate and require the participation of invited clergy, often up to a dozen Buddhist monks. The aim of the ceremonies is to help the spirits of the dead to cease wandering aimlessly and to transcend to another realm. When this transcendence occurs, the spirits will bless their living descendents in all the expected ways: e.g., with good health and prosperity. As these ceremonies require large inputs of money and organization, they are held very infrequently, usually once every few generations.¹³⁶ No similar ceremonies exist in Duong Son because the idea that spirits of the deceased can wander aimlessly does not fit into the Christian worldview.

As a result of improved economic conditions in Vietnam since Renovation (1986), and with the added support of overseas relations, many lineages and branches in Phuoc Yen have already rebuilt, or are planning to rebuild their lineage houses. While I was doing field research there, two new lineage houses were inaugurated. These inaugurations, like the *Le cau sieu bat do* ceremonies, take place over multiple days, require significant outputs of financial resources and organization, and involve the participation of external ritual specialists.

As mentioned above, although no lineage houses exist in Duong Son, several families have built familial commemorative houses to their ancestors. The inauguration of these structures is much more simplified than the inauguration of lineage houses in Phuoc Yen. Usually, the family invites a priest to bless the house and possibly celebrate mass there.

Lonely Spirits

¹³⁶ Nguyen Van Lieu, personal interview, 24 July 2004.

Duong Phuoc Thu, an expert on the villages of Thua Thien Hue, asserts that nowhere in Vietnam are lonely spirits (*co hon*) as remembered as they are in central Vietnam.¹³⁷ At death anniversary ceremonies, families will often place an additional table of food offerings and incense outside of the house for these lonely ghosts. All major ceremonies at Phuoc Yen's Buddhist pagoda include specific rites for lonely ghosts and food offerings made to them as well. Mr. Lieu's wife becomes visibly moved when she talks about these lonely spirits, who have no one to care for them, saying: "We have to make even more offerings to them than we would to our own ancestors, because our father and our mother already have people to care for them."

Whereas it is the responsibility of families and lineages to tend to the gravesites of particular ancestors within the two main burial areas, the responsibility for tending to the gravesites of the *co hon* is invested in the village's four neighborhoods. Each year, on the twentieth day of the first lunar month, each neighbourhood places offerings for lonely ghosts at their respective cemetery for lonely ghosts and cleans the gravesites of all buried there. [Figures 19 & 20]

In Duong Son, people neither believe in nor commemorate *co hon* in ritual practice or material culture, as lonely ghosts have no place within Catholic views of life after death. However, on the day after the commemoration of the village founder, residents of Duong Son maintain gravesites both of individuals who no longer have family members in the village and people whose identity is unknown. Ms. Phan Thi Kien also informed me that some villagers pray for orphaned souls (*cac dang linh hon mo coi*) during mass or in their personal prayer. As in Phuoc Yen, the people in Duong Son regard those who die without proper burial and mourning rites with great pity. In Phuoc

¹³⁷ Duong Phuoc Thu, personal interview, 6 June 2004.

Yen, however, lonely ghosts are acknowledged and remembered much more explicitly than in Duong Son.

Role of clergy and ritual experts

Phuoc Yen

As in many Vietnamese villages, the Buddhist pagoda in Phuoc Yen does not have any resident clergy. This has not, however, been due to lack of desire on the part of villagers. Several years ago, a monk had expressed interest in becoming the abbot of the pagoda, something the villagers would have happily welcomed. Unfortunately, they were not able to obtain permission from local authorities for him to come.¹³⁸

In the absence of Buddhist clergy, the three-man Rites Committee (*ban nghi le*) fulfills the role of ritual specialist in the village. Villagers make requests to the Committee to officiate, or simply be present, at a wide variety of rituals: death anniversaries, funerals, extraordinary ceremonies, the Spring and Fall Offerings (*Te Xuan, Te Thu*) at the village communal house, and the inauguration of ceremonial architecture. At the time of my field research, the Rites Committee was comprised of Mr. Nguyen Van Lieu, Mr. Nguyen Dinh Ong, and Mr. Nguyen Van Hoat, all farming men with families. Committee members lead rituals and provide instruction on how to conduct rituals according to proper form.¹³⁹

Mr. Hoat is the most senior member of the Rites Committee and gained much of his knowledge of ritual practice from his father, an active Buddhist and former member

¹³⁸ Nguyen Van An, personal interview, 12 July 2004.

¹³⁹ Nguyen Van Hoat, personal interview, 23 June 2004.

of the Rites Committee as well.¹⁴⁰ Mr. Hoat has essentially trained Mr. Lieu and Mr. Ong in the recitation of ceremonial texts and proper ritual forms. Committee members receive additional formation in Buddhism through their own reading, their participation in retreat days organized by the Buddhist Church of Vietnam (of which they are members) and inculcate younger generations of Buddhists through the religious education they supervise at the pagoda through the national organization The Buddhist Family (*Gia dinh Phat tu*).

The Rites Committee is currently stretched to capacity trying to respond to the many requests it receives from the villagers to attend and officiate ceremonies. The Committee is always open to training new members, and at the present time, one young villager in his twenties has taken on a prominent role in Buddhist education and ceremonies at the pagoda. The Committee does not, however, have a strategy to ensure that ritual knowledge is passed on to future generations. All one can do, says Mr. Hoat, is to wait until people with sincere hearts *phat tam* (express their intentions), and then the training can begin.¹⁴¹

The Rites Committee is responsible for the bi-monthly ceremonies held at the pagoda, as well as all important festivals during the Buddhist year, such as *Le Phat Dan* (Buddha's birthday) or the *Le Vu Lan* (Filial Piety Festival). And the pagoda is yet another place where the dead, especially lonely ghosts, are remembered. During Buddha's Birthday and the Filial Piety Festival, a special ceremony is held on the pagoda's front gable for lonely ghosts. A table of food is laid out, and the Rites

¹⁴⁰ Mr. Hoat has been active in the Rites Committee since 1959. His father, from whom he learned much about Buddhism and ritual, was consulted for his knowledge of astrology and picking auspicious times and dates for ceremonies and his knowledge of Chinese writing, which was especially useful for writing couplets (*cau doi*) for ceremonial structures, and writing banners for wedding and funerals (*viac trieu*).

¹⁴¹ Nguyen Van Hoat, personal interview, 23 June 2004.

Committee chant for these wandering souls. [Figure 21] As in most Buddhist pagodas in Vietnam, the pagoda in Phuoc Yen has a place at the back where people can bring small photographs of the deceased and request prayers to be said on their behalf. According to Mr. Nguyen Van Lieu, the deceased need not be a Buddhist, or even a person from Phuoc Yen, in order to be remembered by attendees of the pagoda.

Rituals conducted by the Committee outside of the pagoda tend to draw on Buddhist ritual practices as well, but also combine ceremonial elements derived from Confucianism or tutelary deity worship. During the re-burial rites of the Nguyen Dinh family, for instance, the Committee chanted Buddhist sutras for half an hour, and then officiated over a ceremony to the local earth deity (*tho than dat dai*) during which they read a *so* (an official reading) modeled after the imperial declarations read by Confucian literati at the Nguyen court.

Mr. Lieu and Mr. Ong view their work on the Rites Committee as a means of spreading the dharma, as well as a form of community service. As such, they neither charge fees, nor do they accept donations for their services. However, there is an implicit understanding that families that request their presence for rituals will make an offering to the pagoda (*cung duong*) for its general upkeep and other expenses. When they preside over ceremonies at the pagoda, or ancestor worship rituals of Buddhist families, they come as *Buddhist* members of the Rites Committee, wearing the grey robes that in Vietnam are the signature of Buddhist laity. However, when they chant Confucian *so* at the village communal house during the Spring and Fall offerings, or when consecrating a

shrine to a neighborhood protective deity, they do so in their capacity as “village people” (*dan lang*) who are supporting village traditions.¹⁴²

As practicing Buddhists, members of the Committee are aware that, even by the incredibly flexible standards of Mahayana Buddhism, some ancestor worship rituals are considered superstitious. Burning paper money or paper clothing as an offering to the ancestors with the belief that the spirit of the deceased can actually use these items in the after-life is one example. When I asked Committee members how they felt about these practices, their answers were pragmatic. Mr. Hoat, for instance, argued that since Buddhist monasteries derive a significant portion of their income from performing ancestor worship ceremonies, even if those who request the ceremonies do something that is superstitious, ritual specialists can do little else but gently advise people to minimize such behaviour.¹⁴³ In other words, financial expediency has an influence on ritual experts’ accommodation of unorthodox practice. Mr. Ong and Mr. Lieu added another perspective. They invoked the phrase “*hang thuan chung sinh*” (harmonizing with all sentient beings) to explain their own position. Mr. Lieu and Mr. Ong see the accommodation of unorthodox practice as justified by the Buddha’s teaching that “skillful means” are often required to transmit the dharma.¹⁴⁴ Mr. Lieu and Mr. Ong understand that categorical condemnation of people’s actions as superstitious would most likely turn them away from Buddhism. Whereas, by accommodating unorthodox rituals (within limits), they will promote harmony and thereby facilitate their work of bringing the dharma to people. Within this atmosphere of harmony, they can gently encourage

¹⁴² Nguyen Dinh Ong and Nguyen Van Lieu, personal interview, 15 July 2004.

¹⁴³ Nguyen Van Hoat, personal interview, 23 June 2004.

¹⁴⁴ Nguyen Dinh Ong and Nguyen Van Lieu, personal interview, 15 July 2004.

people to forego superstitious activities and substitute these with other acts, such as works of charity.

Mr. Ong and Mr. Lieu's views are not idiosyncratic, but rather, can be taken as representative of Buddhist attitudes towards ancestor worship, even as expressed by high-ranking Buddhist clergy. Thich Quang Nhuan, the abbot of Thuyen Ton pagoda and a professor at the Buddhist University of Hue, expressed similar views during an interview at Lieu Quan Buddhist cultural centre in Hue. When I asked the abbot about the participation of monks in ostensibly superstitious rites, he invoked the history of Buddhism in China. From a purely philosophical point of view, ancestor worship presents a conceptual problem for Buddhism, because it seems to contradict the Buddha's teaching on no self, implying that ancestors have a stable existence after death. Nonetheless, had Buddhists not used skillful means for integrating elements of Chinese Confucianism and Taoism into their religion, says the abbot, they never would have gained a following among the people, because "changing a political regime isn't as hard as changing folk customs."¹⁴⁵ Therefore, even though the virtue of filial piety is "something the Buddha himself would hardly have understood," as Jerry Bentley observes, early on in its interaction with Chinese culture, Buddhism embraced this precept, and Buddhist monks soon became indispensable members of ancestor worship rituals.¹⁴⁶

Echoing a point made by Mr. Hoat in Phuoc Yen ("Buddhism does not force people to do things; they must express the desire from their own hearts"), Abbot Quang

¹⁴⁵ Thich Quang Nhuan, personal interview, 20 July 2004.

¹⁴⁶ Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 17.

Nhuan similarly explained: “Buddhism only teaches, but never forces.”¹⁴⁷ The Confucian insistence on filial piety is coherent from a Buddhist point of view, he asserts, because it teaches people gratitude and compassion. It also conveys Buddhist teachings on the impermanent and interconnected nature of being. By worshipping ancestors, people gain an understanding that all existence is relational. Buddhism, according to Quang Nhuan, uses the means at its disposal in order to “turn people towards the right path”; this includes the incorporation of teachings from other religions, and not condemning unorthodox practices, so long as they do not cause harm. Revering the dead is certainly not an end goal of Buddhism, but it can be used as a means to transmit Buddhist teaching.

In the interview, Thich Quang Nhuan repeated the phrase used by all members of the Rites Committee of Phuoc Yen about the need to harmonize with all sentient beings (*hang thuan chung sinh*). In Quang Nhuan’s view, Buddhism transmits its message through a harmonious integration of local cultural elements. It is a religion that likes to be close (*gan gui*) to and integrate (*hoa dong*) with the customs of its practitioners. Buddhism’s ability to embrace Vietnamese culture, has been the reason, says the abbot, why throughout Vietnam’s history “the roof of the pagoda shelters the spirit of the people.”¹⁴⁸

Duong Son

At the time of my field research, the clergy of Duong Son consisted of two priests, and a small community of nuns who belong to the order of The Lovers of the Cross of Hue. Since 1996, the parish priest has been Le Thanh Hoang, who hails from

¹⁴⁷ Nguyen Van Hoat, personal interview, 28 June 2004; Thich Quang Nhuan, personal interview, 20 July 2004.

¹⁴⁸ Thich Quang Nhuan, personal interview, 20 July 2004.

the village of Tri Buu, Quang Tri province.¹⁴⁹ The assistant priest, Phan Hung, is a descendent of one of the founding lineages in Duong Son, and as such, although he has less authority than Father Hoang over parish affairs, he is particularly beloved of the people. On special occasions, Father Hung may say mass, but his duties in Duong Son are minimal, as his primary responsibilities are with the diocese of Hue, where he travels almost every day to teach courses to seminarians, nuns in formation, and the laity. Father Hoang oversees all parish activities and receives assistance from the sisters as well as a well-organized parish council. The sisters' primary line of work is religious education. Most of these women come from communities outside of Duong Son, and have been sent to the village upon orders from their superiors. They generally work in the village for periods of several years

It is worth noting that Father Hoang has traveled widely and lived for several years in France as he was studying for a Masters degree in development and was writing a thesis on the migration of Northern Vietnamese Catholics to South Vietnam after the partition of Vietnam in 1954.¹⁵⁰ Father Hoang came to Duong Son in 1989 with a long list of plans to transform the village into a model of rural development and modernization. He has been a key player driving Duong Son's recent socio-economic success, and his accomplishments have gained him a reputation for being "the Development Priest" (*Cha phat trien*) within the diocese of Hue.

To support his development projects, Father Hoang has called upon Duong Son's overseas Vietnamese community, which he calculated in 1996, to number about 1,100

¹⁴⁹ Tri Buu was once an entirely Catholic village, as Duong Son is today. Many of the villagers left Tri Buu during the war, and new settlers arrived, many of whom were non-Catholic. Today, the village is a mixture of non-Catholics and Catholics.

¹⁵⁰ Le Thanh Hoang, personal interview, 28 June 2005.

individuals. With the help of the parish council, Father Hoang executes fundraising strategies modeled after western charities – sending out letters of request to individuals and organizations, providing statistical measurements of project outcomes and even annual reports on parish activities. Both he and Father Phan Hung have Internet access from their offices and are the only people in both villages to be connected to the worldwide web.

As priests who came of age in the heyday of the Second Vatican Council, Father Hoang and Father Hung are active promoters of the inculturation of the Catholic faith to the Vietnamese cultural context. At the beginning of every mass, Father Hung offers three sticks of incense before the main altar, just as Buddhists offer incense at the altar of their ancestors on the first and fifteenth day of each lunar month. During the mass, the presentation of the Eucharist is not accompanied by the customary ringing of steel bells, but rather, with the beating of an ox-skin drum and copper cymbal, well recognized symbols of Vietnamese culture. After much planning, in the summer of 2004, the parish inaugurated a new fixture at the church's front entrance: a statue of Our Lady of La Van (*Duc Me La Vang*), the virgin who is said to have appeared in a forest near Quang Tri during a period of intense anti-Catholic persecution in the late 19th century to console believers. Our Lady of La Vang is a Vietnamese virgin, dressed in a traditional *ao dai* dress and *khan dong* headpiece. Her statue and the accompanying fountain replaced the statue of the Regina Mundi (a European looking virgin) that had stood before the church for many decades.

In recent years, the clergy and parish council have been at the forefront of promoting ancestor worship in Duong Son. Father Phan Hung, in particular, regularly

gives homilies on the virtue of filial piety; and, in the monthly bulletin *Hat Cai* (Mustard Seed) that he writes for the diocese of Hue, he encourages Catholics to erect ancestral shrines and reconstruct genealogical registers.¹⁵¹ Today, priests and nuns are often invited as guests of honour to familial ancestor worship ceremonies in Duong Son. The parish also supports reverence for ancestors by saying mass for particular individuals on the anniversary of their death, and through the clergy's role of consecrating ancestral shrines and familial memorial houses.¹⁵² Among the numerous committees in the parish council is the Committee for Works of Filial Piety (*Ban hieu su*), a group of men who offer their services as voluntary pallbearers for the funerals of villagers. No such committee exists in Phuoc Yen, and villagers either hire pallbearers, or ask friends and family to assist.

At the same time that the parish priests recognize the importance of integrating the essential elements of Vietnamese culture into the life of the parish, they also see a place for transformation of cultural practices in light of the gospel.

“Christianity came and was built on the cultural foundations of Vietnam,” says Father Hoang. At the same time, “Christianity sifts and discards that which is superstitious and retains elements that are good and of God.”¹⁵³

The church plays a regulatory role in ancestor worship through its control over who may be buried in the village cemetery. Section 2 of Duong Son's parish regulations states that:

¹⁵¹ Phan Hung, “Ngay Hoi Gia Dinh Giao Phan Hue” [Family Days in the Diocese of Hue], *Hat Cai* 35 (February 2004), 8.

¹⁵² Currently, the parish of Duong Son requests a donation of VND 40,000 for each mass said in memory of an individual. However, the parish has been known to wave this fee in cases where those requesting the mass do not have the means to pay.

¹⁵³ Le Thanh Hoang, personal interview, 21 July 2004.

The cemetery is under the jurisdiction of the Parish. The parish council directly manages and oversees all construction and restoration projects therein....All things concerning the cemetery, including the construction of gravesites within the area reserved for the lineages, must be approved by the Parish Council.¹⁵⁴

The regulatory role played by the church in ancestor worship can be understood as part of the church's explicit attempt to make its mark on every important aspect of social, cultural and economic life within the village.

Another important example of church intervention in ancestor worship came in 1996, when the parish became the key organizer for the annual village founder's commemoration (*Chap Ngai Khai Canh*). For many generations, the lineages of Duong Son had been feuding over which lineage had the right to lead the village founder's commemoration on the eighth day of the first lunar month. The Phan and Tran lineages claimed that, as descendents of the first settlers in Duong Son, this right was reserved for themselves. Several other lineages disagreed and occasionally would arrive at the cemetery to disrupt proceedings on this day.¹⁵⁵

Father Hoang was greatly distressed by these inter-lineage conflicts, as they contradicted the Christian virtue of charity and the Church's express desire for unity. With assistance from Mr. Phan Van Duc and Mr. Phan Van Lang, then head of the parish council, a new statute was entered into the list of Parish Regulations (*Noi qui giao xu*) stating that the village founder's commemoration would be organized solely by the parish and would be for the village as a whole, rather than particular lineages. Lineages had the

¹⁵⁴ Parish of Duong Son, Archdiocese of Hue, *Noi Quy Giao Xu* [Parish Regulations], 3.

¹⁵⁵ Le Thanh Hoang, personal interview, 25 June 2005.

right to commemorate their own ancestors on other dates, but these could only be after the eighth day of the first lunar month.¹⁵⁶

In Phuoc Yen, the Rites Committee, as the representatives of the pagoda, could not and would not intervene in a dispute between lineages. For one, the Rites Committee is not vested with nearly as much authority as the clergy or parish council of Duong Son. Furthermore, primary loyalty in Phuoc Yen is toward the lineage, and only secondarily toward the pagoda, whereas, in Duong Son, people's identification as Catholics and as parishioners of the parish of Duong Son is more powerful than their identification as members of particular family lineages.

Conclusions

In sum, comparing ancestor worship in four domains – motivation; material culture; ritual expressions; and, role of the clergy – it is clear that ancestor worship in Duong Son and Phuoc Yen share some elements in common, but also differ in many respects. In both villages, ancestor worship serves the dual function of expressing gratitude to the ancestors while creating a context to bring together the living. As well, in both villages, ancestor worship is organized around, and upholds, a male-centred kinship structure, which assigns differential roles to men and women within ritual activities and makes the patriline the main unit of kinship identification. Death anniversary ceremonies are celebrated in both villages in essentially similar forms, with a main difference being that food is not offered on ancestral shrines at death anniversaries in Duong Son.

¹⁵⁶ As stated in Section 2 of the Parish Regulations, "The parish oversees the gravesites of the village founders and organizes the annual commemoration to these two individuals on the 8th day of the first lunar month...ancestor worship days for lineages and branches may only take place after the commemoration of the village founders."

In terms of material culture, people in both villages place a great emphasis on constructing gravesites to their ancestors and erecting ancestral shrines within the home. In the last twenty years, a handful of family houses of memory (*nha tu duong*) have been constructed in Duong Son, modeled after similar structures in other villages, like Phuoc Yen. As in all traditional Vietnamese villages, the founder of the village (*Ngai Khai Canh*) is commemorated in both Phuoc Yen and Duong Son.

However, as a result of its interaction with Catholicism, ancestor worship in Duong Son is much simpler than it is in Phuoc Yen. Duong Son has one communal burial site compared to Phuoc Yen's six. Whereas genealogical registers are an essential part of the material culture of ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen, and are thus treated as sacred objects, they have largely been neglected in Duong Son. In the rare instances where genealogical registers do exist, they are treated as mundane records. And while lonely ghosts (*co hon*) are acknowledged and remembered in Phuoc Yen in both ritual and material ways, lonely ghosts do not have a place within ancestor worship in Duong Son.

There are several other key differences between ancestor worship in Duong Son and Phuoc Yen that merit extended commentary. Whereas as the cemetery of Phuoc Yen is loosely regulated by local political authorities, unenclosed, and open to individuals of any or no religious affiliation, Duong Son's cemetery is firmly administered by the parish, fenced, and consecrated as holy ground in which only baptized Catholics may be buried. The difference between the cemeteries seems to speak to a major difference between Catholicism and Buddhism. Historically, Catholicism has been far more interested in enforcing doctrinal orthodoxy than Buddhism, as well as in marking its

believers as separate from non-believers. In *Buddhism and Christianity: Rivals and Allies*, Ninian Smart attributes Christianity's emphasis on doctrinal orthodoxy to the religion's history in which doctrine functioned as a means of "defin[ing] the faith of the new Israel."¹⁵⁷ Smart writes:

The old Israel was defined by descent, by the heredity of those who belonged to the Jewish people....With the New, the core had to be seen in terms of the faithful: but growing divisions in the interpretation of the Gospel led to the need to draw bounds – first to establish a Canon of scripture; and then to express as definitively as possible the doctrines of the faith.¹⁵⁸

The enclosed cemetery of Duong Son, reserved for baptized Catholics, shows how this drive to mark and separate the faithful extends beyond life into death.

As in other aspects of life in Duong Son, the Church has been a decisive factor in the development of ancestor worship historically and at the present time. The emphasis that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church has placed on drawing distinctions between "superstition" and "truth" finds local expression in the views of residents of contemporary Duong Son who assert that, while they also revere their ancestors and are just as filial (and therefore, just as Vietnamese) as non-Catholics, their expressions of ancestor worship are less "superstitious" and more "rational." This self-perception is grounded in their adherence to the teachings of the Catholic Church, which in Duong Son, has a monopoly on "truth." In keeping with Church teaching, residents of Duong Son neither consult astrologers for good times and dates for rituals, nor confer with geomancers to choose the best direction for a memorial structure. They share meals during ancestor worship celebrations, but do not offer food on shrines. And, they believe that ancestors can either go to heaven, hell, or purgatory, but certainly cannot linger in

¹⁵⁷ Ninian Smart, *Buddhism and Christianity: Rivals and Allies* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 16.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

this realm to assert any direct influence on the health or well-being of their living descendents. The testimonies of villagers in Duong Son illustrate that the drive to separate Catholics from non-Catholics and “truth” from “superstition” has been effectively passed down from Church authorities at the Vatican to the village level in central Vietnam, and persists well into the present, even within a post-Vatican II theology that stresses interfaith dialogue.¹⁵⁹

Although the clergy of both villages currently support ancestor worship, they do so to differing degrees and in different ways. Duong Son’s clergy is professionally trained by the Catholic Church, and hence, is tied into a structure of religious indoctrination that is ultimately controlled by a centralized institution, which is the Vatican. In Duong Son, clergy play a more active role in the regulation and transformation of ancestor worship than does the clergy in Phuoc Yen. In supporting local cultural practices in Duong Son, such as ancestor worship, the clergy, as representatives of the church and the local interpreters of its doctrines, ensures that local practice is in line with the doctrinal teachings of the Church.

This is quite different than the clergy of Phuoc Yen who do not receive any systematic training and whose actions are not subject to the scrutiny of any overseeing body. Within this context, the Rites Committee in Phuoc Yen sees itself as a storehouse of ritual knowledge that members of the community can draw upon at their will.

In Phuoc Yen, ancestor worship is the responsibility of the lineages, and the pagoda plays only a minor role. By contrast, in Duong Son, the authority of the church

¹⁵⁹ In *In Our Own Tongues*, Peter C. Phan notes that one of the most important outcomes of the Second Vatican Council in Asia was that it opened the door for interreligious dialogue, a move welcomed among the Asian churches because “it is they (and not the Western churches) that have to rub shoulders daily with followers of other religions.” As such, “[d]ialogue with other religions has become a constitutive dimension of the church’s evangelizing mission.” See Phan, *In Our Own Tongues*, 209.

trumps the authority of the lineages, as evidenced by the parish's intervention, in 1996, in the dispute between the founding and latecomer lineages over the organization of the village founder's commemoration.

Because the clergy in Duong Son exert a greater influence over the population of Duong Son than the Buddhist clergy do over the villagers in Phuoc Yen, this has also meant that, in light of the changes to Catholic theology following the Second Vatican Council, the clergy of Duong Son have also been able to promote ancestor worship in ways not available to Buddhist clergy in Phuoc Yen. For instance, Father Phan Hung uses the Internet to keep abreast with what Vietnamese theologians are saying about filial piety, and Mr. Phan Bon on the parish council is able to attend a national conference on the integration of Catholicism and Vietnamese culture. Being tied to a global institution with well-developed levels of regional and national governance and indoctrination has, at different times in the history of Duong Son, been both detrimental and beneficial for the practice of ancestor worship.

In contemporary times, residents of Phuoc Yen and Duong Son place great importance on remembering ancestors through ritual activities and material culture, and they are generally supported in their efforts to do so by both political and religious leaders in their communities. This has certainly not always been the case. Prior to 1964, ancestor worship was forbidden in Duong Son and within all Vietnamese Catholic communities. The ritual practices and material cultural expressions of ancestor worship found in Duong Son, as described in this chapter, have largely been invented within the last forty years. As for Phuoc Yen, ancestor worship has also undergone transformations in the last forty years, as a result of war and the policies of the Socialist state that

emerged at the end of the war in 1975. More recently, internal and international migration, and post-Renovation economic prosperity, have also had an impact on ancestor worship. The role of the state, the church, and migration in the transformation of ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son in the last four decades are the subjects of the next chapter.



Figure 4: Ngu Chuong Cemetery, Phuoc Yen.



Figure 5: Gravesites, Phuoc Ye



Figure 6: Cemetery, Duong Son



Figure 7: Gravesites, Duong Son



Figure 8: House of the Ho Lineage, Phuoc Yen.

Taken on the ancestor worship day of the lineage (the 27th day of the 11th lunar month), December 2002.



Figure 9: House of memory of the Do family, Duong Son.



Figure 10: Gravesite of village founder, Phuoc Yen

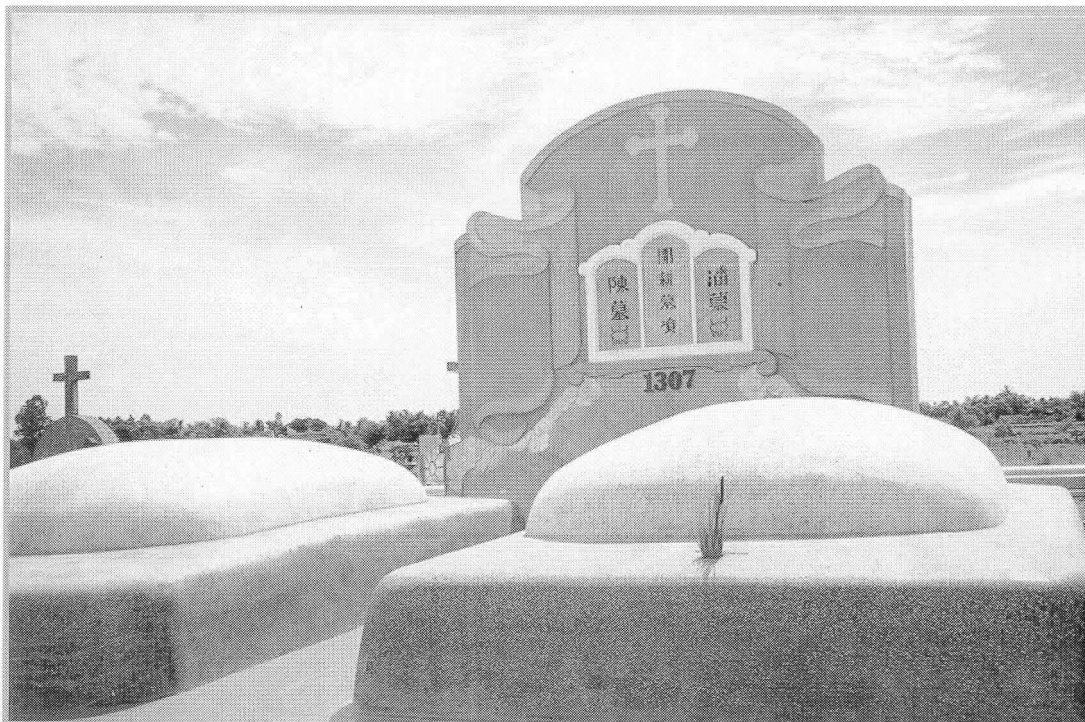


Figure 11: Gravesite of village founders, Duong Son



Figure 12: Ancestral shrine, Phuoc Yen



Figure 13: Ancestral shrine (rear), Phuoc Yen.



Figure 14:
Ancestral shrine,
Duong Son

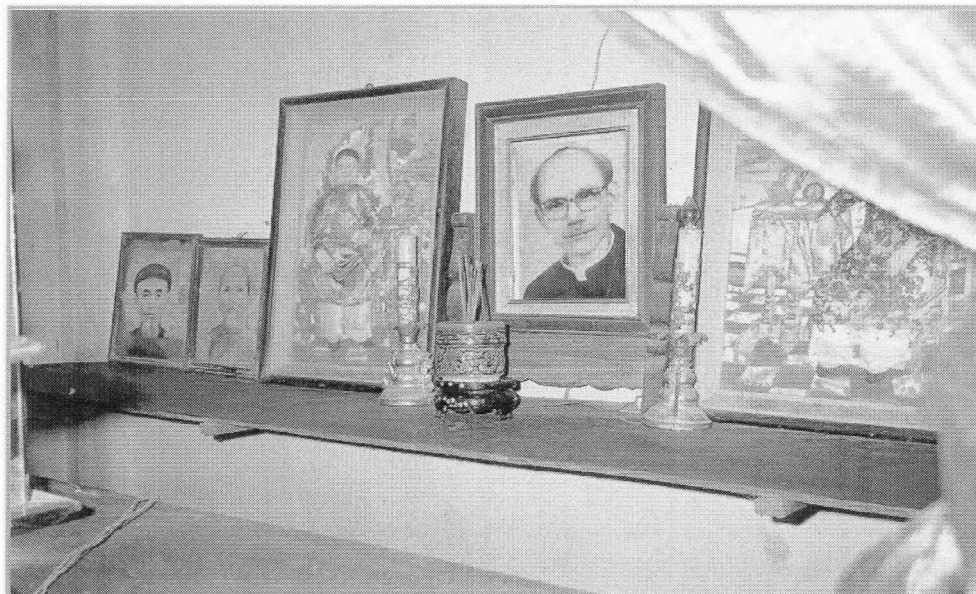


Figure 15: Ancestral shrine (rear), Duong Son



Figure 16: Lineage register, Phuoc Yen.



Figure 17: Ancestor worship day of the Nguyen Van lineage, Phuoc Yen.

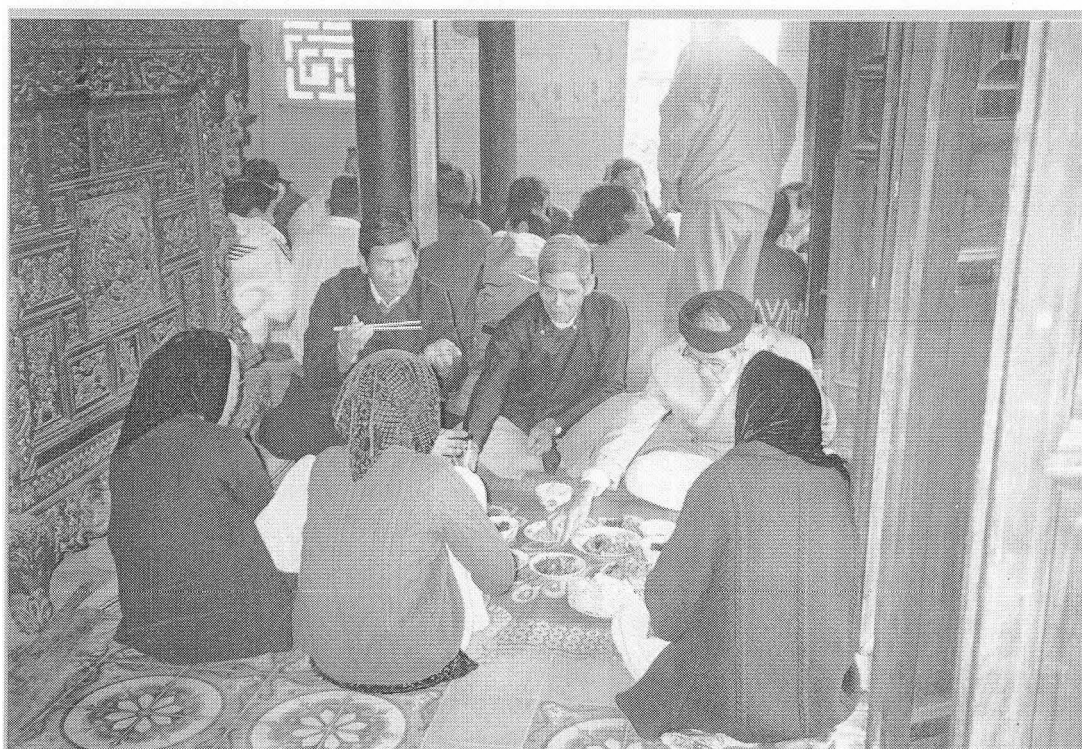


Figure 18: Ancestor worship day of the Ho lineage, Phuoc Yen.



Figure19: Cemetery for lonely spirits in Phuoc Yen's southern neighbourhood

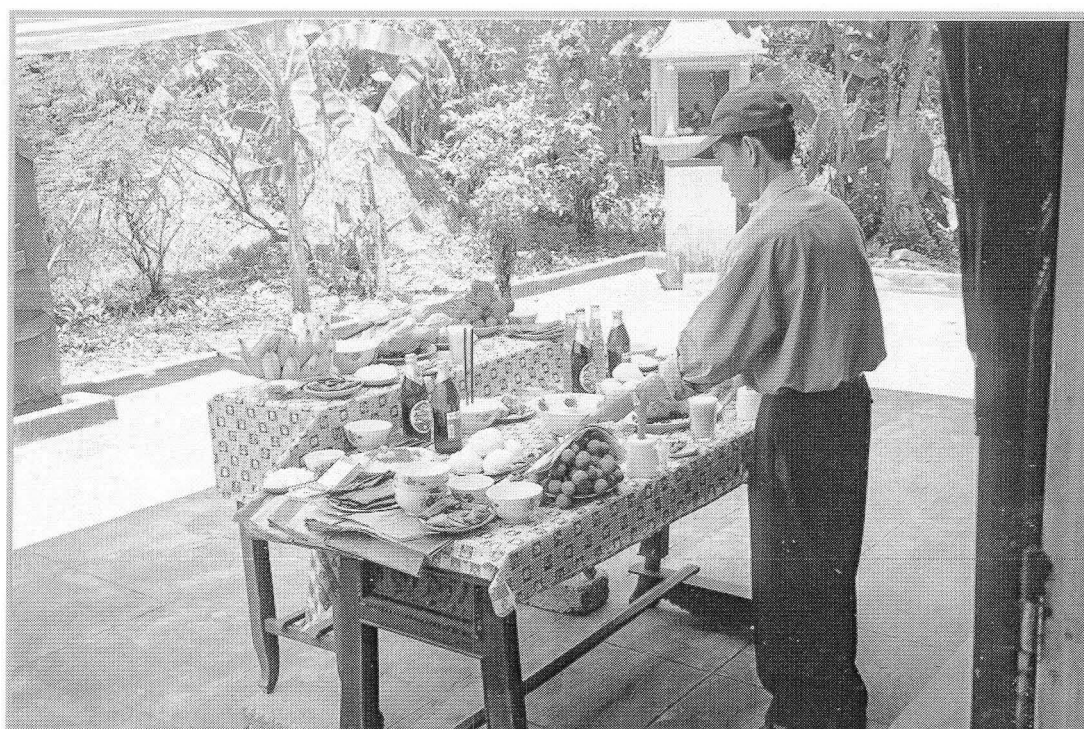


Figure 20: Offering made to lonely spirits at a lineage ancestor worship day, Phuoc Yen



Figure 21: Rites Committee, Phuoc Yen.

Chapter 4

Transforming Practices of Ancestor Worship in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son, 1964 - 2004

Ancestor worship and ritual life in contemporary Vietnam are more robust now than they have been at any other point in more than a generation. Anthropologist Hy Van Luong, who has done in-depth research on life in two northern Vietnamese villages (from 1925 to the present) and in other sites in various parts of Vietnam, has observed that “in the past three decades, major public ritual sites have undergone major renovation, and ritual and festival activities have considerably intensified.”¹⁶⁰ The overview of contemporary ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son presented in Chapter 3 certainly seems to confirm Luong’s observation.

Transformation was a persistent theme that arose in my conversations with residents of Phuoc Yen and Duong Son about ancestor worship in their respective villages, which has undergone periods of contraction as well as expansion over the last forty years. Using primarily the testimonies of villagers, this chapter explores four factors that have contributed to these transformations: post-Renovation economic prosperity; state policies related to ritual life; the Catholic Church’s shifting stance towards ancestor worship; and migration within Vietnam as well as internationally. I treat each of these four factors in turn and aim to provide a textured understanding of how the constantly evolving practice of ancestor worship has taken shape in its contemporary forms within the village. In so doing, my objective is to locate the practice of ancestor

¹⁶⁰ Hy Van Luong, “Restructuring of Vietnamese Nationalism, 1954-2004” (Working paper presented at Asian Nationalisms Project in Victoria BC, October 2004), 3.

worship within the broader historical, political, economic and religious developments in Vietnam over the last forty years.

Transformations 1: The economic

During the First and Second Indochina Wars (1946-1954 and 1954-1975), the majority of villagers from Phuoc Yen abandoned their homes and fields for months or even years at a time to seek refuge in the cities of Hue, Da Nang, Quang Tri and Da Lat. During this time, ancestor worship practices, like most aspects of cultural life, took a backseat to mere survival. By the early 1970's, most of the buildings in Phuoc Yen, including the communal house, the pagoda, and lineage houses, had been severely damaged or completely destroyed as a result of war.

At the end of the American war, villagers immediately began to reinstitute ancestor worship rituals and reconstruct memorial and religious architecture. However, the first decade following the communist revolution brought intense economic hardship throughout Vietnam, on account of the failure of government command-style economic management, worsened by a draconian trade embargo imposed by the United States. Economic scarcity meant that people had less disposable income to spend on elaborate rituals. As a result, ancestor worship rituals in Phuoc Yen were carried out in simplified form during these years in comparison to what they had been prior to the most intense years of the war.¹⁶¹

Because the centralized management of the economy was actually causing the involution of the economy, in 1986 the Vietnamese government gradually introduced

¹⁶¹ Ho Ngoc Thanh, personal interview, 19 July 2004.

free-market reforms through a series of policies known under the name of *doi moi* (renovation). Since then, the Vietnamese economy has experienced steady growth rates in terms of rising GDP and per capita incomes. Although Vietnam remains a poor country, with a per capita GDP of \$414 US in 2001, this figure indicates a substantial increase in income compared to 1990, when per capita GDP was just US \$114.¹⁶² Poverty has declined significantly and standards of living have increased. Vietnam is now an active player in regional trading blocks such as ASEAN, and is preparing for ascension to the World Trade Organization.¹⁶³ Higher incomes have allowed the Vietnamese to enhance rituals in ways they have not been able to in decades, and ritual life has become another site of conspicuous consumption and of marking differences between the newly emerging social classes.

Vietnam's improved economic situation since Renovation has been an important factor driving the expansion of ancestor worship rituals in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son within the last two decades. One of Renovation's important contributions was to reintroduce the spirit of competition and individual initiative into the economic sphere and beyond. The current expansion of ancestor worship in Vietnam, asserts Nguyen Thanh Huyen, must be understood within the context of the Renovation programme and the spirit of individualism it promotes:

[A]s the individual is restored, the cult of ancestors is revived. That is the deepest point of what is generally called *renovation (doi moi)* in Vietnam. In economic life, people now rely on their own skills, resourcefulness and "good luck" but not

¹⁶² Hy Van Luong ed., *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society*, (Lanham: Institute for South East Asian Studies, Singapore and Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 1. Citing World Bank statistics, Luong notes that the Vietnamese economy grew by an average of 7.5% annually during the 1990's. For in-depth studies on Vietnam's political economy in the post-*doi moi* period, see Martin Gainsborough, "Key issues in the political economy of post-*doi moi* Vietnam," in *Rethinking Vietnam* ed. Duncan McCargo (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 40-52.) and Gainsborough, *Changing Political Economy of Vietnam: The Case of Ho Chi Minh City* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

¹⁶³ Chu Thanh, "Race against time," *Vietnam Economic Times*, December 2003, 30-31.

on the “State milkbottle”... Similarly, in spiritual life, each person is looking for himself, for his origin.¹⁶⁴

The stories of Mr. Nguyen Dinh An, my grandfather’s nephew who left the village as a teenager to join the Viet Minh, represent the way in which this spirit of individualism and competition has influenced ritual life.¹⁶⁵ Mr. An recalls that during his childhood in the village, “lineage houses were simple structures made out of bamboo. They were not nearly as elaborate as they are now.”¹⁶⁶ Likewise, death anniversary ceremonies like those we see today were inconceivable when he was young:

How could they be? People didn’t even have enough money to eat. My grandfather was a mandarin, so in our house, we held two or three death anniversaries a year. Everyone else in the village just lit incense to their ancestors and put out a bunch of bananas. Funerals and graves were also simpler. It has been money from overseas relatives that pays for the big funerals we see today. Even when someone opens a store or moves into a new house, they throw a big party. There are people who don’t have money for such ceremonies, so they sell their houses to pay for them!¹⁶⁷

Mr. An attributed the elaboration of ritual practice to social competition and increased status consciousness:

It’s all showing off. Houses, gravesites, and clothing – these are the areas in which people try to outdo each other. And motor vehicles. In the past, it was impossible to even have a motorcycle. It’s just like houses. If someone has a big house, you have to have one too.¹⁶⁸

At the same time that improved economic conditions have facilitated the expansion of ancestor worship, ritual life in Vietnam would not have flourished in the

¹⁶⁴ Nguyen Thanh Huyen, “The Cult of Ancestors: A typical characteristic of the Vietnamese people’s psychic life,” *Vietnamese Studies* New Series No. 43 (113) 1994, 28-29.

¹⁶⁵ Now retired, Mr. An currently lives in Bao Loc, several hours north of Ho Chi Minh City. I interviewed Mr. An when he returned to the village to organize the reburial of ten people in his family into a new gravesite in the village.

¹⁶⁶ Rituals are judged as either simple or elaborate based on the types of offerings made on ancestral altars, the food prepared for the ceremonial meal and the number of guests invited, and the presence or absence of ritual specialists.

¹⁶⁷ Nguyen Dinh An, personal interview, 26 May 2005.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

way it has over the last two decades, had it not been for a relaxation in state policies towards religious and cultural life. In his study of Vietnamese citizens' responses to state attempts to simplify marital exchanges, Daniel Goodkind observes that "a revival of traditional religious and social practices in parts of Vietnam is currently underway in parts of Vietnam due to both the state's loss of interest in promoting Marxist orthodoxy and the recent rise in peasant incomes."¹⁶⁹ As the work of Hy Van Luong also demonstrates, the position of the socialist state towards ritual life in Vietnam has shifted significantly in the last thirty years. Whereas it previously had attempted to limit and simplify ritual life in the name of scientific progress and saving money for the war against America, in recent decades, the state has actually encouraged local cultural practices as a means of asserting Vietnamese national identity within a globalizing world.¹⁷⁰

Transformations 2: State policies regarding ritual life

Beginning in 1954, the Ministry of Culture of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, better known as North Vietnam, launched a campaign to secularize North Vietnamese society, and purge ritual life of elements that the state considered to be superstitious, or that promoted differences in class, gender, or age. In his research on ritual life in two northern Vietnamese villages in the 1950's, Hy Van Luong has found that "local leadership cited the needs for eliminating superstitious ritual practices and for scientific progress, as well as of saving resources for construction and the war against the

¹⁶⁹ Daniel Goodkind, "State Agendas, Local Sentiments: Vietnamese Wedding Practices amidst Socialist Transformations," *Social Forces* 75:2 (December 1996), 719.

¹⁷⁰ This is essentially the argument made by Hy Van Luong in "Restructuring of Vietnamese Nationalism, 1954-2004."

U.S.”¹⁷¹ Additionally, “communal houses and shrines, unless worshipping anti-foreign resistance heroes” were subject to dismantling.¹⁷² The state also sought to secularize time by replacing the lunar calendar with the Gregorian calendar as the official marker of communal celebrations. Through directives of the Ministry of Culture, the North Vietnamese government also launched a series of anti-superstition campaigns that banned outright practices such as “calling spirits (*goi ma*), divination (*boi toan*), spirit mediumship and faith healing (*dong bong*), and the use of protective spirit amulets (*bua*).”¹⁷³ In Luong’s view:

The attack on ritual sites and traditional rituals was mainly rooted in the ideology of the Marxist-Leninist government that considered ritual activities not compatible with the objective of state-organized socialist construction and a modern scientific era.¹⁷⁴

In the view of anthropologist Alexander Soucy:

The differentiation between religion and superstition has been at the core of the state discourses about religion... Because religion and conceptions of ‘tradition’ within the contemporary nationalistic discourse in Vietnam are intimately tied, the state does not directly condemn religion as other Communist states have, choosing rather to focus their attention negatively on certain practices labeled ‘superstitious.’¹⁷⁵

Soucy also points out that contemporary state discourse separating religion from superstition follows the historical precedents set by Confucian literati (in China and Vietnam) who often employed the strategy of declaring non-Confucian religions as heterodox and superstitious while tolerating their practice.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ Luong, “Restructuring of Vietnamese Nationalism, 1954-2004,” 1.

¹⁷² Ibid., 2.

¹⁷³ Malarney, “The Limits of “State Functionalism” and the Reconstruction of Funeral Rituals in Contemporary Northern Vietnam.” 543-548.

¹⁷⁴ Luong, “Restructuring of Vietnamese Nationalism, 1954-2004,” 1.

¹⁷⁵ Soucy, “The Problem with Key Informants,” 191.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

Prior to 1976, Phuoc Yen and Duong Son, as villages in the Republic of South Vietnam (RVN), were not affected by the aforementioned reforms that had been enacted in North Vietnam since 1954.¹⁷⁷ However, things changed following reunification in 1976. The government of the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) extended the reforms to ritual life to the southern part of the country. People in Phuoc Yen today remember that after the revolution ritual life was reduced, simplified, and subject to restriction by state organs.

Residents of Phuoc Yen shared stories about the impact of state anti-superstition campaigns on ancestor worship in the village. Mr. Nguyen Van Lieu and Mr. Nguyen Van Phat told me about an incident that took place in 1979, when our branch of the Nguyen Van lineage held a *Le dam chay* ceremony to pray for the many individuals in the branch who had died during the American War. The branch had spent a month preparing for the ceremonies that would take place at my grandparents' house over five consecutive days. Although village officials refused to approve their requests to stage the event on the grounds that the proposed ceremony was superstitious and too costly, the branch went ahead with the rituals. After two days, seeing a cloth listing the names of the deceased raised from a tall bamboo pole over my grandparents' house, local armed officials came to stop the ceremonies from proceeding. In response, members of the branch lowered the pole, and promptly moved the ceremony to a pagoda in Hue where they carried out the remaining ceremonies.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ At the end of the First Indochina War, Vietnam was partitioned into two states, the communist Democratic of Vietnam (DRV) north of the 17th parallel, and the Republic of South Vietnam (RVN) in the south. The fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975 marked the end of the Second Indochina War and the take-over of South Vietnam by the North. However, it was not until July 2, 1976 that South Vietnam merged with North Vietnam to form one state, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) that we know today.

¹⁷⁸ Nguyen Van Lieu, personal interview, 4 July 2004.

The revolutionary state's reforms to the land tenure system also had a significant impact on ritual life in both villages. Under the pre-revolutionary land tenure system, lineages and religious institutions within villages owned lands, the rents from which could be used for ceremonial purposes, such as the purchase of incense, rice and pigs offered at ceremonies. According to Mr. Lieu, the village leader (*ap truong*) of Phuoc Yen from 1965 to 1975, each of the founding twelve lineages of Phuoc Yen had 1 *mau* or 5-7 *sao* of land, depending on the size of the lineage.¹⁷⁹ The pagoda owned 2.6 *mau* and the village communal house had 14 *mau*.¹⁸⁰ As for Duong Son, the two founding lineages of the village, the Phan and Tran lineages, traditionally had 2.5 *mau* prior to 1975.¹⁸¹

When the land became collectivized after the revolution, lineages and religious institutions retained only the buildings sitting on the land, while the land itself was expropriated by the commune. Renovation signaled an end to collectivized farming in Vietnam, and a return to families farming their own plots.¹⁸² However, lineages never regained the lands they lost in collectivization, and must draw on the support of members of the lineage to cover the expenses of rituals. Mr. Hoat, the current head of Phuoc Yen's Rites Committee says that the inability to provide inducements, such as a proper ceremonial meal of sticky rice and pork, has been one of the main reasons why these days there is such low attendance at both Buddhist and communal house ceremonies. In the past, says Mr. Hoat, everyone in the village would attend the spring and fall ceremonies

¹⁷⁹ 1 *mau* = 5,000 m², 1 *sao* = 500 m²

¹⁸⁰ The 14 *mau* owned by the village communal house was not located in Phuoc Yen proper, but approximately 14 kilometers away, in a community called Phuoc Thanh, which was founded by a man from Phuoc Yen.

¹⁸¹ Phan Van Duc, Unrecorded Interview, June 28, 2004.

¹⁸² Land is still owned by the state and families receive land use rights for prescribed periods in exchange for paying a small amount annually in land taxes. Individual farmers are able to sell their crops freely in the market and keep whatever revenue they earn.

at the communal house. Now, the average turnout for these events is around thirty people, including the celebrants.¹⁸³

Although government anti-superstition campaigns and land reform resulted in the contraction of ancestor worship practices in Phuoc Yen in the first decade following the revolution, the government's loss of interest in pursuing its anti-superstition campaign has created the political space in which ritual life in Phuoc Yen has been revived. As Hy Van Luong has argued, "official state discourse on rituals and festivals in particular and on culture in general has undergone a fundamental shift, reflecting a greater embrace of the past."¹⁸⁴ This shift, in Luong's view, reflects the government's attempt to strengthen and assert Vietnamese identity as Vietnam becomes more deeply embedded in the global capitalist system. The practice of ancestor worship in contemporary Vietnam-- like the veneration of national heroes and war dead, local festivals, and deity worship – has benefited from the government's current strategy for promoting Vietnamese identity. In the view of one Vietnamese social scientist, Nguyen Thanh Huyen, "the cult of ancestors may be a basis to fight against the waves of cultural aggression coming in mass [*sic*] from outside, particularly from western countries, threatening the loss of our national character."¹⁸⁵

Although lineages no longer have incomes from communal lands, they do have the liberty of staging elaborate ceremonies that once would have reaped the censure of local authorities. Furthermore, improved internal economic conditions since renovation,

¹⁸³ Nguyen Van Hoat, personal interview, June 23, 2004. Given that the current population of Phuoc Yen is over 1,400, a turn-out of thirty people at a ceremony is quite small.

¹⁸⁴ Loung, "Restructuring of Vietnamese Nationalism, 1954-2004," 4. Luong cites recent laws passed by the Vietnamese National assembly, in 2001, stating the government's support of festivals and cultural practices that support the development of "national essence."

¹⁸⁵ Nguyen, "The Cult of Ancestors: A Typical Characteristic of the Vietnamese People's Psychic Life," 50.

combined with remittances from overseas relations, have contributed to an overall flourishing of ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen in the last two decades especially.

But how did the villagers in Catholic Duong Son, across the river, react to state policies on ritual life? In a word: differently. Unlike in Phuoc Yen, residents of Duong Son were little affected by the state's anti-superstition campaigns. Since the early 1700's, another kind of anti-superstition campaign was already in full-effect in Duong Son, and in Catholic communities throughout Asia. From the 18th century until 1964, Catholics in Vietnam had been prohibited by the church from venerating their ancestors in the same way that non-Catholics did. One of the reasons why there are presently far fewer material and ritual manifestations of ancestor worship in Duong Son, compared to Phuoc Yen, is that the forms of ancestor worship practiced in Duong Son today, as described in Chapter 3, are recently created traditions, stimulated by a post-Vatican II theology that encourages greater inculturation of Catholicism to local cultural contexts.

Transformations 3: Inculturation of the Catholic Church in Vietnam

Ritual life in Phuoc Yen prior to the revolution was, in large part, a self-regulating institution. Under the Nguyen dynasty, Phuoc Yen, like all Vietnamese villages, would have received approval for its tutelary deity from the imperial court; but otherwise ritual life was largely unaffected by external governing factors. In contrast, since it was established as a parish in 1696, ritual life of Duong Son has always been tied to the global institution that is the universal Catholic Church with its regional, national, and diocesan

levels of governance. Mr. Phan Bon describes the relationship between Duong Son and the church hierarchy as follows:

[In] Duong Son, we are part of the district [of Huong Toan], so whatever political regime we live under, we have to conform to it. But...the difference in Duong Son is that it is organized as an administrative entity. There is a direct relationship of dependency from the small parish to the Church of Rome, and even down to a smaller scale, to each family unit. There is a structure of organization that is vertical. Within the parish we have the priest, the head of the church, who guides the lambs, a disciple who coordinates the parish. The parish has committees, smaller activity groups.... The organization is always directed towards a source... from the (local) church to the global church.¹⁸⁶

Furthermore, as Pedro Ramet points out, within the Catholic Church, “[t]he concept of hierarchy is inseparable from the concept of obedience: hierarchy entails authority, which is empty without subordination.”¹⁸⁷ Expecting that the faithful would be obedient and subordinate to the dictates of the central institution, Church authorities attempted to ban the practice of ancestor worship in Asia in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The Rites Controversy: a brief overview

Catholic missionaries first encountered ancestor worship in China in the 16th century, and, in the 17th and 18th centuries, members of the Jesuit, Dominican, Franciscan, and Paris Foreign Mission (Missionaires Étrangères de Paris) orders hotly debated the issue of whether to allow Catholic converts to practice ancestor worship and venerate Confucius. The Jesuits, who focused their attention on converting the literati (in both China and Vietnam), adopted what was later termed the accommodationist position, which would allow converts to continue practicing ancestor worship rites and honouring

¹⁸⁶ Phan Bon, Personal Interview, July 2, 2005.

¹⁸⁷ Pedro Ramet, “Catholic Tradition, Hierarchy, and Politics of Coexistence Under Communism: An Introduction,” in *Catholicism and Politics in Communist Societies*, ed. Pedro Ramet (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 15.

Confucius, on the grounds that such rites were not religious but “merely civil and political.”¹⁸⁸ For the most part, the other orders, whose work brought them in close contact with syncretistic popular religion, considered the rites as superstition and idolatrous, and made the case that converts should be absolutely prohibited from taking part in such rituals. Mr. Phan Van Duc, a former seminarian from Duong Son describes the debate, which would later become known as the Rites Controversy, as follows:

The elders were of two minds. On the one side were the Jesuits who thought that ancestor worship should be allowed, while the French elders didn't understand the importance of filial piety to the Vietnamese people, so they forbade them from lighting incense to their ancestors, or putting out offerings of food to them. They accused people of being superstitious.¹⁸⁹

Eventually, the Holy See would decide against Jesuits through a series of papal bulls, beginning with decrees to prohibit the cult of Confucius, ancestor worship and ancestral tablets in 1645, 1704, and 1706. The most forceful bans finally came in the apostolic constitutions *Ex illa die* (19 March 1715), and *Ex quo singulari* (11 July 1742). Prohibition of ancestor worship meant that Catholic converts could not light incense or kowtow before ancestral shrines, keep ancestral tablets, put out food offerings to their ancestors, or even eat the food at a death anniversary of non-Catholics. Missionaries had to vow to observe these decisions “exactly, integrally, absolutely, inviolably, and strictly” upon threat of excommunication for reopening the issue.¹⁹⁰

The Church's position on ancestor worship had disastrous consequences for missionary activities in East and Southeast Asia. On December 17, 1706, Ch'ing Emperor K'ang Hsi issued an imperial edict to expel several missionaries from China,

¹⁸⁸ This phrase was used by Jesuit Marino Martini in 1651 before Propaganda Fide in Rome, and is referred to in Peter C. Phan's *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 113.

¹⁸⁹ Phan Van Duc, personal interview, 28 June 2004. The “French elders” Mr. Duc refers to are members of the Paris Foreign Mission Society.

¹⁹⁰ Phan, *In Our Own Tongues*, 114-115.

while requiring all those who remained to acquire imperial permits to stay in the kingdom.¹⁹¹ As a result of not being able to practice ancestor worship, such an integral part of life in Vietnam, Catholics soon acquired reputations within their communities for being unfilial ancestor traitors.¹⁹²

The Catholic Church's intransigence on ancestor worship became a primary justification for the persecution of Catholics by the Nguyen court in 19th century

Vietnam. An anti-Christian edict from Minh Mang's reign stated:

For a long time many Europeans have come to preach the religion of Jesus, deceived the common people, taught them about paradise and hell, taught them not to worship the Buddha and not to worship ancestors. This is such an irreligion.¹⁹³

Witnessing the precipitous consequences of the Rites Controversy on their efforts to win converts, missionaries in Vietnam flooded Propaganda Fide with questions on the precise execution of the bulls in the two hundred years following the issuing of *Ex quo singulari*. Seeking clarification on which practices would and would not be tolerated by the church, their questions demonstrated a sensitivity to the difficulty that Vietnamese converts faced when forced to choose between their Catholic faith and their culture.¹⁹⁴

Unfortunately, the response of the Asian Vicars Apostolic (the Vatican's regional interpreters of church dogma) was to release instruction after instruction that only served

¹⁹¹ Vo, "A Cultural and Theological Foundation for Ancestor Veneration among Catholics in Vietnam," 137-8.

¹⁹² It was not only Christianity, however, that had to contend with Confucian accusations of unfiliality. As scholars of Chinese Buddhism and world religions have pointed out, Buddhism faced a similar challenge when it was first introduced to China in the first centuries CE. Partially on account of its tradition of monasticism, which implied leaving the family and not having children, Buddhism was condemned, then and later, by the Chinese literati as an unfilial religion. Unlike Christianity, however, Buddhism was much quicker to absorb the virtue of filial piety into its theological system, which was an important step to its gaining acceptance among the masses.

¹⁹³ Vo, "A Cultural and Theological Foundation for Ancestor Veneration among Catholics in Vietnam," 311-2.

¹⁹⁴ Vo, "A Cultural and Theological Foundation for Ancestor Veneration among Catholics in Vietnam," Chapter 4.

to accentuate the differences between Catholics and non-Catholics, and notions of “superstition” and “truth.”

Through the instructions of various synods and the Asian Vicars Apostolic, Catholics were taught to avoid participating in non-Christian funerals (Propaganda Fide ruling, 1753), and to clean the tombs of their ancestors on different days than non-Catholics so as to avoid mixing with non-believers and being exposed to superstitious activities (Vicar Apostolic of Shan-hsi and Shen-hsi, China, 1792).¹⁹⁵ Catholics were also prohibited from making financial contributions to the construction of village houses to tutelary deities or to Confucius. In 1841, an instruction of the Synod of Go Thi, Cochinchina, stated:

It is not allowed to wear a hat, hold flowers, and dance and sing in the procession of the dead to the cemetery. It is not allowed to cleanse tombs and gravesites at the same time as non-Christians do. Do not spend extravagantly on funerals.¹⁹⁶

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the Synod of Tonkin (1900) specified that church cemeteries should be fenced and that only Catholics could be buried within them. The Synod of Ke So, Tonkin (1912) added that, in communities with open cemeteries containing gravesites of Catholics and non-Catholics, the parish should negotiate with local authorities to ensure that Catholics could be buried in a separate part of the cemetery.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 180. Whereas I have used the Wade-Giles system of Romanization for the names of the Chinese Vicars Apostolic, the Vo's text, the pinyin is used. Hence, he refers to the Vicar Apostolic of Chan-Si and Chen-Sin. Vo's original source is Vatican document *Collectanea s. Congregationis de Propaganda Fide seu Decreta Instructiones Rescripta pro Apostolicis Missionibus ex Tabulario Ejusdem Sacrae Congregationis Deprompta*, no. 1773, 707.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 183. The original source, cited by Vo is *Cong Luan Go Thi Nuong Theo Cong Luan Tu Xuyen Don Lai* [The Synod of Go Thi based on the Synod of Sutchuen] (Saigon: Ex Typis Missionis, 15).

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 188. Vo's original source: *Synodus Tunquinensis – Cong Dong Mien Bac Ki, Hoi tai Ke So nam 1912 cung Appendices. In tai Ke So 1916* [The Synod of Tonkin, held at Ke So in 1912, with Appendices] (Ke So: n.p., 1916), 62-64.

Church texts from the early 20th century taught Vietnamese Catholics that it was superstitious to believe that “dead parents would become a *qui* (devil), or a *than* (genie) and come back home to eat food offered to them, and that the dead person would cause harm to the living children” if they failed to provide offerings after death.¹⁹⁸ These books also suggested alternative means of expressing filial piety, including prayer, fasting, penance, wake services, and masses offered at various points during the mourning period and on major Christian holidays.¹⁹⁹ Catholics were taught that carrying out such actions was a way to help the souls of their parents should they be in purgatory.

The general consensus among Vietnamese clergy today is that the Rites Controversy was an unfortunate mistake made by Church leaders in Europe who lacked understanding about local cultural conditions. Even today, Vietnamese Christians must contend with the commonly held perception that “*theo dao bo ong bo ba*” (conversion means abandoning the ancestors). Henry Phan, a Vietnamese Baptist minister in Washington State, has found that the idea that Christians are ancestor traitors is so deeply ingrained within the minds of non-Christian Vietnamese that it presents the most serious obstacle to the conversion of Vietnamese people to Christianity, even when they are living in America, one of the most Christian countries in the world.²⁰⁰

Eventually, the Catholic church did change its position towards ancestor worship. In 1939, Propaganda Fide issued the decree *Plane compertum est* giving Catholics in

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 204. Vo is drawing from S. Chinh, *Hieu Kinh Cha Me* [Filial Piety and Respect of Parents]. 3rd 3d. (Qui Nhon: Imprimerie de Quinhon, Annam, 1923).

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 206-7.

²⁰⁰ Henry H. Phan, *The Development of a Model for Training Vietnamese Christians to Respond to Family Members who are Involved in Ancestor Worship Practices*. (PhD Dissertation, Golden Gate Theological Seminary), 1996. As this dissertation shows, it was not only Catholic missionaries that tried to prevent converts from practicing ancestor worship, but missionaries from Protestant denominations did so as well. As with their Catholic counterparts, intolerance of ancestor worship rites has been a major barrier to evangelization for these missionaries also.

Asia permission to practice ancestor worship using most of the traditional forms of non-Catholics.²⁰¹ The church's rationale for its changed attitude was based on an argument similar to the case made by Jesuits several centuries earlier: that ancestor worship was not religious in character, but merely a civil, political and cultural practice. It was not until 1964, however, that the Vietnamese church leaders requested for this decree to be applied to Vietnam.²⁰² In 1965, an announcement of the Vietnamese bishops stated:

...gestures, attitudes, and rites which by themselves or due to circumstances clearly contain a secular meaning to express patriotism, filial piety, respect or remembrance of ancestors and heroes (e.g., to set up a picture or an image, a statue; to bow with respect; to decorate with flowers, lanterns; to organize death anniversaries)...are allowed to be practiced and actively participated in.²⁰³

Over the last forty years, the Vietnamese church hierarchy has met several times to discuss such questions and thus issued various pastoral letters and announcements clarifying its position on ancestor worship and the worship of national heroes.²⁰⁴ These documents outline the rites that Catholics are permitted to carry out to honour ancestors, and articulate the church's rationale for permitting and promoting ancestor worship, a practice that was once banned absolutely.

²⁰¹ This decree came as a result of a request made by clergy in Japan that they be able to participate in rites venerating Confucius and especially Shinto rites, because they were clearly not religious rites but purely civil and political in nature.

²⁰² Phan, *In Our Own Tongues*, 123.

²⁰³ Vo, "A Cultural and Theological Foundation for Ancestor Veneration among Catholics in Vietnam," 213. Original text in the Vietnamese found in *Sacerdotes* 43 July 1965); "L'église du Vietnam et la Question des Rites" *Mission Étrangères de Paris* (mai-juin, 1966), 491.

²⁰⁴ For instance: the pastoral letter of Archbishop of Saigon, Nguyen Van Binh, on the Rites of Ancestor Veneration (*Van kien ve Le nghi ton kinh To Tien*) issued November 15, 1964; the 1965 Announcement of the Conference of Vietnamese Bishops regarding the Veneration of Ancestors and Heroes (*Thong cao cua hoi dong giam muc Viet Nam ve viec ton kinh to tien va cac bac anh hung liet si*); decisions made by the Committee of Vietnamese Bishops on Evangelization in 1972; a communiqué of the Vietnamese bishops in 1974 and; the Asian Synod in Rome (1998).

In 1964, the archbishop of Saigon recognized that filial piety and ancestor worship were an important part of the “the Way” (*dao*) of being fully human.²⁰⁵ A decade later, the Vietnamese bishops argued that, as a result of scientific progress and interaction with other cultures, ancestor worship had been purged of its religious character thereby becoming more of a means of expressing civil, political and cultural relations. They also stated that contemporary Catholics were better equipped than early converts to distinguish between truth and superstition. Finally, they viewed accommodation of ancestor worship as essential to the church’s goal of evangelization in Asia.²⁰⁶ At the Synod of Asia, held in Rome in 1998, the Asian bishops recognized the value of ancestor worship and asked for permission to promote it freely.²⁰⁷ Today, Vietnamese Catholics are allowed to participate in most ancestor worship rites, excluding those still considered “superstitious,” such as burning paper money or clothes, using *hon bach*, soul calling, putting rice and money in the mouth of the dead, and choosing good and bad times for burial.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Paul Nguyen Van Binh, Archbishop of Saigon, Pastoral Letter on Rites of Ancestor Veneration (*Van kien ve Le nghi ton kinh To Tien*), November 15, 1964.

²⁰⁶ In a 1974 communiqué, the Vietnamese bishops reiterated the “Six Permissions” regarding ancestor worship that had been outlined in 1973 by the Committee of Vietnamese Bishops on Evangelization, and further stated that, “In order for non-Christians to easily accept the Good News” that secular rites in remembrance of ancestors and heroes “should be practiced and actively participated in.”

²⁰⁷ Vo, “A Cultural and Theological Foundation for Ancestor Veneration among Catholics in Vietnam,” 3.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 221. *Hon bach*, literally meaning “white soul,” is a piece of white cloth that is folded in the shape of a human being to capture the soul of the dead when the person dies.

Church orthodoxy and reform: impacts on Duong Son

While some residents of Duong Son believe that the early missionaries had been too strict in their prohibition of ancestor worship, my interviewees expressed little resentment at having been barred from traditional practices, which effectively contributed to their exclusion from mainstream Vietnamese society. According to Father Phan Hung of Duong Son, prior to the Second Vatican Council, Catholics in Duong Son commemorated their ancestors using Catholic, rather than Vietnamese rituals. They would pray for them and ask for masses to be said in their memory, but did not make the traditional offerings of incense, flowers, and food; nor did they kowtow before ancestral shrines or partake in ceremonial meals with non-Catholics where food had been offered on ancestral altars.²⁰⁹ Father Hung and Mr. Phan Van Duc both assert that people in Duong Son actually felt proud that they did not participate in traditional and “superstitious” forms of ancestor worship because that made them feel “more western” (*tay phuong hon*) and “more civilized” (*van minh hon*). They do not fault the early missionaries for their lack of sensitivity to Vietnamese culture.

Having said this, the church’s recently relaxed attitude towards ancestor worship has been widely embraced in Duong Son. According to several interviewees, prior to the 1960s expressing filial piety was not as important to people in Duong Son as it was to people in non-Catholic villages.²¹⁰ In the last forty years, however, most of the residents of Duong Son have taken steps to revere their ancestors using traditional Vietnamese cultural forms, such as erecting ancestral altars within the home, constructing more

²⁰⁹ Phan Hung, personal interview, 7 July 2004.

²¹⁰ Phan Van Duc, personal interview, 28 June 2004 and Phan Van Lang, personal interview, 12 July 2004.

elaborate gravesites, building familial houses of memory (if they have the funds to do so), and staging more auspicious death anniversary ceremonies.²¹¹

Church reforms, increasing economic prosperity since the late 1980's, and remittances from overseas relations have all contributed to the expansion of ancestor worship practices and material culture in Duong Son over the last four decades. Rather than avoiding contact with non-Catholic practices of ancestor worship as they used to, for fear of being contaminated by superstition, Catholics in Duong Son now look to non-Catholic communities for models of how to remember their ancestors. While we walked around Duong Son's cemetery one morning, Mr. Duc commented:

We have to acknowledge that non-Catholics have been better at expressing filial piety than we have. Recognizing that they have good traditions, we have copied some, like building *nha tu duong* (family houses of memory).²¹²

As described in Chapter 3, both the Catholic clergy and the laity have actively promoted the reinvigoration of ancestor worship practices in Duong Son. Father Hung, a native son of Duong Son, has made it his special mission to integrate post-Vatican II Catholic theology with Vietnamese cultural practices of filial piety, both in his personal life and his public mission. During our conversations, Father Hung often spoke of *dao hieu*, "the way of filial piety", which he does not consider a religion, but a teaching that is central to Vietnamese culture.

In the Vietnamese heart/mind, expressing filial piety – taking care of parents and other relations in life and in death -- is important. Regardless of which religion you are, you find ways to express these sentiments. The forms of expression have existed in the Vietnamese civilization for many years.²¹³

²¹¹ Phan Van Lang, personal interview, 12 July 2004.

²¹² Phan Van Duc, personal interview, 28 June 2004.

²¹³ Ibid.

In Father Hung's mind, this way of filial piety -- that which gives rise to the various rituals that are identified with ancestor worship -- is an inner attitude of gratitude and reverence towards one's ancestors. He considers filial piety a cardinal virtue because it leads to a more perfect love of God: "If your father and mother are in front of you, and you can't love them, then how will you love God?"²¹⁴

Father Hung also argues that there are good reasons to believe that Catholics are just as filial as non-Catholics, and possibly even more so. Whereas filial piety among the general public is a social expectation, for Catholics, says Father Hung, filial piety is the law as stipulated by the fourth commandment to "Honour thy mother and thy father." He adds that it is significant that the injunction to be filial is the first of the seven commandments that deal with human-to-human relations; the first three commandments dictate the proper relationship between humans and God. Comparing *dao hieu* between Catholics and non-Catholics, Father Hung claimed that, "because Catholics place filial piety under the eyes of God, the Catholic expression of filial piety is deeper, more obligatory, more complete and more meaningful."²¹⁵

In the February 2004 issue of the newsletter *Hat Cai* (Mustard Seed), Father Hung encouraged his readers to help erase the popular perception that "following the way [of Christianity] means abandoning the ancestors" (*di dao bo ong bo ba*) by incorporating traditional ancestor worship practices into their lives.²¹⁶ In the article he encouraged parishioners to create ancestral shrines to accompany their existing shrines to God, and recommended that they write genealogical registers, adding that parish records should not be taken to be adequate substitutes for lineage records.

²¹⁴ Phan Hung, personal interview, 7 July 2004.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Phan Hung, *Hat Cai*, 8.

When I spoke to him in his office in Duong Son, Father Hung brought over the book he uses every day when he says mass and pointed to the section he reads when he offers up the Eucharist. It reads: “Remember in particular *our ancestors*, our parents and our friends who have left this world.”²¹⁷ The standard Eucharistic prayer in the Catholic Church outside of Vietnam reads, “Remember our brothers and sisters who have gone to their rest in the hope of rising again.” The additional emphasis on remembering ancestors was an innovation of the Vietnamese bishops in the late 1980’s and is an example of what Peter C. Phan calls “liturgical inculturation”, that is, integrating local cultural forms into the liturgy of the church.²¹⁸ A second example of liturgical inculturation noted by Peter C. Phan, as well as by Father Hung in Duong Son, is the special mass said for ancestors, parents and grandparents on the second day of the lunar new year, the most important cultural celebration in Vietnam. In Phan’s view:

The inclusion of the veneration of ancestors in the Mass, especially the mention of ancestors in Eucharistic prayers, marks a monumental step in liturgical inculturation in Vietnam.²¹⁹

As an example of the church’s efforts to promote dialogue between faith and culture, Mr. Phan Bon spoke about a three-day conference organized by the Diocese of Hue in 2003 entitled, “Living our faith in Vietnamese ways” which brought together scholars, theologians and lay people to discuss a variety of topics relating to the question of how to live fully the Catholic faith as a Vietnamese person.²²⁰ The objective of the conference, says Mr. Bon, was “to bring the life of faith and integrate it with Vietnamese

²¹⁷ Second edition of the *Roman Missal* in Vietnamese published in 1992. Translation by Peter C. Phan in *In Our Own Tongues*, 125.

²¹⁸ Phan, *In Our Own Tongues*, 124-5.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

²²⁰ The papers presented at this conference have been collated into the following volume: Thieu Quang Thang, Ed. *Hong an huan giao: Song dao theo cung cach Viet Nam* [The Blessing of Religious Education: Living Our Faith in Vietnamese Ways] (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Tôn Giáo, 2004).

culture...to bring the language, the thought of our culture so that people can interact with it.”²²¹

Phan Van Duc, Mr. Bon’s brother, spoke positively about the way the church hierarchy had promoted the cult of the Virgin of La Vang, a mother figure whom the Vietnamese can claim as their own:

Everyone wants Mary to be their mother. So, Mary of Poland will be different than Mary of Africa. The church wants to be close to the people, so it will use whatever means it has to do so. Our church is very concerned for the people.²²²

And it is only right that the church should be so concerned, in Mr. Duc’s mind, because “only where there is culture is there a person.”²²³

As mentioned in Chapter 3, several interviewees in Duong Son expressed the view that Catholic expressions of filial piety were superior to the forms used by non-Catholics, as they were both more economical and less “superstitious.” Mr. Duc also believed that Catholic ancestor worship rites were superior because they created greater social unity and transcended the communal fragmentation that ancestor worship grounded in kinship alone can produce:

In Catholic villages, the priest and the parish stand out to organize rites for the collective and the community is unified in their prayer. And that is where they have an advantage over non-Catholics. For non-Catholics, no matter what their religion, each branch just cares for itself, each lineage for itself. But Catholics pray for everyone who has been baptized, so they are unified in prayer, in the mass, and that is where they are better than other villages.²²⁴

Incorporating ancestor worship rites and other traditional Vietnamese cultural forms into the liturgy are now seen as essential means of achieving the Church’s goals of

²²¹ Phan Bon, personal interview, 2 July 2004.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Phan Van Duc, personal interview, 2 July 2004. Unlike participants from Duong Son, interviewees in Phuoc Yen rarely spoke about superstition. Nor did they compare their own ancestor worship practices to those of their Catholic neighbours.

spreading its message and gaining converts. This process necessarily involves remaking Catholic identity in Vietnam, and challenging the deeply held view that Catholics are ancestor traitors. As Father Phan Hung said to me:

Many people used to think that being Catholic meant that you followed the West, that you lost your roots. But this is not true. It is an extremist view. No, Roman Catholicism actually brings new things to culture. The church in Vietnam is built on the foundations of Confucianism. Before, it was true; you couldn't light incense, you couldn't eat food offered on the ancestral shrine. But after the Second Vatican Council, we are going back to our roots....Catholicism isn't destroying [cultural] foundations, but building upon them.²²⁵

Several years ago, Father Hung and another priest, Father Loi joined members of the Phan lineage from all parts of Vietnam in making a pilgrimage to the gravesite of one of the lineage's founding ancestors in the northern province of Ha Tinh. The two priests treated the journey as an opportunity to missionize, not through preaching the gospel, however, but by letting their actions show that Catholics do not all abandon their ancestors, as many in Vietnam still believe.²²⁶

Both priests practiced kowtowing deeply in the traditional fashion prior to arriving at the gravesite and, once there, they not only prostrated themselves before the ancestor's grave, they also made traditional offerings of rice wine, betel nuts, incense, flowers, cakes, candles and bananas. Father Hung says that the non-Catholics were particularly surprised and impressed that these two Catholic priests knew how to kowtow. He adds with pride that several non-Catholics who watched a video-recording of the ceremony have told him that the sight of the priests performing ancestral rites with such

²²⁵ Phan Hung, personal interview, 28 June 2004.

²²⁶ Ibid.

reverence improved their perception of Catholics to the extent that, whereas they would have not previously consented to their children marrying Catholics, now they would.²²⁷

Father Hung's words provide clear evidence of the dramatic shift in the Vietnamese church's position with regards to ancestor worship in the last forty years, as well as of the discernable impact this shift has had on the religious practices of Catholic (from the laity to the clergy). What he says also shows how Vietnamese Catholics perceive themselves within Vietnamese society, and how they are perceived within Vietnamese society at large. In Duong Son, where the identities of village and parish and villager and parishioner overlap to such a high degree, the daily lives and practices of the villagers are intimately tied up with the global institution of the church and its regional organs of authority. Tracking the changes in attitudes towards ancestor worship within this community and the resulting manifestations in ritual life and material culture illustrate the close relationship between local culture and global institutions, a theme developed further in Chapter 5.

Transformations 4: Migration

The Viet kieu (Overseas Vietnamese) impact

Although it is difficult to say precisely the total number of Vietnamese people presently living outside of Vietnam, in a 2001 issue of *Diaspora*, Louis-Jaques Dorais puts this number around 2.6 million, with about half living in the U.S. and the remainder "scattered over sixty different countries, including France (400,000), China (300,000),

²²⁷ Phan Hung, personal interview, 7 July 2004.

Australia (200,000), Canada (200,000), and Thailand (120,000).²²⁸ Many of these overseas Vietnamese, known as *Viet kieu*, left Vietnam illegally as “boat people” in the first decade following the revolution. To paraphrase Andrew Hardy, the 70’s and 80’s were the decades when the Vietnamese invented a “tradition of overseas migration.”²²⁹ During this time, the immigration policies of Western countries were far more open than they are at present, and most of the boat people gained refugee status in the U.S., Canada, Australia and France, and eventually became naturalized citizens. In recent years, the majority of people leaving Vietnam have done so through policies of family reunification and as migrant labourers to countries in East and Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe.

Writing for the International Organization for Migration, Graeme Hugo cites a 2002 estimate made by the Bank of Vietnam measuring remittances from *Viet kieu* as well as about 100,000 overseas contract workers at US \$2.4 billion, adding that, “the official remittances are only part of a total flow of around US \$4 billion.”²³⁰ The number of *Viet kieu* who return to Vietnam to visit their families, travel and open businesses increases annually. Especially in the former South Vietnam, many people have relations living overseas, and it is widely known that overseas relations provide funding for everything from new buildings to gravesites, university educations to emergency surgeries. Although the impact of *Viet kieu* remittances is well recognized within popular discourse in Vietnam and within the Vietnamese diaspora, scholars (mainly sociologists)

²²⁸ Louis-Jacques Dorais, “Defining the Overseas Vietnamese,” *Diaspora* 10:1 (2001), 3.

²²⁹ Andrew Hardy, “State Visions, Migrant Decisions: Population Movements since the End of the Vietnam War,” in *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society*, ed. Hy Van Luong (Lanham: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore and Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 122.

²³⁰ Graeme Hugo, *Migration and Development: A Perspective from Asia* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2003), 9.

are just beginning to turn their attention to the impact of migration on cultural practices within Vietnam.²³¹

In the literature on transformations in ritual life in contemporary Vietnam, the impact of migration, both within the country and internationally, receives little more than a passing mention, as anthropologists such as Malarney, Luong and Goodkind have focused primarily on changes to state agendas since the revolution. Testimonies of interviewees in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son, however, clearly implicate overseas relations in the reinvigoration of ritual life in the villages, and elsewhere within Vietnam. According to calculations made by Duong Son's parish council, there were 107 descendents of Duong Son living overseas in 1996.²³² Similar figures are not available for Phuoc Yen, although based on my knowledge of the village I would estimate that the number of Viet kieu from Phuoc Yen would be comparable. Stories of residents from Phuoc Yen and Duong Son illustrate that ancestor worship has benefited from the remittances of Viet kieu, materialized in the form of renovated or reconstructed lineage houses, new shrines in family homes, and gravesites. Mr. Nguyen Dinh An, a former resident of Phuoc Yen, said:

The gravesites we're building right now, it's all because of money from our relatives over there. There are two main streams of money in Vietnam: one from Viet kieu, the other gained through corruption, and the latter is the larger of the two streams.²³³

²³¹ Hung Cam Thai's doctoral dissertation *Marriage across the Pacific: Kinship and Migration in Vietnam and the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Ph D Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley), 2003, examines the impact of migration on the marriage choices of women in Vietnam and Viet kieu men. Mandy Thomas looks at food and eating habits as markers of social change within contemporary Vietnam and in the diaspora; see Mandy Thomas, "Traditions in Taste in Vietnam and the Diaspora," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 15:1 (2004) 54-67.

²³² *Giao xu Duong Son, Tong giao phan Hue: Tam bach chu nien 1696-1996* [Parish of Duong Son, Archdiocese of Hue: Tercentennial 1696-1996].

²³³ Nguyen Dinh An, personal interview, 26 May 2004.

Mr. An knew about Viet kieu money and corruption from first-hand experience. Prior to our discussion, he had just paid VND 2.5 million to local officials to obtain permission for the reburial of his relations in Phuoc Yen's Con Da cemetery. One of Mr. An's brothers is a Viet kieu living in Houston, Texas who was in the village at the time of our conversation. This brother had been in the village for several months preparing for the reburial ceremony, laying out several thousands of U.S. dollars in the process.

In Duong Son, I visited a new familial ancestor worship house that had cost US \$8,000 to build, funded primarily by Viet kieu contributions. Remittances are undoubtedly appreciated, but a few interviewees also said Viet kieu money was fuelling the current focus on lavish memorial practices. Mr. Phan Van Duc in Duong Son spoke about a well-known village near Thuan An, on the coast, known as the City of Ghosts (*Thanh pho ma*) because of the ridiculously large and expensive gravesites that have been constructed there in recent years, with the financial support of Viet kieu. In Mr. Duc's words:

People in the United States send thousands of dollars. They destroy existing gravesites to make more impressive new ones. That's why they call it the City of Ghosts. They don't worry about the living, but worry about the dead. The schools are hot and stuffy, the roads full of potholes. They don't have electricity...but they just worry about gravesites. If I don't have money, I pray for my ancestors. If you satisfy your own standards of filial piety, that is enough. But borrowing money to build graves? [laughs] And then when the debt collectors come, they disrespect your ancestors!²³⁴

While I was in Phuoc Yen and Da Lat, several of my cousins and uncles spoke to me about their plans to build a new house for our branch of the Nguyen Van lineage.²³⁵

²³⁴ Phan Van Duc, personal interview, 2 July 2004.

²³⁵ When I use terms such as "cousin", "aunt" or "uncle" the reader should be aware that these are convenient translations from the Vietnamese, which do not correspond exactly to their English usage. An

According to their fundraising plans, villagers would contribute one third of the funds towards the new building, another third would come from villagers living outside of Phuoc Yen in cities like Hue, Da Nang and Da Lat, and the final third would come from villagers living overseas.

Migration within Vietnam

In understanding the development of ancestor worship practices in the villages I studied, especially Phuoc Yen, it is important to consider the impact of another body of migrants: those who have left the village to settle in the cities. In 1996, the parish of Duong Son calculated the number of descendants from the village living outside of the province of Thua Thien Hue to be 1,060, slightly under the number of inhabitants of the village itself, which was 1,100 at the time.²³⁶ As in the case of figures for Viet kieu, no similar calculation has been made for Phuoc Yen. However, according to rough estimates made by Mr. Nguyen Van Bin in Da Lat the number of Phuoc Yen descendants residing out of province is likely even higher than the figure for Duong Son, as he believes there are approximately a thousand descendants of the village living in the city of Da Lat alone.²³⁷ Furthermore, while interviewees in Duong Son never once mentioned the impact of relations within the country on ritual life in their village, in Phuoc Yen most conversations on this topic would inevitably lead to a mention of Da Lat and the impact its residents have had on the resurgence of ancestor worship practices and memorial architecture in Phuoc Yen.

“aunt” in Vietnam is not just the sister of one’s mother or father, but can also be a cousin several times removed. The same applies for the terms “uncle” and “cousin”.

²³⁶ *Giao xu Duong Son, Tong giao phan Hue: Tam bach chu nien 1696-1996* [Parish of Duong Son, Archdiocese of Hue: Tricentennial 1696-1996].

²³⁷ According to 1989 census figures, the population of Da Lat at this time was 102,583. Figure from: www.citypopulation.de/Vietnam.html.

Beginning in the 1950's, residents of Phuoc Yen began leaving the village to escape the burdens of war and poverty, settling in cities and towns throughout South Vietnam.²³⁸ By far the largest number of these former villagers took up residence in Da Lat, a city in the south central highlands of Vietnam well known in Vietnam for its romantic atmosphere, temperate climate, and the exceptional fertility of its soil. Migration from Phuoc Yen to Da Lat continues into the present, especially among younger individuals who travel to the city seeking employment opportunities unavailable in the village. Unlike their predecessors, this generation of migrants has benefited from the support of family members and extended kinship networks firmly established in their new home. Hearing interviewees in Phuoc Yen speak about the important role that their urban relatives have played in the expansion of ancestor worship in the village, I decided to make a trip to Da Lat to find out more about the ties between the villagers and their city relations.

The majority of descendants of Phuoc Yen in Da Lat (henceforth referred to as 'descendants') have settled primarily in two neighborhoods: Anh Sang in the city's core, and Thai Phien, on its outskirts. Anh Sang is a neighborhood of makeshift clapboard houses tightly crammed together in the shadows of Nguyen Chi Thanh Street, one of Da Lat's main arteries. Living conditions are cramped, but newly arrived villagers, who make up the majority of its residents, earn incomes many times higher in Da Lat -- working in flower gardens, vegetable farms, and city markets -- than they would in Phuoc Yen. Thai Phien is a new settlement near Ho Than Tho (Lake of Sighs), one of the city's well-known geographical features. The houses and streets of Thai Phien are wider and

²³⁸ Nguyen Van Bin, personal interview, 6 August 2004.

more established there than those in Anh Sang, and the neighborhood is populated by descendants who have been in Da Lat for several generations. [Figure 22]

At his home in Thai Phien, Mr. Nguyen Van Dua, a resident of Da Lat for over twenty years, described the way people from Phuoc Yen have successfully transplanted many of the practices of ancestor worship from the village to their new urban milieu. All thirty-two lineages in Phuoc Yen are represented in Da Lat, and they all continue to meet annually to celebrate their respective lineage ancestor worship days in the same way they would in the village: by cleaning the graves of ancestors and sharing in a ceremonial meal. As in the village, each lineage maintains a genealogical register (*gia pha*), has a lineage head (*truong ho*) and selects a secretary-treasurer to oversee these activities. The ancestral shrine occupies the central position in the main room of the home. Whenever a descendent of Phuoc Yen dies, the family of the deceased will contact the Village Committee (*Ban quan ly lang*) who will take care of funerary rites and organize the team of pallbearers. Funerals of descendants are very well attended by the Phuoc Yen community in Da Lat.²³⁹

For several decades descendants have gathered annually on the twentieth day of the first lunar month to *cung co hon* (commemorate lonely ghosts) as they do in Phuoc Yen on the same date. In 1971, Ms. Nguyen Thi Trung, a wealthy landowner from the Nguyen Dinh lineage, donated a parcel of land in Thai Phien for the construction of a memorial to the lonely ghosts of Phuoc Yen (*co hon*), and this memorial has become the site of an annual event that draws together almost everyone who has a connection with Phuoc Yen within the city. Presently, a three-man Village Committee -- consisting of a head member (*truong lang*), a secretary, and a communications person -- is responsible

²³⁹ Nguyen Van Dua, personal interview, 6 August 2004.

for village business in Da Lat. Assisted by the thirty-two lineage heads, the committee organizes the annual lonely ghost ceremony, which has come to serve as a substitute for a village ancestor worship day. [Figures 23 & 24] According to the estimates of Mr. Nguyen Van Bin, in 2004, over five hundred people attended the ceremony and the ceremonial meal that followed.²⁴⁰

In addition to transplanting village-based practices of ancestor worship to Da Lat, descendents have been integral to the transformation of ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen over the last forty years through their role as the major financial contributors, providing funds for the construction of gravesites and lineage houses, and ancestor worship rituals. Improved telecommunications networks in Vietnam over the last two decades have helped to strengthen the linkages between families and lineages in Da Lat and Phuoc Yen. On the day I met Mr. Nguyen Van Dua, his oldest son Hung, who has spent most of his life in Da Lat, asked me if I had attended the boat races accompanying the inauguration of a new shrine in Phuoc Yen several weeks earlier. I had indeed watched these races and was curious to know if it was normal for descendents to be so well informed about the day-to-day activities in the village. He laughed and said that, through letters and telephone calls, people in Da Lat often know what is going on in Phuoc Yen before many of the villagers do. Mr. Dua, who himself is planning to return to Phuoc Yen in 2005 to assist in the reconstruction of a new lineage house, says that whenever people in Phuoc Yen need something, be it funds to refurbish the pagoda or to stage a death anniversary, they know they can just pick up the phone to draw on the resources of their community in Da Lat.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Nguyen Van Bin, personal interview, 6 August 2004.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

Finally, it is not only families and lineages that maintain a connection with the Da Lat community, but also Phuoc Yen's party officials. Presently, whenever the village committee of Phuoc Yen has plans for infrastructural or architectural projects, letters are sent to Da Lat soliciting support. According to Mr. Bin, people in Da Lat have poured in hundreds of millions, if not billions, of Vietnamese dong towards these projects. Mr. Bin and Mr. Dua estimate that about three-quarters of the money for the construction of lineage houses in Phuoc Yen comes from Da Lat relatives.²⁴²

Improvements in economic life since Renovation have notably facilitated travel within Vietnam. Whereas the twenty-hour bus ride from Phuoc Yen to Da Lat would have been an unfathomable journey even as recently as the early nineties, the trip is now considered routine, and many descendants return to Phuoc Yen every year to visit family and tend to ancestor worship business. At a death anniversary ceremony held at the home of Mr. Nguyen Van Toan in Thai Phien, almost every adult I spoke to had a close relation who was in the village at that time for reasons related to the ancestors. From May until July, the roadside coffee shops in Phuoc Yen are crowded with descendants who are in the village for visits of days or weeks and whose ostensible purpose for being there is to reconstruct the gravesite of an ancestor, oversee the death anniversary of a deceased parent, or attend the inauguration of a lineage house. [Figure 25]

Conclusions

As this chapter has demonstrated, ancestor worship practices in Duong Son and Phuoc Yen have undergone significant transformations in the last forty years. We can

²⁴² Nguyen Van Bin and Nguyen Van Dua, personal interview, 6 August 2004.

think of the factors of transformation discussed above in terms of forces that have led to the contraction of ancestor worship and forces that have contributed to its expansion.

During the First and Second Indochina wars, ritual practices took a back seat to survival, and the wars had the further impact of destroying much of the sacred architecture in both villages. Following the revolution, state-endorsed land-reform policies and anti-superstition campaigns, and the poor performance of the Vietnamese economy were additional factors that led to the contraction of ancestor worship and ritual life in the Phuoc Yen and Duong Son and throughout Vietnam. These forces of contraction were particularly apparent in Phuoc Yen in the first decade following the revolution.

The last twenty years, however, have been a time of expansion for ritual life throughout Vietnam. The state's loss of interest in enforcing Marxist orthodoxy, and the changes brought about by *doi moi* – both economic and cultural – have facilitated the revival of practices that had been simplified due to war, government policies, and poverty. The Vietnamese diaspora and migration within the country have been additional factors contributing to the expansion of ancestor worship in the villages. Finally, a force that has had a tremendous impact exclusively on Duong Son has been the significant change in the theology of the Catholic church since 1964, which shifted from a position of rejection to one of accommodation and even promotion of ancestor worship.

Although I have framed this chapter as a story of change (i.e., transforming practices), I might very well have framed it as a story of continuity.²⁴³ The robustness of ancestor worship in both Duong Son and Phuoc Yen today in spite of wars, economic

²⁴³ I am grateful to sociologist Peter Dodd for raising this point with me at a lecture I gave based on this research at the University of Victoria in February 2005.

crises, and changing state and church agendas speaks to the ability of people to retain, remember, revive, and reinvent cultural practices against great odds. The revival of ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen in recent decades and its reinvention in Duong Son since 1964 speak to the limits of both church and state attempts to completely displace local belief systems and replace them with their chosen ideology. The impact that Catholic theology and church hierarchy have had on Duong Son, and the role of internal and international migration on both villages, calls our attention to several dialectics: between religion and culture; between global and local institutions; and, between national and international flows of capital and persons, and local practices. These topics are taken up in the next and final chapter.



Figure 22: A street in the borough of Anh Sang, Da Lat.



Figure 23: Site for commemoration of lonely spirits of descendents from Phuoc Yen living in Da Lat.

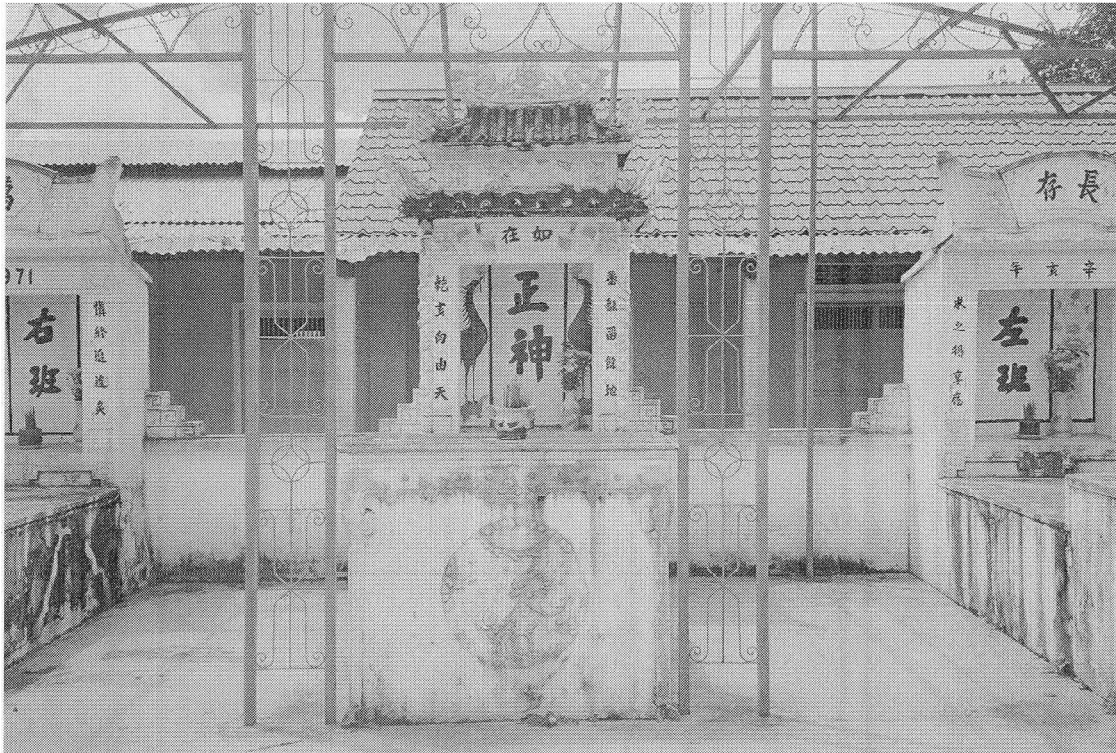


Figure 24: Site for commemoration of lonely spirits of descendents from Phuoc Yen living in Da Lat (close-up).



Figure 25: Nguyen Van Toan stands by his ancestral shrine on the death anniversary of his late-father, Da Lat.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

The impetus for this thesis was a story about two families and two villages, separated by a river and differentiated by religion. Learning about the forty-year friendship between my Buddhist uncle, Nguyen Van Lieu, and the Catholic family who sheltered him during the worst years of the American war was my inspiration for crossing the Bo River separating Phuoc Yen and Duong Son, as Mr. Lieu had on so many of those dangerous nights.

What I observed on these crossings was a simple difference, which led to an impulse to understand why the cemetery in Catholic Duong Son was fenced and neatly ordered, while the cemeteries of Buddhist Phuoc Yen sprawled out across the landscape unenclosed and unregulated. My query about this led to a broader inquiry about differences in the material cultural and ritual expressions of ancestor worship, a practice that, while an essential part of life in Vietnam, has received little attention within the scholarly literature. Comparing ancestor worship in a Buddhist village and a Catholic village, I believed, might yield important insights into the histories of these respective religions in Vietnam and lead to broader conclusions about the relationship between religion and culture.

In addition to offering thick descriptions of contemporary practices of ancestor worship in these villages, a second and equally important aim of this work has been to treat ancestor worship as a site through which to study social change in the villages over the last forty years. Although this thesis acknowledges the centrality of ancestor worship within Vietnamese culture, it also takes the view that ancestor worship, like all cultural forms, is in a constant state of transformation and reinvention as a result of dialogues

between the spiritual and functional needs of local practitioners, and between national and transnational processes.

Of the thousands of villages in Vietnam, I chose to study Phuoc Yen and Duong Son in part because of my personal connection to both villages, but also because comparing ancestor worship in these villages allows me to speak to several gaps within the literature: on cultural life in central Vietnam; on Vietnamese village life; and, on religious life in Vietnam. In a province known to be the heartland of Vietnamese Buddhism, the existence of Duong Son, with its over-three-hundred-year history of Catholicism, is on its own a phenomenon worthy of humanistic and social scientific study. Phuoc Yen, given its historical ties to the court in Hue, also has a noteworthy history. For the purposes of this study, however, I have used Phuoc Yen as a foil for Duong Son, taking it to represent a “traditional” Vietnamese village, which, in religious terms, is characterized by a predominance of Pure Land Buddhism that freely integrates elements of Taoism, Confucianism and local animism. Given the paucity of research on life in central Vietnam, this study makes a contribution simply by mapping the experiences of these overlooked places. One of my goals in writing this thesis has been to do what Julie Cruikshank and Tatiana Argounova believe to be a primary function of ethnography: “to map the experiences of small populations in a world that increasingly considers local experiences irrelevant to a globalizing world.”²⁴⁴

The choice to use ethnography as my principal method of gathering data for this study was both practically and theoretically driven. Practically speaking, ethnography is an essential tool for studying life in Vietnamese villages because of the general absence

²⁴⁴ Julie Cruikshank and Tatiana Argounova, “Reinscribing meaning: memory and indigenous identity in Sakha Republic (Yakutia),” 116.

of documentary sources on villages. Theoretically speaking, ethnography – with its focus on everyday experience and the motivations of research subjects – can help us understand how religions are lived on the ground, in particular places. Not only is there an overall dearth of writing on Vietnamese Buddhism and Christianity, but most of the existing literature, while enormously beneficial in tracking the development of these religions historically and theologically (especially with regards to their respective interactions with colonialism and revolutionary struggles), does not really give us a sense of how these religions are *lived*. The third chapter of this thesis is an attempt to partially fill this gap.

Overview of key findings

In Chapter 3, I presented a comparison of contemporary ancestor worship practices in the two villages, focusing specifically on four points: first, the rationale behind the practices; second, the nature of material culture involved; third, the range of ritual expressions employed; and lastly, the role of the clergy. I showed that in both contemporary Phuoc Yen and Duong Son ancestor worship is widely practiced through rituals such as death anniversaries, and through material cultural expressions such as ancestral shrines, gravesites and memorial structures. At the same time, while ancestor worship in both villages exhibits many similar characteristics, it also has significant differences. Ancestor worship is much simpler in Duong Son than in Phuoc Yen, both in terms of material culture and ritual expression. The villages also differed significantly in terms of the motivations expressed by interviewees for the practice of ancestor worship and the roles of their respective clergy in supporting and regulating it. These differences,

I argued, can largely be explained in relation to Duong Son's long history of Catholicism and the Catholic Church's changing attitudes and doctrines towards this cultural practice.

In the fourth chapter, I examined the historical context for the transformations that ancestor worship practices in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son have undergone over the last forty years. While the comparison of contemporary ancestor worship practices presented in Chapter 3 demonstrated that the observable differences in rituals and material culture in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son can be attributed to religious differences between the villages, other factors must be taken into account to explain the substantial transformations in ancestor worship in both villages over the last four decades. These factors include state policies regarding ritual life, the economic situation in post-war, and then post-Renovation, Vietnam, and migration both within Vietnam and internationally.

These "forces of transformation" have affected the villages unevenly. Because traditional ancestor worship was not practiced in Duong Son using traditional Vietnamese forms until after the Second Vatican Council, the effects of state anti-superstition campaigns and land-reform programmes were felt more strongly in Phuoc Yen. In Phuoc Yen there was a contraction in ancestor worship during the decade following the revolution. At the same time, the improved economic situation in Vietnam since Renovation has had a similar impact in both villages in that it has enabled villagers to spend on ritual practices and memorial architecture to a greater degree than in the past. Similarly, international migration has also contributed to the flourishing of ancestor worship in both villages, as remittances from overseas Vietnamese have become an important source of funds for ancestor worship.

Studying Italian folk culture during the period of fascism, Alessandro Portelli remarks that rural culture survives “with a horizon of disappearance”; it “reacts to fragmentation by obstinately picking up the pieces and putting them back together.”²⁴⁵ The robustness of ancestor worship in contemporary Phuoc Yen and Duong Son seems to confirm Portelli’s assertion. For centuries, ancestor worship did apparently disappear from Duong Son; and for several decades, it was simplified in Phuoc Yen. And yet, in spite of wars, economic upheaval, Church restrictions and state legislation to prohibit or limit the practice, ancestor worship endured.

The presentation of contemporary practices of ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son (Chapter 3) and the examination of how these practices have changed over the last forty years (Chapter 4) are first steps to addressing the substantial gaps in our knowledge about life in central Vietnamese villages and about how Buddhism and Catholicism are practiced within these contexts. In addition to addressing the aforementioned gaps in the literature, the findings of this study will contribute to discussion in areas more broadly theoretical. In the next section, I discuss three such areas.

Theoretical contributions of the research

Parallels between state Marxism and Catholicism

Ninian Smart has suggested that state Marxism, although a secular ideology, “has a distinctly religious-type function, and moves men [*sic*] by theory, symbols, rituals, and

²⁴⁵ Portelli, *Battle of the Valle Giulia*, 97.

Party energy.”²⁴⁶ Drawing on the work on Alisdair MacIntyre’s *Marxism and Christianity*, Shaun Kingsley Malarney has drawn a further parallel between state Marxism and Christianity as ideologies, evident in the way both systems attempt to “drive all other gods from the world” and frame themselves as the ultimate authority on “truth”, “reality,” and the fundamental questions of human existence.²⁴⁷ Malarney labels the efforts of the Vietnamese government to reform ritual life in northern Vietnam after 1954 as an example of ‘state functionalism’, “a phenomenon in which state officials employ ritual in order to advance official objectives and ideology.”²⁴⁸

The findings of this thesis expose remarkable parallels between the means used and ends sought by the Catholic Church (since the 17th century) and the socialist government (since 1954) to reform ritual life in Vietnam. Categorizing certain rituals as superstitious and then systematically trying to ban them (through Church or state laws) was a practice common to both the Catholic Church and the socialist state.²⁴⁹ Both Church and State sought to impose their own notions of time on local culture by displacing the lunar calendar with the solar calendar as the marker of communal ritual celebrations.²⁵⁰ The communist government, like the Catholic Church, also launched a

²⁴⁶ Ninian Smart, *The World’s Religions*, 2nd edition. (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 25.

²⁴⁷ Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam*, 208.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴⁹ This argument between the parallels between state Marxism and Catholicism could also be extended to other Christian denominations in Vietnam, who, like their Catholic counterparts, also had difficulties with ancestor worship, and like the Catholic church, have attempted to stop converts from practicing it. See Henry H. Phan, *The Development of a Model for Training Vietnamese Christians to Respond to Family Members who are Involved in Ancestor Worship Practices*.

²⁵⁰ Malarney, “The Limits of State Functionalism,” 543. Malarney shows how death anniversaries and other ceremonies in North Vietnam began to be marked by the solar calendar following after 1945. Since the solar calendar was linked to mundane life, people “would therefore never feel fear or reluctance to fulfill their assigned roles in production and the construction of socialism because of the date on the calendar.” I am not aware of any specific decrees made by Propaganda Fide in this regard, regulation of the calendar has been a long-standing Church concern since antiquity. I also know that in Duong Son, Catholics mark death anniversaries and all important communal celebrations (most of which are Church celebrations) by the solar rather than lunar calendar.

campaign against superstition via public education and outright bans on certain practices. As Peter De Ta Vo has demonstrated, the Catholic Church banned offering food to the dead, and many of the inquiries of the Vicars Apostolic in Asia related to the status of eating food at feasts. Similarly, the Vietnamese government also tried to eliminate feasts, which they viewed as wasteful, and therefore, an obstacle to nation building.²⁵¹ And just as the Catholic Church produced its own catechetical documents instructing Catholics to avoid “superstitious” forms of ancestor worship, the Communist government also “circulated ‘educational’ stories designed to encourage the voluntary abandonment of spirit beliefs.”²⁵² Although the Church hierarchy now supports ancestor worship, it still reserves, like the socialist state, the authority to be the ultimate judge of what is “truth” and what is “superstition.”

State Marxism and Christianity are also similar in that they are both eschatological and revolutionary, aiming at nothing less than the transformation of subjectivities, and the creation of new people for a new society – a socialist utopia in one instance, the city of God in the other. In both cases, reformation of ritual life was aimed at shifting identities away from particularistic forms (e.g. kinship-based forms of identification) to more universal forms (that of citizen or Christian).

In *Postcolonial Vietnam*, Patricia M. Pelley cites the works of David Marr and Hue-Tam Ho Tai in arguing that, between the 1920’s and 1980’s, “one of the principle goals of socialism...was to normalize new notions of community based on...the multiethnic state – instead of, and in opposition to, the patrilineal clan.”²⁵³ She points to

²⁵¹ Ibid., 548.

²⁵² Ibid., 543.

²⁵³ Patricia M. Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 157.

the way “the DRV physically dismantled patrilineal and encouraged Vietnamese to use non-kinship terms of address” as a means of encouraging people “to think in less particularistic ways and to reorient their loyalty towards broader entities and ideally towards the nation.”²⁵⁴

I think that it is possible to read the intervention of Catholic clergy in ancestor worship in Duong Son in a similar way – that is, as an effort to replace particularistic (kinship-based) forms of identity with universal (Catholic) notions of identity. An illustrative case, described in Chapter 3, was the conflict that arose between the founding lineages of Duong Son (the Phan and the Tran) and latecomer lineages concerning who would organize the commemoration of the village founder. In this conflict, the Church intervened to declare, through its parish regulations, that it would become the lead organizer of this ceremony. From 1996 onwards, the day would belong to no family in particular, but to the village/parish as a whole. As in the case of socialist efforts to shift identification from patrilineage towards the nation state, Catholic clergy in Duong Son took action to shift identification from patrilineages to the parish.²⁵⁵

In approaching ancestor worship with greater simplicity and frugality than their non-Catholic neighbours in other villages, Duong Son is held up as a model village by the local party authorities. Considering the significant parallels between the ways that the state and the Church have dealt with ancestor worship, it is not surprising (although it remains ironic) that this Catholic village could be regarded as exemplary within a Communist state.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 160 and 157.

²⁵⁵ I recognize that particularistic and universalistic forms of identification are not always mutually exclusive; in fact, they are frequently mutually reinforcing. Furthermore, both churches and states have tried to promote their own notions of “the family” – a particularistic form of identification -- in order to further their own ideologies and pretensions towards universality.

At the same time, the flourishing of ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen today, in spite of government anti-superstition campaigns and land-reform policies, also confirms Malarney's argument that there are limits to 'state functionalism.'²⁵⁶ Likewise, the eagerness with which the residents of Duong Son have embraced the Church's reformed position towards ancestor worship, and the degree to which they have integrated traditional Vietnamese forms of ancestor worship into their Catholicism over the last forty years, also suggest that Church attempts to ban the practice were of only limited success. Catholicism, like state Marxism, was unsuccessful in displacing ancestor worship, and was forced to accommodate it to some degree.

The findings of this thesis add a set of ethnographic data to a largely theoretical literature that seeks to relate the politics of ostensibly secular states to their thinly masked religious foundations.²⁵⁷

Dialectics of religion and culture

In *Old World Encounters*, Jerry Bentley posits that the history of the world's major religions is a history of travel, cross-cultural encounters, successful and failed efforts of conversion, and syncretism.²⁵⁸ Bentley points out many instances in which efforts to convert societies were met with resistance, and asserts that cultures are remarkably resilient at resisting cultural imposition and re-generating themselves in spite of efforts to assimilate through a variety of means. As other historians of religion have

²⁵⁶ Malarney, "The Limits of State Functionalism."

²⁵⁷ See Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); Michael Taussig, *The Magic of the State* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Benoît de Tréglodé, "Sur la formation d'une nouvelle géographie patriotique: la culte de Mac thi Buoï," in *Vietnamese society in transition: The politics of reform and change*, ed. John Kleinan (Amsterdam, Het Spinhuis, 2001)

²⁵⁸ Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times*. (Oxford University Press, 1993).

also observed, the world's major missionizing religions (Buddhism, Christianity and Islam) were only able to gain converts because of their ability to absorb and transform alien religious practices and make them their own. In the dialogue that occurs between new ideologies and old ones, or new religions and their predecessors, the newer party may attempt to displace the old through acts of exclusion. However, it is rarely successful in doing so, because of people's dogged resistance to giving up "old ways" for "new ways", old subjectivities for new subjectivities.

In the face this tenacious holding-on to old ways, the newer ideology on the block (whether that of the state or global religious institution) is forced into a dialogue with the old and is forced to decide what can be accommodated, tolerated, or integrated. The result of this dialectic is the transformation of both the new and the old. This thesis has argued that in Duong Son and Phuoc Yen ancestor worship has been transformed through its interaction with the major religions (Buddhism and Christianity), and, at the same time, in accommodating local practice, larger institutions – the state, the church – have themselves been transformed.

Given the absolute centrality of filial piety and ancestor veneration to Vietnamese conceptions of self, both Buddhism and Catholicism have been forced to accommodate these institutions to some degree in order to gain converts, even though these practices pose theological challenges for both religions. As the Franciscan, Dominican and MEP orders argued during the Rites Controversy, ancestor veneration presents a problem to Catholicism because it poses a direct challenge to monotheism, and biblical injunctions to worship no other spirit than the Christian God. The theological tension is different for Buddhism. From a Buddhist point of view, worshipping ancestors contradicts the

Buddhist view of no self. As philosopher Conrad Brunk pointed out to me, the idea of worshipping one's ancestors seems completely contradictory to the picture of Tibetan Buddhist monks hacking up the bodies of deceased monks and leaving them to the vultures in order to say something about the instability of the self.

As the testimonies of Buddhist and Catholic clergy in the villages presented in Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate, contemporary Buddhists and Catholics have addressed the tensions that ancestor worship poses to their religious philosophies in different ways. Buddhist clergy in Phuoc Yen justify their accommodation of ostensibly “superstitious” practices using the Buddha’s teaching of “harmonizing with all sentient beings” (*hang thuan chung sinh*), while Catholic clergy and lay-people in Duong Son base their revival of ancestor worship on the Second Vatican Council’s exhortation towards “*hoi nhap van hoa*” (inculturation).

Over time, Buddhism and Christianity have undergone similar processes of adaptation to Vietnamese culture, and have constructed theological foundations for ancestor worship, as a result of this dialogue. In addition, both Buddhism and Catholicism, previously accused by Confucian literati in China and Vietnam for their lack of filial piety, have made great efforts to frame themselves as religions of filial piety *par excellence*.²⁵⁹ A key difference between the histories of the two religions in Vietnam is

²⁵⁹ In *Chu Hieu Trong Dao Phat* [Filial Piety within the Buddhist Religion], monks Thich Thien Sieu and Thich Minh Chau discuss the importance of filial piety within Vietnamese culture and within Buddhism itself. They explain the meaning of *Le Vu lan* (the annual celebration of filial piety), and also analyze various Buddhist sutras which they interpret as providing exhortations towards filial behaviour. See Thich Thien Sieu and Thich Minh Chau, *Chu Hieu Trong Dao Phat* [Filial Piety within the Buddhist Religion] (Ho Chi Minh City: Nha Xuat Ban Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 2000).

As for Catholicism, the efforts of scholars such as Peter De Ta Vo and Peter C. Phan, both cited extensively in this thesis, can be seen as attempts both to inculturate Catholicism to Vietnamese culture, and also, to reinterpret Catholic theology in such a way that it encourages believers towards filial piety. In spreading his message on the compatibility of Catholicism and filial piety, Father Phan Hung in Duong Son draws heavily from the writing of other Vietnamese clergy, such as Joseph Hoang Kim Toan, who post

that Buddhism was able to embrace ancestor worship two millennia ago, and integrate it into its worldview relatively quickly, while Roman Catholicism, on the other hand, struggled for over two centuries to ban the practice, embracing it only recently.

This difference can be explained at least partially by the doctrinal differences between the religions, and the institutional organization of the Buddhist and the Christian churches in Vietnam. Buddhism's lack of bureaucratized hierarchies of centralized authority allowed local Buddhist clergy to adapt to respond to the spiritual needs of their fellow villagers much more easily than Catholic missionaries. Additionally, Buddhism's non-creedal nature, and Mahayana Buddhism's doctrinal flexibility, allowed Buddhist clergy to become active participants in ancestor worship rites early on after its arrival in Vietnam. The degree to which Buddhism has made itself a religion of filial piety is well illustrated by the fact that in Vietnam one of the most important holidays of the year is the 15th day of the 7th lunar month, a celebration of filial piety (*Le Vu lan*) that centres on Buddhist pagodas nationwide.

Although some Christian missionaries in Vietnam may have been sympathetic to the needs of converts to continue worshipping ancestors, the decision of Church authorities in Europe and the Asian Vicars Apostolic, from the 18th to early 20th centuries, gave them little room in which to accommodate these practices. When Propaganda Fide finally did reverse its prohibition on ancestor worship in 1939, it required emptying ancestor worship of its religious significance and attributing to it a purely "civil and political" meaning.

Since the Second Vatican Council, Vietnamese Catholic theologians have posed various ways of reinterpreting Catholic theology such that ancestor worship can not only be tolerated, but also can be supported and encouraged by Catholic clergy. Theologians such as Peter C. Phan and Peter De Ta Vo suggest various ways to re-think Catholicism in light of filial piety and ancestor worship. Their suggestions include understanding “Jesus as the model of a filial Son,” making ancestors part of the communion of the saints and emphasizing the importance of the Fourth Commandment.²⁶⁰ Although the Catholic Church long considered ancestor worship as an obstacle to evangelization, theologians who have come of age after the Second Vatican Council now view the accommodation of ancestor worship as essential to missionization. In Vo’s view, “one of the ways to catch new fish is to let non-Catholics know that ancestor veneration, of which filial piety is an expression, is allowed and highly encouraged among Catholics.”²⁶¹

It seems that Catholic theologians are finally coming to appreciate something that Buddhists realized two millennia earlier: that any religion that seeks to become an integral part of Vietnamese life must necessarily accommodate itself to people’s core values and cultural practices, of which filial piety and ancestor worship are important parts. Contemporary efforts by Buddhist and Catholic theologians in Vietnam to frame their respective religions as the pre-eminent religions of filial piety illustrate the degree to which religion is transformed through interaction with culture. This thesis contributes a Vietnamese perspective to the literature on cultural studies of religion, which examines

²⁶⁰ Vo, “A Cultural and Theological Foundation for Ancestor Veneration among Catholics in Vietnam,” 306.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 319.

the dynamics of dialogue, mutual transformation and syncretism in cross-cultural encounters.²⁶²

“Global villages”: local culture and in a globalized world

In 1964, American anthropologist Gerald Hickey published *Village in Vietnam*, a comprehensive ethnographic study of a village in the Mekong delta. A classic within the scholarly literature on Vietnamese villages, it draws on the little-community model of cultural anthropologist Robert Redfield, to characterize the Vietnamese village as a generalizable ideal type defined by four outstanding features: “distinctness, smallness, all-providing self-sufficiency and homogeneity.”²⁶³ Hickey emphasizes the uniformity of social conditions within this little community, which allegedly gives rise to uniform tendencies among its people, and a “mechanical solidarity” that resembles Durkheim’s social segment.²⁶⁴ In Hickey’s view, the village is “a self contained homogeneous community, jealously guarding its way of life – a little world that is autonomous and disregards (if not disdains) the outside world.”²⁶⁵

For many years, Hickey’s study became the prototype for the ethnographic “community study.” Hickey was not, however, the only scholar who held this view of Vietnamese villages. As John Kleinan has noted:

²⁶² The literature in this field is vast. My own perspective is informed by Jerry Bentley’s work, *Old World Encounters*, and my study of Chinese and Vietnamese religions. Again, the works of Peter C. Phan and Peter De Ta Vo have been instructive in regards to the mutually transforming dynamic between Vietnamese culture and Catholicism. In relation to Buddhism’s cultural adaptation, see: Alicia Matsunaga, *Buddhist Philosophy of Assimilation: The Historical Development of the Honji-Suijaku Theory* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1969); Arthur F. Wright, *Studies in Chinese Buddhism* (Yale University Press, 1990); and, Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Lieden: E.J. Brill, 1972).

²⁶³ Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 267.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 267.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 276.

Most works on rural Vietnam... often mention the village as a place where people hide behind a bamboo hedge and where traditions have been kept intact from time immemorial. Village culture and village views are considered to be inward-looking and profoundly traditionally oriented.²⁶⁶

Examining ancestor worship within Phuoc Yen and Duong Son in historical context makes it evident that the idea of the traditional Vietnamese village – self-contained, ignoring the outside world – is untenable. In our contemporary globalized world, say geographers Jonathan Smith, Andrew Light and David Roberts, “[p]opulations, ideas, investments, goods, weapons, and pollution move more or less freely across increasingly porous international boundaries,” and by consequence, “individual localities are more and more exposed to the vagaries of global flows.”²⁶⁷

The “individual localities” of this study – the villages of Phuoc Yen and Duong Son – have experienced the impact of global flows of population and capital in a significant way over the last forty years, beginning with out-migration from the villages to urban centres within Vietnam, and then, after the Revolution (1975), proceeding to migration overseas. Remittances from overseas Vietnamese and descendents living in Vietnamese cities has been among the most powerful “forces of transformation” in the practices of ancestor worship over the last four decades.

The village of Duong Son, in particular, has been a local node within a global network from the moment it was established as a Roman Catholic parish in 1696. Since that time, Duong Son, and the daily lives of its villagers, have been closely tied to a global religious institution with sophisticated systems of bureaucratic management and indoctrination. As Chapter 3 and 4 have shown, the presence or absence of ancestor

²⁶⁶ Kleinen, *Facing the Future, Reviving the Past*, 1.

²⁶⁷ Jonathan M. Smith, Andrew Light, and David Roberts, “Introduction: Philosophies and Geographies of Place,” in ed. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith, *Philosophies of Place* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 12.

worship in Duong Son has been more or less determined by the pronouncements of this centralized institution, interpreted through its local representatives. For some time, both Phuoc Yen and Duong Son have been “global villages.”²⁶⁸

Understanding the transformations in ancestor worship practices in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son over the last forty years demands that we eschew the idea of Vietnamese villages as isolated communities, sheltered by actual and metaphorical bamboo hedges. Fortunately, three decades after *Village in Vietnam*, Hy Van Luong’s study of the revolutionary process in a northern Vietnamese village from 1925-1988 now presents a very different way of understanding the village as a unit of analysis. In his study of Son Duong village, Luong warns us not to be misled by its appearance as a place “frozen since time immemorial,” since “[e]vents behind the bamboo hedge have been partly shaped by Chinese and Western capitalist world systems in the course of their economic, political and ideological expansion.”²⁶⁹ Luong’s analytical framework draws significantly on the work of Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, and focuses on the interplay between structure and history. Examining the way large-scale social processes are experienced at a local level, Luong calls his book an attempt “to situate historical events...in major undercurrents of socioeconomic formations.”²⁷⁰ Luong argues that it is only through examining the interaction between “the inequalities and contradictions within the capitalist system, on the one hand, and the indigenous sociocultural framework, on the other” that we can gain a full understanding of the dynamics of the Vietnamese revolution.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ I have to thank Warren Magnusson for framing the villages to me in these terms.

²⁶⁹ Luong, *Revolution in the Village*, 3.

²⁷⁰ Luong, *Revolution in the Village*, 10.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

Subsequent to the publication of *Revolution in the Village*, there have been further micro-historical studies of Vietnamese villages that treat them as sites of social change, implicated in supra-local processes. These include John Kleinen's *Facing the Future, Reviving the Past* and a volume of essays edited by Bernhard Dahm and Vincent Houben: *Vietnamese Villages in Transition: Background and Consequences of Reform Policies in Rural Vietnam*.²⁷² As opposed to the ethnographic "community study" for which Hickey's volume became a prototype, the works of Luong, Kleinen, and Dahm and Houben embody the model for village studies in Asia that is presently favoured among social scientists:

focusing upon interlinkages between local and supra-local levels, taking for granted that the village is part of a larger society and a place which is "historicized" through long-term processes of social change.²⁷³

Without taking supra-local processes into account, it would be difficult to gain a rich and textured understanding of "local" cultural practices, such as ancestor worship in Vietnamese villages, and their historical development. In examining the impact of supra-local institutions and processes -- state policies, the Roman Catholic Church, and migration -- on ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son, this thesis contributes to a still small but growing literature that treats Vietnamese villages as historicized sites of social change. It also contributes to the already extensive literature on globalization and culture.

Finally, the examination of migration (both internal and international) on ancestor worship in the villages opens up several areas for further inquiry. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, internal migration has contributed significantly to the expansion of ancestor

²⁷² Kleinen, *Facing the Future, Reviving the Past*; Dahm and Houben, *Vietnamese Villages in Transition: Background and Consequences of Reform Policies in Rural Vietnam*.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 4.

worship in the villages over the last four decades. This has been particularly true in the case of Phuoc Yen, where descendents from the village now living in the city of Da Lat contribute large sums of money on ancestor worship, and frequently return to the village to reconstruct gravesites and participate in rituals. With the help of improved telecommunications and transportation networks, descendents in Da Lat have effectively transplanted ancestor worship to their new milieu and can now more easily connect with members of their lineages and return to their ancestral home more frequently than they have been able to since they began leaving the village fifty years ago.

Interestingly, ancestor worship has fared relatively poorly in the process of overseas migration.²⁷⁴ Some Viet kieu families may have ancestral shrines within their homes, but rituals such as death anniversaries and lineage anniversaries are rarely celebrated in the diaspora, and little effort is made to transmit these practices to younger generations.

How can we explain this difference? How is it that ancestor worship in the villages has survived and thrived in spite of war, poverty, urbanization, and state and Church agendas, but has not survived overseas migration? Why is it that members of the diaspora (such as the people I interviewed in Phuoc Yen) support ancestor worship in their villages – by returning to construct gravesites or sending money back for the construction of lineage houses – but have not made efforts to pass these practices on to the next generation of Viet kieu?

Answering these questions would require a formal study within one or more Viet kieu communities. Tentatively, I would offer that the relative absence of ancestor

²⁷⁴ I make this statement based on my informal observations as a member of the Viet kieu communities in North America. There has yet to be a study of ancestor worship within the Viet kieu community.

worship within the diaspora is mainly due to the weakness of extended kinship networks and physical rootedness within Viet Kieu communities – two requirements for rituals such as death anniversaries and lineage commemorations. In addition, ancestor worship is a place-based practice. Weeding the graves of ancestors, visiting the lineage house are all practices that are grounded in a particular physical place. Not only are members of the Vietnamese diaspora remote from these places, but they also live at a distance from members of their lineages, who, if they are also overseas, likely live in other cities or perhaps even other countries.

Migration to Da Lat is fundamentally different than overseas migration because descendents in Phuoc Yen have migrated in sufficient numbers that they have reproduced the kinship structure around which a large part of ancestor worship revolves. It would be interesting to investigate other internal migrant communities in Vietnam, such as the Phuoc Yen community in Da Lat, to compare how ancestor worship, and other village-based cultural practices, have or have not been reproduced and/or transformed through the process of migration.

Returning to the river

As ethnography is both a method of inquiry and a field of study that stresses personal experience and the relationship between the researcher and her subjects, in discussing the “contributions” of this thesis, it is essential for me as a researcher to address the actual and potential contributions of this work to the communities where it was conducted, and to my own worldview.

Phuoc Yen and Duong Son are both communities that value their respective histories as well as their cultural practices. Given the lack of written work on these subjects, this thesis will be much appreciated among members of the communities. In spite of the resilience of ancestor worship within the villages, residents of Phuoc Yen and Duong Son are aware that people's connection to their ancestors, their lineages, and their villages become diluted once they cross the ocean. Interviewees in both villages expressed the hope that reading this work will encourage *Viet kieu* to maintain their connections to their ancestral villages and support the maintenance of the places and monuments that make ancestor worship possible. Having observed how little is known about ancestor worship among my generation of *Viet kieu*, I share the hopes of the participants in my study.²⁷⁵

Although this study has emphasized differences between ancestor worship practices in the villages, several key interviewees – Mr. Lieu in Phuoc Yen and Mr. Duc in Duong Son – used their participation as an opportunity to draw themselves, and their religions, closer together. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes illustrates the way ancestor worship practices have been the basis of an informal interfaith dialogue between members of the villages:

June 28th, 2004.

I arrived back in Phuoc Yen at about 4:30 after a full day of interviews in Duong Son. At the side of the Lieu house, I found Be Nho (Mr. Lieu's youngest daughter) shredding greens to make pig feed. An, Mr. Lieu's son, recently home after finishing his undergraduate degree in Physics at the University of Da Lat, was watering a patch of pennyworth, and Mrs. Lieu was smoking a hand-rolled stogie under the orchid trellis while she chatted with me.

²⁷⁵ I include myself in this group of *Viet kieu*. Prior to conducting this research, I was barely aware that these practices existed and was certainly ignorant of their richness and importance within Vietnamese culture.

Mr. Lieu arrived on his rickety bike, with a naked grandson precariously clinging to the crossbar. Both grandfather and grandson had gone for a wash in the Bo River, leaving both their bodies glistening wet in the fading light of dusk.

As Mr. Lieu sat, shirtless, on the edge of a concrete fish tank, I recounted to him my findings from that day. I told him how his friend, Mr. Duc from Duong Son, had mentioned at least four times during our morning together that Catholics are not as good at expressing their filial piety as non-Catholics. Mr. Duc had said, "We have to acknowledge that non-Catholics are better at expressing filial piety than we are. Recognizing that they have good traditions, we have copied some, like the construction of family houses of memory."

Mr. Lieu smiled when I told him this and said that it wasn't that they were copying, but that people are naturally wired to want to learn good things from others. The efforts of Catholics to build family houses of memory was an example of this human tendency.

I told him some more things that Mr. Duc had said: that the early missionaries didn't understand Vietnamese culture, that they forbade ancestor worship because they wanted to make sure people really "got" monotheism, and wouldn't get confused between God and their ancestors (whom they revered as spirits). Mr. Lieu listened intently and would occasionally parrot back a bit of a phrase that I said.

From the corner of his concrete fishpond, he interjected, "everyone has a mother and father. Whether they are Buddhist, Catholic or Marxist Leninist. It is only natural that people should revere their ancestors." Anyway, it wasn't only the Catholics that wanted to get rid of ancestor worship, said Mr. Lieu, but the communists tried to do so as well. Over time, they realized that it just didn't make sense, so now people are coming back to these practices.

He suggested that ancestor worship was the most indigenous form of religious expression in Vietnam. Then Buddhism came, but it integrated with this system, not seeing it as an opposition to worshipping Buddha. "People saw that worshipping Buddha was like worshipping their ancestors". Then he added that the Buddha, one's ancestors, or God the Father were all the same – they were just guides; there to give people a sense of direction on how they should live, or models to emulate.

Although the testimony of interviewees in Duong Son reveals that some Catholics continue to view themselves as different, and somewhat better than non-Catholics in regards to their practices of ancestor worship, as the above excerpt demonstrates, sharing and comparing ancestor worship practices also became the basis for developing mutual understanding and respect, as well as acknowledging commonalities between Buddhists and Catholics.

I also hope that this study has contributed to the lives of research participants in providing them with a context in which to develop a sharper understanding of their own cultural practices and the practices of their neighbours with whom they differ in religion.

As Mr. Phan Bon said to me:

Duong Son and Phuoc Yen are two villages separated by a river. Across the river, we see each other, and in the river we also see our own reflections. Seeing the other, we see ourselves, and seeing ourselves, we see the other.²⁷⁶

....

The transformation of subjectivities has been one of the underlying themes of this thesis. One of the reasons why both the Catholic Church and the Socialist state were so interested in controlling ancestor worship in Vietnam was because of their awareness of the importance of rituals and material culture in the formation of subjectivities. In conducting this research, and crossing the river from Buddhist Phuoc Yen to Catholic Duong Son, and over and back again, my own subjectivity has likewise been transformed.

At the end of *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam* (2002), Shaun Malarney states that the primary interest of anthropologists is to understand how humans create order and meaning, which necessarily means investigating how they answer questions such as: Who am I?, What is my place in the world? What powers and abilities do I have or can I draw upon? What is a good society? What makes a good person?²⁷⁷ Ancestor worship, like many ritual practices, is a material and ritualized way for people to express their answers to these fundamental questions of existence. In studying ancestor worship in Phuoc Yen and Duong Son, I have not only come to understand, to some degree, how people in these particular localities create order and meaning. I have also been given the

²⁷⁶ Phan Bon, personal interview, 2 July 2004.

²⁷⁷ Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam*, 224-225.

opportunity to turn these questions on myself, and to compare and contrast their answers with the answers I have developed through my own experiences as a *Viet kieu*, as a Western academic, as a Christian interested in Buddhism, as a grand-daughter of Phuoc Yen and a friend of Duong Son.

In closing, I offer the following excerpt from my fieldnotes, written on the eve of my departure from my ancestral village, which illustrates, better than other words could, how this study has affected my own subjectivity:

July 31, 2004

My cousin Vina and I made an offering of food to our ancestors at grandma and grandpa's house today, following the example of three uncles before us. Our three uncles, back in the village from France and the U.S. this summer to visit our grandparents, each made similar offerings of food, flowers and incense, and shared a meal with our closest kin and neighbours, before leaving their ancestral home. By offering food and incense, they ask for the protection of our ancestors as they depart.

This is a new ritual for Vina and me. Growing up in France and Canada respectively, we have never seen anyone do this until now. But, as Vina is leaving in a few days, and I will do the same shortly thereafter, it seemed right to do this, even though we didn't really know what we're doing.

Vina and I went shopping for food at Dong Ba market this morning and, assisted by our amazing cousins, we spent the rest of the morning cooking. Invitations were delivered in person, by yours truly, around noon to our family and neighbours around the village.

Uncle Lieu helped officiate the ceremony, which was incredibly simple. Basically, once the meal had been cooked, we placed it on the altar and on a bamboo mat spread out on the divan opposite to where grandpa's bed. Uncle Lieu lit incense before the main shrine and said that we (the grandchildren) had made this meal as an offering to our ancestors, and were asking for them to bless us as we would soon be departing from the village. He lit more incense outside at the shrine to Third Grandaunt and muttered similar words. Once the eldest people were seated on the upper divan at the front of the house, Mr. Lieu made a little speech to all those gathered, and then we began to eat.

Before everyone tucked in, I said a few words on behalf of Vina and I, first to the older folks who sat with grandma and grandpa, and then to the younger crowd gathered in the kitchen in the lower part of the house. The message was the same both times: that we were deeply indebted to all of them for their kindness towards the two of us during our time in Vietnam, and also for the care they have shown over the years, and continue to show, towards our grandparents.

I even had the audacity to speak on behalf of my father and his brothers (which, for some reason, I felt that I had to do) in thanking them for being the real caretakers for my grandparents all these years. Although it isn't customary for young women to make speeches at such events, I felt like these words needed to be said.

Grandma cried. Mr. Hoat, from the Rites Committee, became misty eyed, and said how good it is that we, the younger generation, have not forgotten our roots, and that we continue to "huong ve que huong" (turn towards our homeland). The younger crowd didn't respond quite so emotionally, but I think they still appreciated it. It was an exhausting show to put on, but I am so glad that we did it.

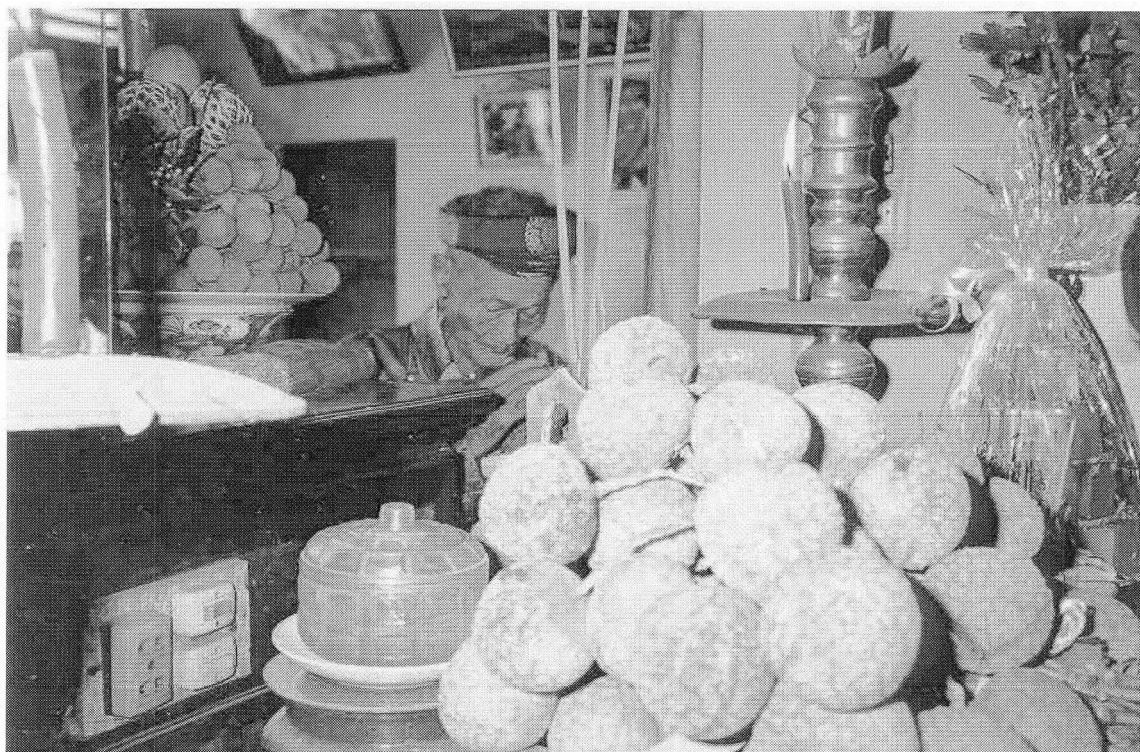


Figure 26: My grandfather offers incense to the ancestors, Phuoc Yen.

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