Living with the dead: The politics of ritual and remembrance in contemporary Vietnam
Salemink, O.H.J.M.; DiGregorio, M.

2007

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication in VU Research Portal

citation for published version (APA)

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

• Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
• You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal?

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address: vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

Download date: 08. Oct. 2023
Living with the Dead: The politics of ritual and remembrance in contemporary Vietnam

Michael DiGregorio and Oscar Salemink

Journal of Southeast Asian Studies / Volume 38 / Issue 03 / October 2007, pp 433 - 440
DOI: 10.1017/S0022463407000355, Published online: 03 October 2007

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0022463407000355

How to cite this article:

Request Permissions : Click here
Living with the Dead: The politics of ritual and remembrance in contemporary Vietnam

Michael DiGregorio and Oscar Salemink

Since the inauguration in 1986 of the reforms known as Đổi Mới, ritual and religious practices have proliferated in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This renewed interest in religious and ritual practice has been the object of intensive scholarly interest both in Vietnam and outside, and has been interpreted in terms of revival (phục hồi), invention and politics of tradition. This collection of articles deals with this phenomenon of ritual revival in Vietnam as well but attempts to go beyond the – by now common – approaches that connect it with the emerging religious practice and political liberalisation, economic reform and the emerging market in the context of Đổi Mới. Instead, these papers explore in more depth the ritual dimensions of life from the central state down to the individual level.

Abandoning simplistic dichotomies between such categories as profane and sacred; this-worldly and other-worldly; entertainment and ritual; central and local; elite and folk; Buddhist, Taoist and folk religions; national and transnational, the papers in this collection set out to explore how these categories come together in real lives, both individually and collectively. Without losing sight of the politics and economics of religious and ritual experience, this collection of articles sets mundane practices in meaningful cosmologies that include other worlds. Indeed, a common thread in the papers is the basic assumption that much ritual practice in contemporary Vietnam attempts to create a connection – or a channel of communication – between this ‘yang’ world (thế giới dương) with the other ‘yin’ world (thế giới âm), and in that sense seeks to connect the living in this world with the dead – the ancestors, the spirits – in the other world. While recognising the truism that ‘traditional beliefs’ have become elements in constructions of meaning, values and certainties in post-Đổi Mới Vietnam,¹ the papers suggest that the existential, ontological, political and economic uncertainties in this life are ritually offset by a firm and widespread belief that the dead exert deep influence over the living, and by waverings and uncertain attempts to turn the dead into allies.

Reviving ritual and festival

The set of articles in this volume cannot offer a comprehensive overview of all the issues at hand. Rather, they focus on aspects of relations between the living and the dead through beliefs and rituals that take place at a variety of levels, from individual

---

¹ This is also brought out in Resolution No. V of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (passed in 1998), which seeks to ‘build an advanced culture imbued with national identity’.

Michael DiGregorio is a Program Officer with the Ford Foundation, Hanoi; Oscar Salemink is affiliated with the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, VU University Amsterdam.
experience to family and village and, by extension, to the imagined community of the nation as a whole. To say that these beliefs and rituals have become a major focus of study in Vietnam is, to say the least, an understatement. Beginning in Vietnam in the late 1970s, research on the revival of beliefs, ritual and festivals, following a period of suppression in the campaign toward secularisation and socialist construction, came as a surprise to many. Outside the country there is now a burgeoning literature on this phenomenon, and despite many common features, scholars have tended to stress different causal factors in their re-emergence. Hy Văn Luong, for example, pointed to a ‘dialogic’ widening space for religion and ritual action that corresponded with increasing wealth and a need for spiritual compensation for the economic insecurity inherent in the market. John Kleinen drew attention to the rebirth of village prestige economies in which economic position was signalled through ‘conspicuous consumption’, including contributions to temple reconstruction and village rituals. This point was also noted by Trương Huyễn Chi, who painted a vivid picture of the competition for prestige between and within villages, lineages, gender and age groups and individuals. At the same time, Kleinen, like Luong, pointed to the state’s interest in the revitalisation of rituals as a means of political legitimisation. This latter issue is also taken up by Alexander Woodside in his reflection on the changing role of the state in Vietnamese society.

Kirsten Endres also took up the political gauntlet, situating the revival of transformed ritual, village festivals and reconstructed ritual space in an official desire to promote traditional morality during a period of rapid social change. She referred to this effort, inscribed in guidelines for designation of ritual sites as places of historical significance, as ‘the politics of ritual displacement’. In these same events and processes, Ngô Đức Thịnh saw as completely opposing a perspective as possible. Referring back to a line of reasoning initiated by the late Vietnamese ethnologist Nguyễn Từ Chi, Thịnh saw the restoration of ritual spaces and practices, including annual village festivals, as an attempt to recreate institutions of local self-governance. Through Thịnh’s position

as director of the Institute of Folk Culture Studies of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, this social perspective influenced the design of many Vietnamese and foreign research projects and dissertations in the 1990s. Given the variety of explanations, Shaun Malarney’s use of the term ‘multivocality’ in 1993 to explain the alternative meanings ascribed to the work of reconstructing ritual spaces and practice was prescient.7  

Within Vietnam, a major policy debate has been waged around the recreation and restoration of ritual sites and practices: whether village festivals, regarded as primarily local religious events, are admissible in a socialist state; and whether they should be preserved in ‘traditional’ form or adapted to modern requirements. These types of questions, both betraying a ‘statist’ perspective, have revolved around the modern notion of festivals as lê hội – a compound word consisting of the elements lê (ceremony, ritual or rite, and having a religious connotation) and hội (association, gathering or festivity, having a secular connotation). The word lê hội, then, is used to denote village festivals, temple festivals and other traditional festivities with a partly profane, partly sacred character.8 By extension, this term has more generally been applied to all festivals, from the semi-religious state celebration of the Hùng Kings to the international arts and culture-oriented Festival Huế.  

The debate regarding the role and functions of village festivals was initiated by researchers within the Institute of Folk Culture Studies and more or less settled during a conference in Hanoi in 1993, with the result that village festivals were considered legitimate events, as expressions of the cultural identity and the moral basis of the community.9 Ngô Đức Thịnh, Lê Hồng Lý, Nguyễn Chí Bên, Tô Ngọc Thanh and others working within the Institute of Folk Culture Studies and the Folk Culture Association carried out research along these lines through the 1990s. Subsequent years have seen an enormous increase in ritual and festival activities; an enhanced sense of their legitimacy, as evident from state support for and media coverage of festivals; and a mushrooming of calendars and other scholarly, educational and public interest publications about rituals and festivals (usually focusing on explanations of their meaning).  

The other question was how to preserve or revive festivals. Many contributors to the 1993 conference proposed adapting them to the exigencies of modern life, and especially to tourism, some claiming that the latter aspect has always been part of traditional festivals. Others warned against the consequences of adaptation and tourist development, arguing that the lê hội would lose their symbolic and especially religious significance, thus becoming mere entertainment and mere form.10 Is this concern about

9 See the articles in Đình Già Khánh and Lê Hữu Tảng, ed. Lễ hội truyền thống và Lê Trung Vũ, ed. Lễ hội có truyền.
10 On the need for taking adaptation see, for example, Đình Già Khánh and Lê Hữu Tảng, ed. Lễ hội truyền thống: scholars taking the opposite position included Đặng Nghiêm Văn and Tô Ngọc Thanh.
form really new, however? Since the sixteenth century, the Vietnamese state has been involved in these rituals through the king’s power to invest guardian spirits and the authority of the Ministry of Rites to prescribe ritual activities and endorse hagiographies.\textsuperscript{11} The royal certificate of investiture (sắc phong), the prescription of rites and the endorsement of hagiographies were all attempts by the state to place heterogeneous local ritual within the structures of Confucian orthodoxy. At the same time, royal certificates investing a local personage or historical figure as guardian spirit were eagerly sought as symbolic links between community and state, at times invested with mystical powers of their own.\textsuperscript{12}

The Ministry of Rites, long disappeared, has found a worthy guardian of its mission in the Ministry of Culture and Information. Ministry regulations regarding the designation of sites as being of ‘historic or cultural significance’ have become one of the major avenues through which localities have restored ritual sites and practices, including their annual festivals. However, in a post-modern twist to the dialogic process through which community, scholars and the state reached consensus on the restoration of village festivals, leakage of the term used to describe these events to include national and international events has now infused these events with the semi-sacred context of lễ hội. Today, courses on festival management at the Hanoi Culture University are referred to as lễ hội management and include everything from local village festivals to case studies of Festival Huế.

Roughly after village and temple festivals had been officially endorsed as contributing to Vietnam’s national identity expressed in beautiful traditional values, scholarly interest turned to spirit mediumship – especially in the northern form of lên đồng – and to pilgrimage, for instance to the shrine of Bà Chúa Xứ – the Lady of the Realm – in the southwestern province of Châu Đốc. Much of the scholarly interest in lên đồng focuses on individual or at least small-scale ritual attempts to effect healing and well-being on a personal level.\textsuperscript{13} With the proliferation of mediumship practices and their public acceptance by the party-state and by a large part of the public, lên đồng, hài bồng and other types of spirit mediumship become fringe or even integral parts of public, large-scale temple festivals which are transformed into sites of mass pilgrimage.\textsuperscript{14} Whereas much of the scholarly attention is oriented towards ritual practice in the northern part of the country, the central and southern regions and the highlands have received much less attention even though ritual, mediumship and pilgrimage are no less prevalent in those regions than in the Red River Delta. The major


\textsuperscript{12} During the annual festival in Hạnh Thiên in Nam Định province, farmers crawl under a royal warrant set on a gilded stand for luck in the coming agricultural season.

\textsuperscript{13} Nguyễn Thị Hiền, ‘The religion of the Four Palaces: Mediumship and therapy in Viet culture’ (Ph. D. diss., Indiana University, 2002); and Possessed by the spirits: Mediumship in contemporary Vietnamese communities, ed. Karen Fjelstad and Nguyễn Thị Hiền (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2006).

\textsuperscript{14} Phạm Quỳnh Phương, ‘Hero and deity: Empowerment and contestation in the veneration of Trần Hưng Đạo in contemporary Vietnam’ (Ph.D. diss., LaTrobe University, 2005).
exception to this pattern is Philip Taylor’s ongoing work in the Mekong Delta, in particular his monograph on the Lady of the Realm.\(^{15}\)

The articles in this collection have not been assembled to neatly reflect this geographic diversity in Vietnam, as most conform to the northern orientation of current scholarship – the only exception being Oscar Salemink’s essay on the Festival Huế. Instead, the articles reflect a concern with ritual in terms of scope and level, ranging from individual and family concerns via village and locality to national level and state concerns. Earlier versions of three of the articles in this collection were presented in draft form at the March 2003 conference ‘Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind and Spirit’ at the American Museum of Natural History in New York.\(^{16}\) The three remaining articles were invited in order to provide a perspective that ranges from individual to state level practices. While each of the articles is based on case studies in Vietnam, the editors hope that they provide a comparative resource to scholars interested in similar practices within East and Southeast Asia.

**Contents of the symposium**

The articles have been organised following an assumption that the ‘multivocality’ described by Malarney could best be understood through scale shifting. Beginning at the individual level, Nguyễn Thị Hiền (‘Seats for spirits to sit upon: Becoming spirit mediums in contemporary Vietnam’) focuses on personal motivation in the practice of spirit possession (lên dông). Lên dông, like spirit possession rituals elsewhere, is a complex religious and cultural performance which makes the spiritual realm present through theatrical means and dramatic interactions. In Vietnam, this practice is most closely tied to worship of the Mother Goddess (Đạo Mẫu). This religion, also known as the Religion of the Four Palaces (Heaven, Earth, Water and Mountain Forests) draws on both ethnic Việt (Kinh) and upland minority beliefs and characters. Hiền breaks with an extensive literature that places the practice of spirit possession within a context of therapy. By allowing mediums to speak for themselves, she concludes that people commit themselves to serve the spirits (hậu bông) first because it is their destiny and second because they expect their practice to bring them good health and auspiciousness. Equally, performing len dông rituals fulfills the mediums’ religious needs, providing them with the social and emotional satisfaction that they can find nowhere else.

Moving from the individual to family and lineage, Kate Jellema (‘Everywhere incense burning: The revival of ancestor worship in Renovation-era Vietnam’) focuses on the veneration of ancestors as devotion to the ever-present souls of the departed, as a form of self-cultivation, and as a means in intervening in the affairs of the living. She develops and expands on these themes through the spiritual labour of two individuals, Thủy and Sung, both of whom devote a significant part of their money, time and energy to the worship of their ancestors. Thủy, who has never married, nurtures a rich

---


16 The convenors of that conference were Dr Laurel Kendall (American Museum of Natural History), Prof. Nguyễn Văn Huy (Vietnam Museum of Ethnology) and Prof. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Harvard University).
private relationship with her departed parents, discussing with them the affairs of the 
living, and pleading with them to intervene on her behalf. Sung, on the other hand, has 
taken up the restoration of ritual places and practices of his family as a means of re-
establishing his geographically wide-ranging lineage.

Taken together, these two case studies remind us not only of the multiple pasts of 
a Vietnamese family, but also its multiple presents. In the lives of Thúy and Sung, and 
the family and lineage members whose lives intersect with them, the worship of 
ancestors – ever present though removed by time – offers a means of maintaining 
ongoing relationships with loved ones, publicly demonstrating economic success and 
moral debt, seeking moral guidance and furthering projects of self-cultivation, 
intervening in the affairs of the living, and building or maintaining lineage and family 
networks. As companions, meritorious forebears and moral creditors, ancestors remain 
potent spiritual beings whose efficacious interventions result from an ongoing cycle of 
nurture and remembrance that binds children to parents and descendants to ancestors 
long after biological death.

Shifting from lineage to village level, Michael DiGregorio (‘Things held in 
common: Memory, space and the reconstitution of community life’) looks at the ritual 
practices and contestations by which an iron- and steel-producing village in northern 
Vietnam is understood and indeed (re-)produced as a community. The article 
describes in vivid ethnographic detail how the search for community against the 
backdrop of economic competition and cooperation as well as competition between 
lineages (giảp) and between generations in a politicised revolutionary and post-
revolutionary context, generates constant contestations over (temporal) claims to 
origins. The contemporary contestation over who is to be recognised as the founder of 
the village and of the blacksmithing craft reflects competition between the historical 
founding lineages in the village. This (historical) contestation is cross-cut by spatial 
claims over particular sacred sites for the re-construction of temples, shrines and 
pagodas, on behalf of particular groups and categories of villagers – the most 
conspicuous being the all-female Buddhist Association, which successfully obtained 
space for the construction of a new pagoda. Another prominent arena for such 
contestations is the village History Collection Committee, led by the dominant lineage 
branch, which according to DiGregorio ‘were promoting shared origins and moral 
obligations not as a cover for inequality, but rather, as a remedy’. In so doing, these 
elderly people, then, attempt to discursively construe and ritually construct the village 
as a moral community against perceived threats to community solidarity from the 
growing market competition within this economically highly successful craft village.

In his contribution ‘Praying for profit: The cult of the Lady of the Treasury’, Lê 
Hong Lý offers a description and analysis of the overnight popularity of this deity. 
According to legend, the Lady of the Granary (Bà Chúa Kho) was worshipped as a Lý-
dynasty figure who successfully set up rice granaries in a village in Bắc Ninh province. 
During colonial times and the socialist heyday, the temple complex and cult dedicated 
to her suffered a fate similar to that of many other temples in northern Vietnam. As 
elsewhere, in the 1980s local groups pressured the authorities for permission to rebuild 
the temple and re-start activities related to the cult, which was granted in January 1989 
by a Ministry of Culture and Information decision to designate the complex as a 
historical and cultural monument. After that, interest in the Lady boomed well beyond
the confines of the locality and beyond farmers’ interest in fertility of the soil. Books
and pamphlets explaining the cultural significance of the Lady were quickly sold out,
the temple complex was restored, religious and ritual activities – including spirit
mediumship resembling the practices described by Nguyễn Thị Hiền and Oscar
Salemink in this issue – were re-started, and pilgrims started to arrive in great numbers.

This time, however, most worshippers were not farmers but traders. In order to
explain this phenomenon, Lý points to the location of the temple close to the main
road and railroad linking Hanoi with China, but also to the timing of the boom – not
just after the Đổi Mới reforms took hold, but after the normalisation of trade relations
with China. In his interpretation Lý notes the sense of economic insecurity and moral
uncertainty experienced by many pilgrims who attribute their new wealth to luck or
even to dishonesty, at a time of market transition characterised by institutional
immaturity, when trade and market transactions are seemingly chaotic and
unpredictable. Traders try to offset their this-worldly insecurity by engaging in
other-worldly transactions with the Lady who is now associated with another meaning
of the Vietnamese word ‘kho’, namely ‘treasury’ rather than ‘granary’. While the market
chaos of the early reforms may explain why traders seek to offset their sense of
insecurity by seeking spiritual intervention, it begs the question of what the
development of more mature and predictable market institutions will do to the
popularity of the Lady of the Treasury.

In ‘The emperor’s new clothes: Re-fashioning ritual in the Huế Festival’, Oscar
Salemink shifts his gaze from northern to central Vietnam, from local ritual practice to
a localised event with a national and even international scope and from ritual as part of
the religious domain to a biennial international arts festival as a largely secular event.
He asks the question of how the authorities can successfully claim political credit for
the Festival in the absence of public symbols that are easily understandable by the
public. Salemink proposes to analyse the Festival Huế – a big modern art festival with
local, national and international participation and attendance – as a new ritual, by
focusing not on symbolic substance but on ‘the cultural form of the performance as an
artistic genre – a form which through borrowing, cross-over and repetition has become
quintessential Vietnamese, and therefore “authentic”, in the eyes of a large part of the
audience’. This enables him to develop an argument regarding the formal continuity
between ‘official’ culture and traditional folk culture as a form of aesthetic politics.

By looking at a few key performances and their reception by various audiences – a
popular fashion show, a closing ceremony and the hesitant attempts to revive the Nam
Giao ritual which was historically performed by the emperor on behalf of the nation –
and by juxtaposing these vignettes with ritual in action in a section on spirit mediums
in Huế, the author argues that these performances use particular cultural forms that
allude to the iconography of ritual in Vietnam. Through aesthetic association the effect
of the performance is linked to the efficacy of ritual, regardless of the symbolic content.
By this focus on recognisable iconographic forms across disciplinary and religious
boundaries, the political regime can assume the role of mediator between this world
and the ‘other world’ as in the Confucian court tradition. Observing that the present-
day Ministry of Culture and Information hesitantly assumes some of the ritual
functions of the pre-colonial Ministry of Rites Salemink claims that Hồ Chí Minh’s
‘political “descendants” don the Emperor’s new clothes, even if they hire an actor to stand in and play the Emperor’s part’.

Finally, Shaun Malanney’s article (Festivals and the politics of the exceptional dead in northern Vietnam) jumps another level on the scale by explicitly looking at the role of the state in the ritual celebration of what he calls the ‘exceptional dead’. This concept weds the Weberian notion of charisma to the Vietnamese practice of remembering ancestors – in this case the remembering done, organised or condoned by the socialist state. Malanney sketches in great detail various types of ritualised engagements with charismatic dead as developed by the Vietnamese state, both during the heyday of ‘socialist construction’ and in the Đổi Mới era of economic and social reform. He shows that in spite of significant continuities, the resurgence of festivals since the early 1990s also indicates profound changes in official and public definitions and enactments of ritual engagements with the charismatic dead.

While the state has allowed private citizens and groups to openly ritually engage a much wider group of charismatic dead and hence to enlarge the sources of charisma beyond the socialist canon, it has also attempted to control and appropriate such festivals, thus ritually creating political legitimacy from the ritual engagement with an enlarged set of charismatic dead. In particular, state involvement with the Hùng Kings’ death anniversary ceremony in Phú Thọ province demonstrates that state officials are readjusting their preference of, and attitude toward, the charismatic dead with whom they publicly associate. In Malanney’s words, the state continues to ‘ritually employ the charismatic dead as part of its legitimization process, but by changing the dead involved, the state is making different claims regarding the sources of its legitimization and links to the pre-revolutionary past’. His final conclusion is that while the ritual engagement with charismatic dead remains important as model of virtue, moral guide and source of communal pride or political legitimation, ‘the identities of and way in which people engage the charismatic dead continues to change and will undoubtedly continue to do so as Vietnamese society continues to transform’.

Taken together, the six articles in this special section of the Journal of Southeast Asian Studies offer a range of possibilities in which rituals in contemporary Vietnam can be seen as attempts to engage with the dead – ancestors, spirits, deities, charismatic figures – in the yin (âm) world who continue to influence the living in the yang (đường) world. Although the scope, scale and level of these ritual engagements differ widely, there is a good deal of overlap and cross-cutting in terms of beliefs, practices and attitudes, suggesting the possibility of a nested hierarchy connecting these ritual practices at various levels. Simultaneously, these papers suggest that despite their ‘traditional’ feel, such rituals keep changing in response to the changing uncertainties and insecurities, desires and anxieties that are part of the human condition. In that sense, the search for ritual form is never definitive or complete, and must remain ‘unfinished business’, reflecting the inherent potential of ritual practices to change.

17 The Vietnamese noun for work or business, việc, can also refer to ritual work or family business.