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Festivals and the dynamics of the exceptional dead in northern Vietnam

Shaun Kingsley Malarney

This article examines the changing dynamics of ritual engagements with the 'exceptional dead' in northern Vietnam. Since its inception, the socialist state has attempted to control which exceptional dead its citizenry can ritually engage in order to advance revolutionary goals. Although it was successful in this effort for several decades, since the early 1990s both the state and the population have begun ritually engaging a wider number of exceptional dead. This article examines the implications of this change with regard to political legitimation, access to sacred space and the changing role of the exceptional dead in people's lives.

A brief review of the contemporary Vietnamese media presents the image of a nation in which 'festivals' (*lễ hội*) are a popular and revered part of Vietnamese cultural life. Be it in newspapers, books, television shows, advertisements or calendars, festivals receive extensive coverage. Even the Communist Party's daily newspaper *Nhân Dân* provides detailed descriptions of various events, and its official website provides a long list of 'traditional' festivals for its readers. Among the people, festivals have also become a popular destination for pilgrimages, and some receive hundreds of thousands of visitors annually, such as the Hùng Kings Death Anniversary (*Giỗ Tổ Hùng Vương*) in Phú Thọ province. Although this image accurately captures the contemporary status quo, it conceals the fact that from the early 1950s until the late 1980s, the Vietnamese socialist state prohibited many festivals and significantly restricted the organisation of others. The state did implement ambitious cultural reforms in other areas, yet festivals were not a major component in its cultural agenda. Far from celebrating and encouraging festivals, the Vietnamese state restricted or prevented their performance; thus, for decades festivals remained a remembered though minor part of social life.

This article's purpose is to examine the socio-political implications of the resurgence of festivals that has taken place in Vietnam since the early 1990s. Scholarly research has demonstrated how, over the past 15 years, citizens and communities across the country have been a driving force behind the return to the organisation of previously abandoned festivals or the expansion of those that had been previously conducted on only a modest scale.[1] While the results of this research are indisputable,

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1 Kirsten W. Endres, '"Culturalizing politics": *Doi Moi* and the restructuring of ritual in contemporary rural Vietnam', in *Vietnamese villages in transition. Background and consequences of reform policies in*

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in this article I seek to explore one specific dimension of this resurgence, the manner in which both state and non-state actors in contemporary Vietnam have been involved in ritual engagements with what I shall describe as the 'exceptional dead'. Building upon a detailed examination of the exceptional dead and the state's ritual appropriation of them in the period from the 1950s through the late 1980s, my goal is to show that while there are significant continuities in this ritual engagement in Vietnamese social life, the resurgence of festivals since the early 1990s in fact involves several profound changes, particularly with regard to such issues as the control over sacred space, political legitimation, the changing definitions of which exceptional dead to ritually engage, and their role in the participants' lives. As Lê Hồng Lý has noted, a common feature of most festivals is the ritual engagement with 'historic celebrities', but what I seek to demonstrate is that when looked at in the aggregate, engagements with the exceptional dead in festivals make significant statements about contemporary Vietnam's social world.[2]

Festivals and the exceptional dead in revolutionary Vietnam

Defining the exceptional dead

Every society and nation has certain individuals who, after their deaths, become the focus of a relatively greater level of social attention and awareness. While some dead fade into seeming obscurity, others are more deeply engaged by the living. These engagements can include, among other things, organised research into their lives, the transmission of information about their achievements, the performance of commemorative activities devoted to them, the construction of memorials for them, the designation of them as models of virtue or the engagement with them in ritual, be it to simply commemorate them or to mobilise the supernatural potency some dead are regarded as possessing. Compared to others, certain dead stand out in social life.

For the purposes of this article, I have defined these dead as the 'exceptional dead'. My definition is informed by Max Weber's conceptualisation of charisma. Weber's writings on the subject were built upon the recognition that in social life some individuals stand out from others, and one category of such people is made up of those who possess charisma. For him, charisma was 'a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or

rural Vietnam, ed. Bernard Dahm and Vincent Houben (Passau: Passau Contributions to Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), pp. 197–221; Endres, 'Local dynamics of renegotiating ritual space in North Vietnam: The case of the *dinh*', *Sojourn*, 16, 1 (2001): 71–103; 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); Hy Van Luong, 'Economic reform and the intensification of rituals in two northern Vietnamese villages, 1980–90', in *The challenge of reform in Indochina*, ed. Borje Ljunggren (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Institute for International Development, 1993), pp. 259–92; Shaun Kingsley Malarney, *Culture, ritual and revolution in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002); Phạm Quỳnh Phương, 'Hero and deity: Empowerment and contestation in the veneration of Trần Hưng Đạo in contemporary Vietnam' (Ph.D. diss., La Trobe University, 2005).

2 Lê Hồng Lý, '*Lễ hội ở Đông bằng Bắc bộ về những nhân vật lịch sử*' [Folk festivals in the Tonkin Delta relating to historical figures], in *Lễ hội truyền thống trong đời sống xã hội hiện đại* [Traditional festivals in modern social life], ed. Đinh Gia Khánh and Lê Hữu Tàng (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 1993), p. 90.

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qualities'.[3] Anthony Giddens has elaborated on Weber's definition as follows: 'A charismatic individual is, therefore, one whom others believe to possess strikingly unusual capacities, often thought to be of a supernatural kind, which set him apart from the ordinary.' In a comment which is important for the present study, Giddens observed that 'whether a man "really" possesses any or all of the characteristics attributed to him by his followers is not an issue; what matters is that extraordinary qualities should be attributed to him by others'.[4] In my definition, the exceptional dead are those who are deemed by the living to have been in some way apart from the ordinary and who possessed extraordinary qualities that differentiate them from other dead.

Membership in the category of exceptional dead has several important empirical dimensions. It is obviously the product of social action, but as it occurs posthumously, it is something that is attributed by others, and it is accordingly the result of actions of definable social actors. Unlike the case of charisma, there is no dialectical interaction between the charismatic individual and others; the deceased is simply designated as exceptional by the living. Among the living, justifications for, and designations as, exceptional dead can be variable and, significantly, different groups within society can designate their own exceptional dead. In the Vietnamese case, the state has perhaps been the most important designator of exceptional dead, but religious groups, villages, lineages and other agents identify their own as well. This relates to an important sociological dimension of the exceptional dead, as some have widespread appeal while the appeal of others is more limited.

The designation as exceptional dead involves a moral discrimination, as some deceased individuals are differentially evaluated by living social agents. This point, when combined with the ability of different social groups to designate their own exceptional dead, allows for the empirical possibility in which different actors have different and possibly conflicting definitions of the category. For example, certain activities, such as giving one's life to overturn the status quo, can be regarded as exceptional by members of a dissident or revolutionary group, while to the regime such activities can constitute treason. Vietnamese history is replete with many such cases.

Designations as exceptional dead are historically contingent; they can vary over time and are therefore dynamic. A deceased individual who at one point is regarded as exceptional can later be either rejected or simply forgotten, while someone who was once effaced can subsequently be designated as exceptional. Others, while formerly considered exceptional only by some, can come to be regarded as exceptional by many, a point that will be significant with regard to several Vietnamese spirit cults. Finally, the justification for why a deceased individual deserves to be numbered among the exceptional dead can have a profound influence on how the living relate to members of that group. For example, an individual designated as exceptional for secular achievements can become a guide for personal morality or proper citizenship, but another with supernatural or divine attributes can have an intimate relationship with

3 Max Weber, *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), vol. 1, p. 241.
4 Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and modern social theory: An analysis of the writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 160.

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the living and be engaged in very different ways. Relations between the living and the exceptional dead are therefore variable, a point that is critical for understanding contemporary Vietnamese festivals.

The popular and official importance of the exceptional dead in Vietnam is not unique, particularly when compared to other reforming or post-socialist societies. As the work of Grant Evans and Katherine Verdery has shown, engagements with the dead become increasingly dynamic and significant in such transforming societies.[5] My goal in the remainder of this article, however, is to demonstrate that while the category of exceptional dead in Vietnam has tremendous historical depth and breadth, its composition and the relative importance of its various members engaged in festivals have undergone significant changes in recent years. The exceptional dead do play an important role in contemporary Vietnamese festivals, yet the actors who designate them, the reasons they are designated, their socio-political consequences and the roles they play in participants' lives are dynamic and varied.

The exceptional dead in the socialist state

The Vietnamese Communists began the articulation of their category of the exceptional dead in 1925 and this process reached full form after their definitive assumption of power in 1954. That they did so was not surprising as previous regimes, dating all the way back to the biographies written by Lê Văn Hưu in his late-thirteenth-century *opus Đại Việt sử ký* (Annals of Đại Việt), had identified and celebrated particular individuals who had performed acts or rendered services that the regimes had regarded as exemplary.[6] Similar to their predecessors, the defining feature of the new exceptional dead was that they were regarded as having performed some form of '*công*' – a semantically rich term which for our purposes here can be glossed as a 'meritorious work', 'meritorious action', 'meritorious achievement' or 'meritorious contribution'. '*Công*' is also a concept that is employed in Vietnamese social life in multiple contexts, both official and unofficial. At a general level, it refers to any type of action or particularly work a person has performed, but the meaning employed in the context of the exceptional dead refers to virtuous or meritorious actions that individuals performed and which benefited not simply the individual but a wider community.

Công can encompass a wide range of activities. At the simplest level, many shrines and temples in Vietnam have lists hung on walls that record the names of individuals who have given donations, referred to as *công đức*, to the establishment. For some people, this type of *công* can represent the greatest level they will achieve, but a small, select few attain greater or even transcendent levels. In centuries past, a doctor of herbal medicine in the village of Giáp Tứ of Thịnh Liệt commune south of Hanoi played an important role in treating villagers during an outbreak of disease; to this day local people still speak of the *công* he had with the village for reducing the epidemic's severity. Philip Taylor has commented that Lê Văn Duyệt, the nineteenth-century

5 Grant Evans, *The politics of ritual and remembrance: Laos since 1975* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998); Katherine Verdery, *The political lives of dead bodies: Reburial and postsocialist change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
6 Benoît de Tréglodé, *Héros et révolution au Viêt Nam: 1948–1964* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001), pp. 48–9.

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Viceroy of Gia Định (the region surrounding present-day Hồ Chí Minh City), is regarded by many in southern Vietnam as having *công* with the nation.[7] In contemporary northern Vietnam, people often refer to Hồ Chí Minh as having performed 'great meritorious works' (*công lớn*) for the country and its people. By performing meritorious works, an individual is socially marked as someone who was minimally exceptional or maximally extraordinary.

The new socialist state in the 1950s deemed a variety of diverse achievements – scholarly, artistic, medical, administrative, diplomatic or religious – as worthy of a meritorious designation. The quintessential exceptional dead under the new regime were those who had fought or struggled, and particularly given their lives, to either advance the revolutionary cause or defend Vietnam from foreign aggression. Over the millennia Vietnam has faced foreign aggression on numerous occasions, notably in its many conflicts with the Chinese. These conflicts produced a long list of individuals who had bravely resisted foreign invaders, such as the Trưng Sisters, who briefly overthrew Chinese rule in 40–43 CE, but ultimately died at the end of their revolt; Triệu Thị Trịnh (Bà Triệu), who led another revolt against the Chinese in 248 that ended in her death; and the general Trần Hưng Đạo who famously thwarted the Mongol invasions of Vietnam in 1285 and 1287–88. In the socialist state, these types of individuals have been defined as 'national heroes' (*anh hùng dân tộc*) or more simply as 'heroes' (*anh hùng*).

In 1925 the Vietnamese Communists began identifying a new category of exceptional dead, the 'revolutionary martyr' (*liệt sĩ*). The term '*liệt sĩ*' (Chinese *lieshi*) predated the Communist Party and its significance was influenced by other revolutionary movements, notably in China. In the new usage it applied to individuals who had 'sacrificed' (*hi sinh*) their lives in support of the revolutionary cause. Quoting a 1957 government document, Benoît de Tréglodé describes the early articulation of the *liệt sĩ* as 'a person who died gloriously on the field of honour in his struggle against imperialism and feudalism since 1925'. He continues that the revolutionary martyr had 'courageously fallen at the front in the defence of the work of the national revolution'.[8]

The list of *liệt sĩ* began in 1925, but their ranks swelled tremendously in the French and American wars; in all of these cases, they were publicly recognised as having great *công* with the nation. Significantly, classification as a martyr was based neither on gender nor affiliation with the Communist Party. In fact, large numbers of soldiers killed during the wars were not Party members and, particularly during the French war, a number of famous women gave their lives for the revolutionary cause. The *công* of the revolutionary martyrs is publicly asserted in contemporary social life in the phrase '*Tổ Quốc Ghi Công*', which can literally be rendered as 'The Fatherland records your *công*', or perhaps more sonorously as 'The Fatherland remembers your sacrifice'. This phrase is inscribed in large red letters on the certificates that families receive to inform them that their family member has been killed and classified as a *liệt sĩ*; most families who receive these certificates frame them and hang them on their walls at home. The phrase can also be found on monuments built in 'revolutionary martyr cemeteries' (*nghĩa*

7 Philip Taylor, *Goddess on the rise: Pilgrimage and popular religion in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), p. 204.
8 De Tréglodé, *Héros et révolution*, p. 267.

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trang liệt sĩ), on a variety of other war dead monuments and on banners hung in public. It is important to note that state officials scrutinised the circumstances of individuals' deaths in order to determine whether they would receive the *liệt sĩ* classification. For example, someone in the military who died of disease was classified as 'war dead' (*tử sĩ*), while a civilian non-combatant killed by enemy bombing was a 'victim of war' (*nạn nhân chiến tranh*). A revolutionary martyr had to die in combat with the enemy.

An examination of the creation of the exceptional dead category in the socialist state in the post-1954 period reveals that while certain individuals were inherently deemed worthy of membership in this category, the state was simultaneously reviewing the distant or immediate historical record and selectively excluding or effacing certain individuals. Patricia Pelley has described the case of the early fifteenth-century figure Hồ Qúy Ly who, on the positive side, was praised by some for his advanced political thought, while for others he had the negative attribute of having usurped the Trần dynastic throne. This combination left him in an ambiguous position regarding his meritorious contributions.[9] Oscar Salemink describes in this collection the exclusion of the leaders and supporters of the Nguyễn dynasty, which was in power during the period of Vietnam's colonisation.

Many individuals from southern Vietnam have also been a focus of exclusion. Hy Văn Lương provides an excellent example of one community's struggles with the state over the latter's attempt to eliminate the celebration of Marshal Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức, a man the community regarded as having tremendous *công*, but whom the socialist state viewed as having been politically suspect due to his association with the Nguyễn dynasty.[10] Perhaps the greatest example in contemporary Vietnam is the case of the former soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Over 200,000 ARVN soldiers died fighting against members of the People's Army and its ally the National Liberation Front, yet these individuals remain officially ignored. Their situation and those of others will be addressed below.

The role of the exceptional dead in the socialist state

The designation of the exceptional dead was but one part of a broader agenda to make these dead a part of people's everyday lives. In doing so, however, the state has also articulated a set of moral prescriptions for how the people should relate to the dead and the roles the latter should play in their lives. At the simplest level, the people are exhorted to 'remember' (*nhớ*) the exceptional dead. The socialist state employs several terms to emphasise their remembrance or commemoration, such as '*kỷ niệm*' (literally, 'commemoration') or *tưởng niệm* (another variation of 'remembrance' or 'commemoration'), but the word most frequently used is the everyday term for 'remember' (*nhớ*). The semantics of this term are significant. Unlike a word like '*kỷ niệm*', which has a more formal sensibility, the term '*nhớ*' mobilises the sense of

9 Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New histories of the national past* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 26–7.
10 Hy Van Luong, 'The Marxist state and the dialogic restructuration of culture in rural Vietnam', in *Indochina: Social and cultural change*, ed. David Elliot *et al.* (Claremont, CA: Claremont-McKenna College, 1994), pp. 79–117.

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everyday life. More importantly, it is also the verb used to describe one of the most fundamental obligations toward one's ancestors: to remember them. This linkage is salient, as it linguistically merges the objectives of the official remembrance project with one of the most basic moral responsibilities of all Vietnamese.

When remembering the exceptional dead, the state wants the population to focus on remembering their officially defined virtues. This has been nowhere more clearly stated than in the phrase widely employed in public spaces: 'eternally remember our moral debt to the revolutionary martyrs' (*đời đời nhớ ơn người liệt sĩ*). The remembrance and recognition of these virtues, however, are part of a more important goal. For the state, the population should remember the exceptional dead because they serve as exemplars (*gương mẫu*); the people are to learn of their morally good works and then use these to guide their own lives.

Beyond the simple articulation of the category of exceptional dead, the socialist state has also gone to great lengths to insert them into social life. Streets, schools, museums and commemorative sites are named after them; stories are circulated about them in the public media; and new holidays have been created to honour them. These constant encounters with the exceptional dead in everyday life are designed to permeate social life with officially approved moral messages intended to serve as templates for individual behaviour. As de Tréglodé has argued, however, the dead have performed an even more important function in revolutionary Vietnam: '[they] legitimize the power of the living and do not fail to confer order and cohesion upon the collective [nation or society]'. More pointedly, he notes that in the revolutionary state, the revolutionary martyr 'was a *rassembleur*, a "creator of unity"'.[11] Beyond simply serving a didactic role, the official exceptional dead have been meant to help unify the new society.

Creating community through the ritual engagement with the exceptional dead

De Tréglodé's statement that the dead 'do not fail to confer order and cohesion upon the collective' points to a significant objective of the socialist state's agenda for the living to ritually engage the exceptional dead in social life. As I have discussed elsewhere, the state employed what I describe as a 'state functionalist' approach to ritual practice. With this approach, it created a corpus of rituals that were designed, through their performance, to advance official agendas and ideology among the population. This approach applied to a wide variety of rituals, such as weddings, funerals and death anniversaries, which in turn were to advance such fundamental components of official ideology as gender equality, frugality and secularity.[12] The engagements with the exceptional dead, however, were linked to two related goals: the transmission of their officially defined virtues and the integration into the new revolutionary community of the participants in these engagements.

The socialist state created a wide variety of venues through which the living could ritually engage the exceptional dead. The first venue can be described as civic rituals;

11 De Tréglodé, *Héros et révolution*, pp. 264–5.
12 Shaun Kingsley Malarney, 'The limits of "state functionalism" and the reconstruction of funerary ritual in contemporary northern Viet Nam', *American Ethnologist*, 23, 3 (1996): 540–60; Malarney, *Culture, ritual and revolution*.

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these rites, without historical precedent in Vietnam, were organised and conducted by local officials. One famous example was the annual 'Remembering Our Moral Debt to Uncle Ho Tree-Planting [New Year] Festival' (*Tết Trông Cây Nhớ Ơn Bác Hồ*). Hồ Chí Minh was a champion of efforts to beautify the countryside, and in 1959 he organised the first spring tree-planting event. After his death the government continued to designate a day in January or February in which local officials organised groups of people, particularly children, to go plant trees and remember his contributions. The practice continues to this day, as when in January 2005 President Trần Đức Lương participated in tree-planting in Hòa Bình province.

Another civic ritual involving a ritualised encounter with the exceptional dead was often described as an 'educational session' (*buổi giáo dục*). These sessions were part of the broader campaign to propagandise (*tuyên truyền*) among the people. They were usually organised and led by a member of the local administration or Party apparatus and were held in official venues, such as administrative offices, schools or 'recreational buildings' (*câu lạc bộ*). These meetings were organised to communicate officially endorsed values; some included film screenings or meetings with individuals who had distinguished themselves in revolutionary activities, while others would recount the stories of *liệt sĩ*. A 1962 document encouraged organisers during these sessions to tell 'the stories of Comrades Trần Phủ, Hoàng Văn Thụ, Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai, Lý Tự Trọng and Võ Thị Sáu' (Party leaders who died or were executed during the colonial period), as exposure to the 'indomitable fighting spirit of these imprisoned and executed Communists' would have a 'polishing up' effect on the people and the youth.[13] Every year in Thịnh Liệt commune near Hanoi, the administration organises a session for students in the local schools to recount the death of a commune native, Bùi Ngọc Dương, who was killed at the battle of Khê Sanh when he ran into an American bunker and detonated a satchel charge. Local officials hold this session annually to educate local children on his bravery and spirit of sacrifice.

A second type of encounter with the exceptional dead involved ritual actions devoted to war dead; as such, it straddled the boundary between what can be described as civic and family ritual. Some of these rites were almost exclusively civic in nature, such as those organised by local administrations on War Invalids and Revolutionary Martyrs Day (celebrated on 17 July after its establishment in 1947). Although the national government organises solemn events on these days in the capital, the vast majority of the population only participates in these rituals in their native communities in ceremonies organised by their local administration. To give one example, every year on War Invalids and Martyrs Day the communal People's Committee of Thịnh Liệt holds a well-attended ceremony, presided over by the Committee President, at the local 'Revolutionary Martyrs Monument' (*Đài Liệt Sĩ*). The administration extends invitations to all residents, presents gifts to the families of revolutionary martyrs and gives laudatory speeches recording their sacrifices. Although this rite is purely secular in nature, many households add a religious element by conducting their own private ancestral rites for fallen family members on the same day. Another such rite, now only

13 *Đấu tranh chống đối phong bại tục, cải tạo thói quen cũ xây dựng nếp sống mới* [Struggle against bad practices and corrupt customs, reform old habits and build the new ways] (Hanoi: n.p., 1962).

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rarely performed, is the Official Memorial Service for War Dead (*Lễ Truy Điệu*) that commune-level officials would conduct in the homes of families of revolutionary martyrs. In this greatly appreciated rite created during the American War, local officials demonstrated their gratitude to these families for their sacrifice.[14] In all of these cases, state officials officiated in rituals devoted to the exceptional dead and also dictated the spaces in which the rituals were performed. Except for the Official Memorial Service for War Dead, the rites were held in secular public spaces.

A third type of officially sanctioned engagement with the exceptional dead involved the insertion of rites dedicated to them into family rituals; the most visible such attempt involved revolutionary martyr cemeteries. In Vietnam, families have an annual responsibility at the turn of the Lunar New Year to clean family graves. In Ninh Bình province, official regulations asked for young children to be taken out to revolutionary martyr cemeteries so they could learn of the martyrs' sacrifices as well as how to care for the site.[15] From a different perspective, in the late 1970s officials in Nam Hà province sought to integrate *liệt sĩ* into wedding ceremonies. The regulations they developed asked newly married couples to visit their local war dead monument and place a bouquet of flowers on it in order to show their appreciation and express their debt to those who had sacrificed their lives.[16] Another widespread and officially encouraged practice was the visitation by families to their local revolutionary martyr cemeteries. This often took place on War Invalids and Martyrs Day, when families would place incense sticks on the graves, though some households would also visit on the deceased's death anniversary.

The fourth and final type of officially encouraged engagement with the exceptional dead involved the creation of a secular cult for an individual. De Tréglodé provides an excellent example of this in his description of the practices that have been created for the revolutionary martyr Mạc Thị Bưởi of Hải Hưng province. Bưởi was born into a poor peasant family in 1927 and began following the revolution in 1945. After several years of distinguished service she was captured in 1951, tortured and ultimately killed, all without giving up any secrets. The government recognised her as a national hero in August 1955. From then on, the local and provincial governments and the Communist Party apparatus embarked upon the construction in her natal community of a variety of spaces for her commemoration that included multiple tombs, a statue and several buildings for paying respects to the deceased heroine. All sites were designed to provide spaces where the living could ritually engage with the exceptional hero while also propagating knowledge of her life and accomplishments. Local Party officials also created a set of rites to be performed on Bưởi's death anniversary. These rites, which

14 Malarney, *Culture, ritual and revolution*.
15 Tỷ Văn hoá Ninh Bình [Ninh Bình Office of Culture], *Công tác xây dựng nếp sống mới, con người mới và gia đình tiên tiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước* [The task of building the new ways, new people and progressive families in the struggle against America for national salvation] (Ninh Bình: Tỷ Văn hóa, 1968).
16 Bộ Văn hoá (Ministry of Culture), *Những văn bản về việc cưới, việc tang, ngày giỗ, ngày hội* [Documents on weddings, funerals, death anniversaries and public festivals] (Hanoi: Văn hóa, 1979).

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featured incense offerings as well as offerings presented on an altar dedicated to Bưởi, involved most of the village's population.[17]

The examples mentioned above list only a small fraction of the total number of ritualised engagements with the exceptional dead developed by the socialist state, but their distribution provides a reasonable sense of the types of rituals the state preferred to organise. Apart from their obvious shared characteristics of being controlled by officials and their didactic qualities, what stands out in the analysis of these officially created ritual encounters is their localised nature. Thus, when speaking of the ritualised engagement with the dead, it is important to note that in the period between 1945 and the early 1990s, many of these events were relatively small in scale or localised in nature. They were primarily organised by the lower levels of the state administration; rarely did they constitute regional- or national-level ritual practices involving thousands or tens of thousands of people.

The Mạc Thị Bưởi case provides a fitting example. Despite Bưởi's elevated stature as one of only 18 first-rank national heroes, official participation in her rites has largely been confined to communal and district officials. Interestingly, even at an event as significant as the 1995 inauguration of a new commemorative hall, no one from the provincial People's Committee or Party organisation attended, though numerous invitations were issued.[18] In short, the higher levels of government never sought to turn the commemoration of Mạc Thị Bưởi into a national-level cult. During these years, the state encouraged the performance of rituals dedicated to the exceptional dead, but it also aimed to keep them small and focused in order to more effectively promote its own ideological aims and to control their conduct. Significantly, the official goal to maintain control over these rites was accompanied by the demand that the ritualised encounters take place within spaces selected and controlled by the state. This agenda situated these rites and their participants firmly within the revolutionary community, yet the number of *other* members of the revolutionary community who participated was deliberately kept small.

The charismatic dead and the politics of festivals prior to 1990

The new set of ritualised encounters with the exceptional dead was a significant component in the ritual repertoire of the socialist state, but revolutionary officials still needed to contend with the vast array of popular rituals that predated the revolution. As noted above, in the post-1953 period, state officials remained actively involved in local ritual practices and implemented a wide variety of reforms at weddings, funerals and other ceremonies in order to ensure that they remained within acceptable ideological boundaries and had a proper socialist character. In the period from the late 1950s through the late 1980s, the government published a wide variety of regulations regarding the organisation and conduct of these rituals, but despite the expansiveness of this campaign and the significant role that it assumed in everyday life, the state took a decidedly different approach to 'festivals' (*hội*). While officials allowed for the

17 De Tréglodé, *Héros et révolution*, pp. 341–53; Christoph Giebel, 'Museum-shrine: Revolution and its tutelary spirit in the village of My Hoa Hung', in *The country of memory: Remaking the past in late socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 77–105.
18 De Tréglodé, *Héros et révolution*, p. 351.

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continuation – albeit in clearly modified form – of many family-centred ritual practices, the state spent little time outlining or articulating regulations for the conduct of festivals.

As noted at the beginning of this article, pre-revolutionary Vietnam had featured a wide variety of local festivals (known collectively as *hội hè đình đám*) which, generally speaking, were dedicated to specific localities' own particular exceptional dead. These ranged from such local celebrations as rites performed in village communal houses (*đình*) and devoted to village guardian spirits, individuals whom the higher-level mandarinate or local population regarded as exceptional dead, to such regional festivals as those devoted to the Hùng Kings, Trần Hưng Đạo or the Trưng Sisters, or the Phủ Giầy festival in Nam Định province, dedicated to the female deity Liễu Hạnh.[19] With the advent of revolutionary control over the countryside, many of these festivals were either greatly scaled down or stopped completely. The majority of those abandoned were village communal house ceremonies, largely due to their associations with the former elite or their perceived wastefulness.[20] Indeed, a review of the historical evidence allows one to argue that the state in this period did not regard festivals as a critical component in their broader cultural agenda to create a new socialist society and culture.

From the 1960s onward, however, the state began articulating its attitude toward festivals. One early official document published in 1962 commented of these events that 'all of the commemorative days of all national heroes must be organised with a new content and meaning. They must have the goal of educating the people on the heroic traditions of struggle of our forefathers so the people can study these patriotic examples and be resolved to implement all of the responsibilities before them.'[21] These admonitions were more clearly articulated in later directives. A representative example that illustrates the state's attitude toward festivals during this period was the March 1975 promulgation by the Council of State of regulations on the organisation of weddings, funerals, death anniversary ceremonies and festivals. Assembled at the request of the Minister of Culture and based upon the need to 'build new customs that accord with the Party line on the socialist revolution', the regulations contained a detailed set of prescriptions regarding the first three categories, but only a cursory treatment of festivals. The general principles for festivals asserted that:

> All festival days must ensure a positive content, such as cultivating patriotism, encouraging emulation in labour, production, and frugalness in the building of socialism, and should fulfil the citizens' responsibilities. They should be filled with beneficial physical education, sports, and artistic activities, and should not create impediments to production. They should strictly forbid all superstitious practices.[22]

19 John Whitmore, 'Administrative control of the spirits' (unpublished paper); Toan Ánh, *Nếp cũ: Làng xóm Việt Nam* [Old ways: The Vietnamese village] (Saigon: Toan Ánh, 1968); Toan Ánh, *Nếp cũ: Hội hè đình đám, quyển thượng* [Old ways: Village ceremonies, volume 1) (Saigon: Nam chi Tùng thư, 1969).

20 Endres, 'Local dynamics'.

21 *Đấu tranh chống đồi phong bại tục.*

22 Hội đồng Chính phủ (Council of State), *Thể lệ của Hội đồng Chính phủ về tổ chức việc cưới, việc tang, ngày giỗ, ngày hội* [Regulations from the Council of State on the organization of weddings, funerals, death anniversary ceremonies, festivals] (Hanoi: Phổ thông, 1975), pp. 9, 26 (long quotation).

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Official ambivalence toward festivals was evident in these regulations in a number of different ways. The section on concrete suggestions began by forthrightly stating that 'as for village festivals in the countryside that have not been organised in a long time, at this point in time their restoration is prohibited'. Any that had 'a superstitious character', such as those at Phủ Giầy and the Đồng Bằng shrine in Thái Bình, were to be eliminated. The government was similarly suspicious of events that combined 'religious festivals' with sightseeing at famous natural vistas, such as those held at the Chùa Thày or Chùa Hương pagodas. Although they acknowledged the necessity to respect the people's freedom of religion, the regulations indicated that their long-term goal was for these festivals to gradually become more secularised 'journeys to visit famous landscapes'.[23]

The one category of festival allowed to remain was the type 'closely related to the nation's history and national heroes'. Explicitly mentioned were the death anniversaries of the Hùng Kings, the Trưng Sisters and Trần Hưng Đạo. Even here, however, the regulations stated that it was necessary to 'improve' (*cải tiến*) their organisation. The document included the obvious exhortations to eliminate superstitions, though it more pointedly urged organisers to 'guarantee and enhance the educational and ideological content'. In an associated text, the Ministry of Culture released an undated and unsigned earlier draft of the 1975 regulations from the Council of State that includes most of the text incorporated into the final regulations. In an interesting redaction, the Ministry's text excluded from the earlier draft the sentence, 'Visits to the shrines of national heroes should be regarded as similar to visits to all other sites of historical interest.' Another earlier idea that was circulated, but which does not appear in the final text, was that all festivals were to conclude in one day, as opposed to the multi-day festivals of the pre-revolutionary period.[24]

What is clear from official documents from the 1960s and 1970s is that the state never embraced festivals as a central component of its ritual repertoire. It fully intended to employ ritual engagements with the exceptional dead as a mechanism for advancing official ideology and creating the new socialist society, but festivals were not central to this agenda, and most were in fact deliberately removed. Several reasons informed this decision. Village communal house ceremonies were excluded, as mentioned above, because of their undesirable associations. Larger, regionally based festivals were under official suspicion because they constituted occasions in which potentially heterodox ideas and practices were engaged or performed. Official documents indicate that larger festivals continued to involve such undesirable activities as 'superstitious practices', gambling, drunkenness and charlatanry; restricting the organisation of these events was thus a way to limit these practices. Finally, large, multi-day festivals that involved the participation of thousands of people from across the country could also have provided venues for the formation of organised political opposition. Even today the Vietnamese government still places

23 Ibid., p. 16.
24 Ibid., p. 17 ('educational and ideological content'), 44 (shrines), 34 (one-day limit). The Ministry of Culture has had various titles over the years but in this article will be consistently referred to by this name.

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restrictions on large-scale gatherings of its citizens, and in the revolution's early years sensitivities about the dangers of such convocations ran particularly high.

Despite these restrictions, official sources reveal that people remained attracted to large-scale festivals during this period. A particularly revealing document was published by the Cultural Service of Nam Hà province which, though ostensibly dedicated to publicising a 15 January 1971 directive from the Ministry of Culture on the regulation of local festivals, revealed that after the American military stopped bombing raids against North Vietnam in 1968, 'tens of thousands of people from all provinces, cities and places have been going to participate in festivals. The most crowded locations have been the city of Hanoi, Hải Phòng, and all of the provinces of the delta and midlands of northern Vietnam.'[25] The socialist state had implemented an aggressive agenda to limit participation in festivals, yet the population remained strongly interested in them. Popular interest was so strong, in fact, that even those that the government vigorously sought to suppress, notably Phủ Giầy, remained in existence.

Festivals and the exceptional dead in contemporary Vietnam

The exceptional dead and the politics of festivals since 1990

By the early 1990s, the government recognised that its approach to suppressing or radically reducing the organisation of festivals was no longer tenable, as popular sentiment was pushing for the return of local and regional celebrations. Instead of continuing to severely limit or prevent their organisation, the state began to allow for their re-emergence, working primarily through the Ministry of Culture. In October 1989 the Ministry published a set of initial regulations entitled 'Regulations on Opening Traditional Festivals', and at year's end the Council of Ministers published an instruction on the upcoming Lunar New Year and other festivals. This legislation indicated that while the government would permit the re-emergence of festivals, 'all of the cultural, information, physical education and sports services' were to play the dominant role in their organisation.[26]

Perhaps more significantly, the following several years saw the emergence of official interest in the history and mechanics of festivals. (It is important to note that this interest was part of a broader official re-examination and later valorisation of folk cultural practices occurring at the same time.) Instead of allowing festivals to re-emerge on an *ad hoc* basis according to popular will, state organs (particularly those affiliated with the Ministry of Culture at various levels) began researching festivals and publishing their results. An interesting early manifestation of this was the publication of a 377-page volume by Phan Khanh in 1992. Conceived and written in response to

25 Tỷ Văn hoá Nam Hà (Nam Hà Office of Culture), *Chỉ thị về hội hè và quy ước về tổ chức đám cưới, đám ma, ngày giỗ, ngày Tết và ngày kỷ niệm lớn* [Instructions on public festivals and conventions on the organization of weddings, funerals, death anniversaries, Tết and important commemorative days] (Nam Định: Tỷ Văn hóa Nam Hà, 1971), p. 6.

26 *Chỉ thị của Chủ tịch Hội đồng Bộ trưởng số 362-CT ngày 16-12-1989 về việc tổ chức đón Tết Nguyên Đán Canh Ngọ và các ngày lễ, hội'* [Instructions of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers Number 362-CT, 16 December 1989 on the organization of Lunar New Year 1990 and all ritual and festival days]', *Công báo Cộng hoà Xã hội Chủ nghĩa Việt Nam* [Government Gazette of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam], 24 (1989): 521.

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Ministry of Culture policies, the book was, in Khanh's words, intended 'to help all locales put the activities of Museums – Historical Sites – Festivals on the right course, with the aim of protecting our cultural inheritance and to educate on the traditions of compassion, patriotism, revolution and scientific research.'[27]

The text explains official ideas regarding festivals, notably their educational role in advancing official ideology. Interestingly, unlike the regulations on festivals written only two decades earlier, it provides detailed analyses and recommendations for festival organisation – such as which texts to employ, ritual objects and ritual order – all of which are directly informed by pre-revolutionary practices. The volume also includes four 'scripts' (*kịch bản*) for the organisation of famous regional festivals, such as the Hùng Kings Death Anniversary, the Ngọc Hồi Đống Đa Victory Festival (commemorating the defeat of Chinese forces in Hanoi in 1789), and the Lạc Long Quân Bình Đà Festival (in honour of the mythical progenitor of the Vietnamese race). The volume concludes with a 17-page list of festivals compiled in consultation with such pre-revolutionary sources as Toan Ánh's guide to festivals, published in Saigon in 1969, and Đào Duy Anh's cultural history of Vietnam, published in Huế in 1938.[28]

Official support for research into festivals was also evident in the March 1993 organisation, with Toyota Foundation sponsorship, of a five-day international seminar on the subject of 'Traditional Festivals in Modern Social Life'. This event brought together scholars from several Southeast Asian nations to analyse and compare the nature and socio-political consequences of festivals, particularly in changing societies.[29] Since 1992 literally dozens of books have been published in Vietnam on festivals large and small, local and regional. These texts range from volumes dedicated to providing a broad overview of festivals across Vietnam to those that address only one festival.

In May 1994 the Ministry of Culture released the definitive set of 'Regulations on Festivals' (*Quy chế lễ hội*). The regulations stated that 'festivals are a type of traditional cultural activity that have the power to attract large numbers of participants and become a need in the spiritual life of the people', while they also reaffirmed the need to 'organise, administer, and guide all festivals so that they accord with our nation's venerable customs, economy, and society, and to standardize festival activities'. To the latter end, the regulations established that organisation and conduct of festivals would only be allowed after permission from the relevant People's Committee (either district, provincial or municipal) or the Ministry itself for national-level events; the relevant local Culture and Information Office would then be responsible for ensuring that official directives were followed. The regulations also clearly articulated some of the most important goals of festivals, which included 'education on the people's positive historical and cultural traditions with respect to their efforts to found and protect the nation'. More pointedly, they directly inserted the engagement with the exceptional dead into the regulations, stating that another goal was to 'reflect back upon the meritorious works (*công*) of all of the renowned historical and cultural figures, those

27 Phan Khanh, *Bảo tàng, di tích, lễ hội* [Museums, sites, festivals] (Hanoi: Thông Tin, 1992), p. 4.
28 Toan Ánh, *Nếp cũ: Hội hè đình đám*; Đào Duy Anh, *Lịch sử Việt Nam* [Vietnamese history] (Hanoi: Văn hóa, 1958).
29 Đinh Gia Khành and Le Hữu Tàng, *Lễ hội truyền thống trong đời sống xã hội hiện đại* [Traditional festivals in modern social life] (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 1993).

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people who performed meritorious services for the people and the nation (legendary and mythical)'.[30]

The government's publication of regulations about festivals illustrates its concern with integrating them into its broader socio-political goals. By setting the parameters for festival organisation, its aim was to keep their performance within the range of acceptable ideas and values. While this policy has to a certain extent succeeded, the reality has gone beyond what the government planned. The following three sections will examine recent transformations of three different types of festivals, each of which is centred upon ritual engagements with specific exceptional dead. What stands out about these festivals is their social importance, as well as the fact that the exceptional dead they engage were not central figures in the socialist canon. As will also be evident, despite a measure of official involvement in all of them, their goals do not subscribe to the earlier official desire to celebrate revolutionary virtues or integrate participants into the revolutionary community.

The realities of festivals and the exceptional dead: Asserting local identity in a changing society

One of the socialist state's most important methods for constraining the population from engaging in discouraged practices was the denial of access to sacred sites, particularly through the destruction, closure or conversion of those that had formerly served as locations for the conduct of rituals.[31] Although this policy affected shrines, Buddhist temples and other sacred locales, its effects on village communal houses (*đình*) were particularly significant. In the pre-revolutionary period, village communal house rites were socially the most important local festivals and played an important role in publicly articulating local identities. As is evident in the studies on traditional culture by Phan Kế Bính and Toan Ánh, villages took great pride in their communal house rites and often devoted a great deal of energy and effort to them.[32] The main foci of these rites were the village guardian spirit or spirits (*thành hoàng*), which were most commonly locally and/or officially selected exceptional dead, though some mythical figures were sometimes included as well. Revolutionary policies from the late 1940s onward effectively halted the conduct of village festivals until the late 1980s. In many villages, *đình* were even converted to secular purposes such as warehouses or administrative offices, making the conduct of rites on their premises difficult if not impossible.

Despite official restrictions on communal house rites, there nevertheless existed a significant degree of resistance to this policy. By the late 1980s the residents of many communities began pressuring local officials for the return to some form of *đình* rites and village festivals.[33] As just discussed, there existed at the highest level of the government an awareness that a return to the organisation of such festivals was

30 Bộ Văn hoá Thông tin (Ministry of Culture and Information), *Quy chế lễ hội* [Regulations on festivals] (Hanoi: Bộ Văn hoá Thông tin, 1994), pp. 2–4 (quotations from p. 2).
31 Endres, '"Culturalizing politics"'; Endres, 'Local dynamics'; Malarney, *Culture, ritual and revolution*.
32 Phan Kế Bính, *Việt Nam phong tục* [Vietnamese customs] (Hồ Chí Minh City: NXB Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1990 reprint); Toan Ánh, *Nếp cũ: Hội hè đình đám*.
33 Endres, '"Culturalizing politics"'; Endres, 'Local dynamics'; Kleinen, *Facing the future*; Luong, 'The Marxist state'; Malarney, *Culture, ritual and revolution*.

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desirable, but local officials often found themselves in the delicate position of trying to legitimately respond to local desires while not exceeding the boundaries of what higher-level officials, some of whom were not fully supportive of the national government policy, would find acceptable.

One interesting solution to this problem has been documented in the research of Kirsten W. Endres, which explores the manner in which communities appropriated the officially acceptable exceptional dead in order to create a set of justifiable reasons for the re-assertion of public control over their communal houses and the re-organisation of traditional rites. Endres' research focused on two northern villages, Đa Hội and Đại Bái, communities that were centres for artisanal traditions of blacksmiths and coppersmiths, respectively. Their history is similar to numerous others in northern Vietnam as both experienced the cessation of communal house rites in the 1940s and 1950s, and then in the post-1954 period, the formerly sacred *đình* were appropriated by the local administrations and converted to mundane uses. By the 1980s, residents of both communities had begun their efforts to reclaim their *đình*; as Endres describes, the approach they took was to seek government recognition of these structures as 'historical sites' (*di tích lịch sử*). In socialist Vietnam, the Ministry of Culture recognises two important types of 'sites': 'historical' (*di tích lịch sử*) and 'cultural' (*di tích văn hóa*); and the reception of this designation is a source of local pride and prestige.[34] Phan Khanh has commented of *di tích* that

> History has come and gone, but the heroic vestiges of those generations still forever remain, eternally resounding in the souls of how many generations and making our people proud. *Di tích* call our attention to that, call our attention that we must rise above difficulties, be united in will and strength to steadfastly take possession of, create, and make our country advance to become 'shoulder to shoulder with all of the strong Asian nations', as the revered Uncle Hồ dearly wanted.[35]

Di tích thus represent esteemed and exemplary spaces in the socialist state.

Designation as a historical site requires a community to submit an application that is carefully scrutinised by the Ministry of Culture. Endres notes that for *đình* to receive this designation, residents 'had to prove the historical value of the building or the historical significance of the residing deity'. Both Đa Hội and Đại Bái faced a similar problem in that their communal houses were not of demonstrable historical value, thus they chose to pursue the designation on the basis of the historical significance of the residing deity. However, both communities had several complexities to deal with regarding their guardian spirits. In Đa Hội, the pre-1945 spirit was Trọng Thủy, the son of a 'Chinese invader', while in Đại Bái the village had two guardian spirits, the mythical figure Lạc Long Quân and Nguyễn Công Hiệp, a meritorious villager. None, however, were regarded as particularly meritorious; thus when the communities submitted their applications, 'the original *thành hoàng* had been abandoned or marginalized'.[36]

34 Endres, '"Culturalizing politics"'.
35 Phan Khanh, *Bảo tàng, di tích*, pp. 171–2.
36 Endres, '"Culturalizing politics"', pp. 206, 208. Trọng Thủy was the son of a general in the third century BCE who was long viewed as an early 'Vietnamese king' but was later stigmatised as a 'Chinese invader'. For more information see Trần Thị Trương, 'Đền Bà Chúa Kho', p. 18.

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Consequently, in each community the villagers submitting the applications chose to efface their original guardian spirits and put forward local exceptional dead with achievements more in line with what the Ministry would find compelling. Thus, they nominated as prospective guardian spirits the founders of their local artisan traditions, Trần Đức Huệ the blacksmith in Đa Hội and Nguyễn Công Truyền the coppersmith in Đại Bái. After some difficulties in the applications, both villages received recognition, Đại Bái in 1989 and Đa Hội in 1992. In each case, it is clear that the Ministry and the community jointly agreed upon which exceptional dead were most suitable, and through that negotiation the communities were able to reclaim their sacred sites and return to the regular conduct of village festivals.

The importance of identifying and receiving official recognition of local exceptional dead in the process of reasserting local ritual practices and identity can also be seen in the growth of such '*di tích*' in recent years. In 1990, 83 historical sites were recognised by the Ministry of Culture, a figure which rose to 190 by the following year. During a July 1998 interview, a Ministry official stated that there were at that point 2,217 recognised historical sites, as opposed to 464 in 1989.[37] As Phan Khanh makes clear, the Ministry has placed a significant emphasis on *di tích* as spaces that can serve to advance officially accepted ideas. What has also become evident, however, is that many localities actively seek the '*di tích*' designation in order to add further prestige to their festivals. Indeed, the explosion in the number of recognised sites has resulted from localities submitting applications to the Ministry of Culture. A Ministry official commented that for communities the reception of a '*di tích*' designation publicly indicated the prestige of the exceptional dead worshipped, adding another element to local desires to receive the designation.[38] What is clear from these cases is that the agendas of the state and localities have merged on the issue of mutually identifying and recognising exceptional dead, and this has allowed both state and local actors to exercise a measure of control over local ritual spaces and practices.

The realities of festivals and the exceptional dead: Festivals and state legitimation

Since the end of the Cold War and the opening of Vietnamese society and economy to foreign, and particularly capitalist, influences, the socialist regime in Vietnam has faced a legitimation crisis. Although the regime still officially embraces the socialist transformation of Vietnamese society, the tone and nature of revolutionary rhetoric has been scaled back considerably and the regime has needed to look to new methods for building popular support and legitimising its rule. This is a multifaceted process, but one very visible component has been the government's recent embrace of the Hùng Kings Death anniversary ceremony. With its appropriation of this ritual and its associated festival, the government has attempted to ritually link itself with a quintessential set of Vietnamese exceptional dead.

In Vietnamese popular historiography the Hùng Kings constitute the founding dynasty of the Vietnamese nation. Narratives regarding the kings vary, but archaeological evidence indicates that some 4,000 years ago, the region of the foothills

37 Interview with an anonymous Ministry of Culture official. Figures are from Phan Khanh, *Bảo tàng, di tích*, pp. 308 (1990), 328 (1991), 270 (1989).
38 Interview with a Ministry of Culture official.

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adjacent to the western extension of the Red River delta was populated by an array of diverse chiefdoms that later were linked together into a more complex society that became the first identifiable ancestors of the Vietnamese. This socio-political transformation produced the first Vietnamese kingdom, Văn Lang. According to a mythical narrative, at some point prior to the year 2000 BCE, a man named Hùng Vương, or King Hùng, established the Văn Lang kingdom in what is now Phú Thọ province. Hùng Vương was the eldest son of a mythical union between Lạc Long Quân, himself of human-supernatural ancestry, and the fairy Âu Cơ. Văn Lang came to encompass most of contemporary northern Vietnam. Hùng Vương was the first of the 18 Hùng Kings who constituted the Hồng Bàng dynasty. Given that the dynasty is held to have remained in existence for over 1,700 years, it is clear that the number of the Hùng Kings is more figurative than literal.

An alternative narrative, which is articulated by the state, describes Văn Lang's origins in material terms. As the renowned historian Đào Duy Anh wrote of the previous narrative, 'That is a legend that belongs to the time of mistaken history.'[39] The materialist narrative asserts that Văn Lang emerged approximately 4,000 years ago in the same area of northern Vietnam. The region was populated by 15 different tribes, known as the Lạc Việt tribes, that were hierarchically organised and led by chiefs and other elites. A series of material pressures, notably the benefits of cooperative agricultural production and defence, pushed them into the cooperative arrangements that led to the formation of a unified kingdom. The most powerful tribe was the Vãn Lang tribe. Its talented and skilled leader was the driving force behind unification and once unification was achieved, he became Hùng Vương, the first of the Hùng Kings and founder of Văn Lang and the Hồng Bàng dynasty.

These distinct narratives regarding the Hùng Kings, and it should be noted that they are in a sense distillations of the major narratives as similar narratives with slightly different details do exist, are united in their general outlines regarding the male personalities involved as well as the overall structure of the Hùng kingdoms. The primary difference between the two narratives rests in the official narratives effacing, basically without explicit rebuttal or denigration, the supernatural components of the unofficial narrative. Indeed, many people regard the Hùng Kings as exceptional dead, but in reality mythical exceptional dead, which places them in a somewhat ambiguous position regarding the secular ideology of the socialist state. Another important point about the Hùng Kings is that, unlike the glorified exceptional dead with military achievements or who sacrificed their lives for the Vietnamese nation, they were not famous for their martial abilities, though they had success in rallying the population to protect their territory. The kings are remembered not as great military leaders, but instead as skilled leaders and administrators whose policies brought peace, prosperity and unity. A recently published volume, entitled *A brief chronology of Vietnam's history*, provides a fitting example of this image of Văn Lang and the Hùng Kings:

> Văn Lang was the first embryotic (*sic*) State of Vietnam, which was simply organized but could rally the people. The feeling of community attachment developed into community consciousness and solidarity among fellow countrymen. Cognizant of the relationship

39 Đào Duy Anh, *Lịch sử Việt Nam*, p. 35.

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> between nature and human beings, the population also became aware of the strength of community in irrigation work, the exchange of goods and the struggle to defend of (*sic*) the village and the country.[40]

There is a definite logic in this as Vietnam is now a nation at peace and as such there is no great need for military valour. The Hùng Kings provide a historical model for statecraft and the state's role in creating a happy and contented population.

Despite their semi-mythical character, the Vietnamese socialist state never renounced links to the Hùng Kings. In late 1954 Hồ Chí Minh declared at the Hùng Shrine that, 'The Hùng kings made a meritorious contribution in establishing the nation. We must work together to preserve the nation.'[41] In the post-1954 period, as Pelley has argued, a great deal of scholarly labour in socialist Vietnam has been devoted to documenting a continuous series of dynasties and leaders who have ruled over the territory that is now Vietnam for four millennia. The genealogy that was created was designed to demonstrate that 'an unbroken chain of succession linked contemporary generations of Vietnamese to the mythical age of the Hùng kings'.[42] Ultimately, what this effort really constituted was 'a project of political legitimation' in which the socialist state sought to represent itself as the descendent, continuation and culmination of thousands of years of legitimate rule over the Vietnamese nation and its people.[43]

The important change that occurred, however, was in the state's ritual engagement with the Hùng Kings. In 1946 the newly installed revolutionary government organised a commemorative rite in which Vice President Huỳnh Thúc Kháng made incense offerings to the kings and from 1958 onwards the government, with the participation of the Ministry of Culture and the Phú Thọ provincial People's Committee, took official control over organising the Hùng Kings Death Anniversary. Despite the existence of official interest in the festival, the government placed little emphasis on the festival in the post-1958 period. Rites were organised, but they remained for the most part small-scale and were not heavily promoted by the government. During this period, the socialist state did not openly embrace the Hùng King festival as a critical component of its statecraft.

The change in official attitudes toward the Hùng King rituals became unequivocally clear on 26 July 1999 when the Politburo issued a resolution that marked the major holidays of the year 2000, and included on that list was the Hùng Kings Death Anniversary. The government's seriousness about these rites was perhaps even more evident in the resources devoted to it. While for decades the government had encouraged the population to be frugal and avoid wastefulness in ritual practices, the local and national government spent approximately US$1.3 million on renovations at the temple site and for infrastructural improvements. The former provided for repairs to various shrines within the complex while the latter were to alleviate traffic

40 Hà Văn Thư and Trần Hồng Đức, *A brief chronology of Vietnam's history* (Hanoi: Thế Giới, 2000), p. 5.
41 Phan Khanh, *Bảo tàng, di tích*, p. 215.
42 Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, p. 7.
43 Ibid., p.12.

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jams on routes into the festival area. The province also claimed 113 hectares of land around the temple to construct a park named Văn Lang. It will house exhibits that will, according to one newspaper account, 'tell visitors about legends of the country's foundation and the first victories of the Vietnamese people in their struggles with nature to survive'.[44] 113 hectares of land is an enormous quantity, particularly in land-scarce northern Vietnam, just as $1.3 million is a tremendous sum of money for a cash-strapped government.

The socialist state's definitive embrace of the Hùng Kings festival occurred on 14 April 2000. On this day, a group of high-ranking officials from the Communist Party, the national government, the Fatherland Front (a party-led organisation that plays an important role in cultural affairs), and the local province presided over the rites. The chief ritual officiant was Nông Đức Mạnh, the Chairman of the National Assembly. Mạnh had a rather remarkable role in the ceremony. Most likely for the first time ever in socialist Vietnam's history, the leader of the National Assembly officially performed a purification rite to begin a ceremony dedicated to a supernatural entity. The other officials then did the same. That an official should play a role in such a ceremony was not entirely surprising as in the 1990s commune level officials became important participants in such village level ritual practices as communal house festivals, but Mạnh's ritual role was a definite departure. In subsequent years the organisation of the festival has grown ever grander and other high-ranking officials have continued to participate. The festival has also proven popular with everyday Vietnamese people. In 2000 the festival's management board reckoned that they had received an average of 50,000 visitors a day, with an anticipated total of 800,000 guests for the entire festival schedule.[45] Later years have seen those numbers exceed one million visitors.

In 2000 an official commented in a newspaper article that the objective the official expansion of the Hùng King festival was to 'remind the people of the merits of the Hùng Kings'.[46] Such a statement is true, as it is equally true that the government has embraced the festival as part of its effort to present itself as the legitimate successor to the exceptional Hùng Kings and thereby increase its legitimacy. Three other points also stand out. First, as mentioned, the socialist state never renounced the Hùng Kings. They were regarded as exceptional dead, but their lack of military achievement and legendary/mythical status placed them in a somewhat peripheral position *vis-à-vis* the types of exceptional dead that had been given such prominence during war and revolution. Second, although the state allowed for the Hùng King festival to continue, it did not aggressively promote its organisation nor did it attempt to insert high-ranking government officials into the ceremonies. Finally, although it did tolerate the organisation of the rites, the spaces in which the rites were performed were not symbolically emphasised as critical loci for the public display of state power and authority. The recent embrace of the rites by the contemporary state therefore represents a re-invigoration of earlier practices, albeit with a number of important modifications in structure, personnel and ultimate goals. In them, the exceptional dead are publicly appropriated by the state to place it within a genealogy of legitimate

44 Article on National worship festival, *An ninh Thủ đô*, 11 Apr. 2000.
45 Article on National worship festival, *Nhân dân*, 14 Apr. 2000.
46 Article on National worship festival, *An Ninh Thủ Đô*, 11 Apr. 2000.

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Vietnamese rulers. The 2005 designation of the Hùng Kings festival as a national festival by the Prime Minister Phan Văn Khai demonstrates the government's commitment to strengthening that link.

The realities of festivals and the exceptional dead: Popular religion and other exceptional dead

In his monograph *Goddess on the rise: Pilgrimage and popular religion in Vietnam*, Philip Taylor comments on an interesting paradox in Vietnamese popular religion. Although the popular religious landscape is filled with sacred structures in which the living can engage a multiplicity of exceptional dead – such as shrines, temples, communal houses, mausolea and other sites – significant differences exist in the numbers of people who visit the sites and the way in which they engage the exceptional dead therein. At one level, the quintessential exceptional dead are what Taylor describes as the 'warrior-scholar-official spirits'.[47] These are individuals, usually male, with great scholarly, military, diplomatic or other achievements that have made them worthy of acclaim and remembrance. Counted among these individuals in southern Vietnam were such luminaries as the anticolonial fighters Nguyễn Trung Trực (1837–68) and Trương Định (1820–64), Marshal Nguyễn Huỳnh Đức, and former Viceroy Lê Văn Duyệt. Historically, cults devoted to these individuals have been established and the sacred sites devoted to them have been the focus of festivals and other important rituals. From the state's perspective, many of these warrior-scholar-officials embody the exact virtues advanced by the state and the renown of many derives from their dedication to the Vietnamese nation and official virtues.

Despite the exemplary qualities displayed by these dead, Taylor observed that their achievements actually constituted a constraint upon the ways in which people engaged them. As he noted, these exceptional dead were to be 'respected' (*kính trọng*) and the people's debt to them remembered (*nhớ ơn*), but it was inappropriate to 'worship' (*thờ*) them.[48] As a result, while rituals were performed at their sacred sites, they tended to be more limited in scale and did not attract large groups of followers. These constraints also constituted an impediment to the roles they played in people's lives. The requirement to respect them created a definite distance between these dead and the living as the living were less likely to call upon them to assist them with the everyday vicissitudes of their lives. They could constitute a model of virtue, but they were not dead to which people regularly turned for help.

In contrast to the warrior-scholar-official spirits, Taylor described a different category of exceptional dead, the spirits of individuals regarded as 'responsive' (*linh ứng*) to requests from the living. In popular religious life, many Vietnamese engage spirits in order to request assistance in dealing with problems in their lives, such as illness, family troubles, or financial difficulties. Some of these spirits are engaged in spirit medium ceremonies in which the participating spirits are consulted regarding the causes and solutions to the difficulties,[49] while another group is composed of spirits

47 Taylor, *Goddess on the rise*, pp. 193–222 (quotation from p. 194). Note that Taylor does not use the expression 'exceptional dead'.
48 Ibid., p. 205.

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with whom the living engage in transactional relationships in which the living provide a variety of offerings in exchange for the spirits' assistance. As Taylor describes, the dead who have earned reputations for responsiveness tend to have been people who were in some way socially marginal. Although there are exceptions, such as the famous general Trần Hưng Đạo, many of the spirits in this group were women, people from Vietnam's periphery, people who had been victimised, and individuals who died socially undesirable deaths, such as dying young or violently.

It is important to note that many of the individuals in this category had performed actions that were officially virtuous, such as the Goddess of the Treasury (*Bà Chúa Kho*) in northern Vietnam who skilfully managed an official granary or the Lady of the Realm (*Bà Chúa Xứ*) in the south who helped protect Vietnam from foreign incursions, but their actions were not of the same calibre as those of the warrior-scholar-officials and were not the primary basis for their renown. Instead, after their deaths, these spirits became foci of cultic activities and developed reputations as being spirits that were responsive to requests by the living. Over the past decade, the festivals dedicated to these and other spirits have attracted tens of thousands of visitors from across Vietnam, many of whom make significant expenditures for their ritual offerings. This is particularly true of the shrine dedicated to the Goddess of the Treasury in Bắc Ninh province in the north and that of the Lady of the Realm in Châu Đốc near the Vietnamese border with Cambodia. The latter's shrine receives over one million visitors annually, tens of thousands of which come for her annual festival in the fourth lunar month.[50]

Taylor's descriptions of the activities at the shrine of the Lady of the Realm capture the chaotic nature of festivals for these types of spirits. Swelling with visitors, thousands come to participate in the rituals as well as take in the general atmosphere. Thousands more crowd into the sacred structures in an attempt to secure access to the most sacred spaces to make their offerings and requests. Visitors to the Goddess of the Treasury shrine in the north can attest to the similar character of activities there in the first and 12th lunar months. Despite this chaos, Taylor notes that the entire affair takes place under the guidance of local officials, thus while the activities are a marked innovation compared to the 1980s, access to the exceptional Goddess is still under the official gaze. Nevertheless, despite this official presence, which does have a demonstrable effect upon the overall structure of the festival, Taylor's analysis demonstrates the pronounced individuality of the participants' encounters with the Goddess. Supplicants engage the Goddess as individuals with unique requests for or obligations to her. In this circumstance, the engagement is not merely to show her respect, but to worship her as well. This shared act of worship, which participants conduct as distinct individuals and not as a unified group, unites the participants into a community of worshippers of the Goddess. But, this community is defined as neither a revolutionary nor a national community.

For many of the participants in these rites, though particularly Hồ Chí Minh City-based women engaged in commerce, it is clear that the Goddess plays a tremendous

49 Barley Norton, 'Music and possession in Vietnam' (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1999).
50 Taylor, *Goddess on the rise*, p. 3.

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role in their lives. Indeed, what stands out about her and others in this category of exceptional dead is that their cults are much more dynamic than those of the warrior-scholar-official spirits and also that people engage them on a much more personal level. As Taylor describes, the Goddess' perceived responsiveness and assistance provides an important source of comfort and security when confronting the indeterminacies these women face as participants in an unpredictable market environment. Life, for these women, is a seemingly never-ending series of challenges and problems to solve and the Goddess helps the women confront them. Perhaps more significantly, the Goddess also constitutes a moral guide for these women. Local conceptions portray the Goddess as a strict enforcer of moral codes. This pertains to the expectation that anyone who enters into an arrangement with her will properly fulfil that obligation or be severely punished, though it more generally applies to all realms of personal life. The Goddess' followers are expected to live morally upright lives or she will sanction them. As one woman commented, 'She wants people to be good. She gives good people help in earning a living, raising children, and curing diseases. But she has killed people for not respecting their parents, for gambling, drinking, and other bad behaviour.'[51]

As with the exceptional dead discussed in the previous sections, spirits such as that of the Lady of the Realm have risen to social prominence in the last decade as Vietnamese society has transformed and the Vietnamese government has relaxed its control over social life. Moreover, the spaces in which these dead are ritually engaged have been reclaimed as sacred sites and large-scale and largely unfettered ritual engagements with these dead now take place. What stands out about the Lady of the Realm, as well as such other exceptional spirits as Trần Hưng Đạo examined by Phạm Quỳnh Phương, is that in a significant way they have assumed the type of role in people's lives that the state had intended for its exceptional dead.[52] People profoundly identify with these exceptional dead and they provide a powerful guide for them in their everyday lives.

The limits on access to the exceptional dead

The preceding sections illustrated the current willingness of the socialist state to allow for the re-emergence of an active festival life across Vietnam. Festivals are now regarded as culturally valuable events that allow the Vietnamese people to retain important cultural practices and traditions, although they are certainly modified compared to their pre-revolutionary antecedents. Despite the seeming openness of the state toward festivals, it is important to note that significant limits regarding what the state will tolerate remain. The still-enforced 1994 'Regulations on Festivals' state clearly in Section 2, 'Strictly prohibit the use of festivals to organise activities that have a reactionary, depraved or superstitious content or are contrary to the positive, healthy customs of the people.'[53] Restrictions of this nature have prevented the emergence of a variety of different festivals or other organised ritual activities that engage ideas the state does not endorse.

51 Ibid., p. 133.
52 Phạm Quỳnh Phương, 'Hero and deity'.
53 Bộ Văn hoá Thông tin, *Quy chế lễ hội*, p. 3.

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The simplest manifestation of this tendency has been the prevention of the performance of public rites dedicated to former ARVN soldiers. Prior to the North's victory over the South in 1975, southern Vietnam had a variety of war memorials and military cemeteries dedicated to those who fought for the South. During the war, over 220,000 ARVN soldiers were killed in action. After the North's victory, all ARVN war memorials were removed and in some cases ARVN cemeteries were dismantled as well. Although families are allowed to erect gravestones that indicate that a family member died fighting for the ARVN, no memorials can be erected nor is it possible for any sorts of organised rites to be conducted for ARVN war dead. For the socialist government's perspective, these fallen soldiers are not worthy of the acclaim accorded to the revolutionary martyrs.

A second type of festival restriction involves religious groups in conflict with the government. At present, several groups, notably evangelical Christian groups in the mountainous highlands and the Hòa Hảo Buddhist group in the Mekong Delta, have contentious relations with the government and in some cases church leaders are imprisoned. These groups are forbidden to organise or have significant limitations placed on their festivals. The Hòa Hảo case is particularly interesting. Hòa Hảo is a reformed Buddhist millenarian movement that was started in An Giang province in 1939 by Huỳnh Phú Sổ, a man followers regard as a prophet. The Hòa Hảo were anti-Communist and after 1975 they had their religious activities severely curtailed, in particular activities devoted to Huỳnh. In 1999 a major controversy erupted in An Giang when a policeman stepped on his portrait in front of Hòa Hảo worshippers. In recent years the government has begun to allow for the open celebration of the Founder's Day on 18 May, but the organisation is controlled by local officials and also has a large police presence that, in some cases, has kept celebrations small. The 2003 prosecution of a Hòa Hảo follower for commemorating Huỳnh Phú Sổ's disappearance indicates the limits on Hòa Hảo engagements with their exceptional dead.[54]

One final and intriguing context in which the socialist state has implemented restrictions on the interaction with the exceptional dead is the case of Hồ Chí Minh. At one level, Hồ represents the quintessence of state ideas regarding the exceptional dead. Not only are his words ubiquitous in social life, so are paintings, photographs, and busts of Hồ readily visible throughout Vietnam. The socialist state has also constructed a pilgrimage site for Hồ in the form of his mausoleum in central Hanoi. On most days in the early morning visitors can enter into a procession and file past his body as it lies in state inside the mausoleum. Visitors come from across Vietnam, often in organised groups, to visit the mausoleum and for many it is a powerful experience. Despite the state's encouragement of these types of ritualised encounters with Hồ, they have prohibited the formation of any cults associated with him as well as the creation of a particular festival dedicated to him. In the 1990s a number of cultic activities emerged associated with Hồ, but the state moved quickly to stop these practices.[55] The detailed

54 Shaun Kingsley Malarney, 'Return to the past? The dynamics of contemporary religious and ritual transformation', in *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a transforming society*, ed. Hy Van Luong (Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), pp. 225–56.

55 Malarney, *Culture, ritual and revolution*, pp. 189–207; Seth Mydans, 'Vietnam, a convert pursues capitalism devoutly', *New York Times*, 5 Apr. 1996, sec. A, p. 4.

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research of Phạm Quỳnh Phương has demonstrated that many Vietnamese citizens perform rites to Hồ Chí Minh, but the change of that to an unsanctioned festival is still unacceptable.[56] All of these cases represented individuals regarded in some quarters of Vietnamese society as exceptional dead, yet, unlike those dead openly celebrated in officially accepted festivals, the state maintains restrictions on their public celebration.

Conclusion: The exceptional dead in contemporary Vietnam

One phrase that has regularly featured in Vietnamese political discourse since the mid-1990s is 'when drinking water, remember the source' (*uống nước, nhớ nguồn*). The adage is actually an old popular expression, but its meaning, that one should remember one's predecessors whose efforts and sacrifices made the present possible, fits well with the Vietnamese state's continued emphasis on the exceptional dead in social life. What I have attempted to demonstrate in this article is that, although the socialist state has maintained an emphasis on the exceptional dead and the ritual engagement with them, this broader continuity conceals significant changes. The most obvious change has been the state's embrace of large-scale festivals as an acceptable venue for engaging the exceptional dead. In the period from the 1950s through the early 1990s, the state tolerated some festivals, but it did not actively attempt to organise large-scale festivals in which ritual engagements with the exceptional dead were a part of regular statecraft. Instead, most engagements occurred on the local level with only local level officials. The official welcoming of large-scale festivals represents a significant popular achievement, particularly from the perspective of people reasserting control over formerly restricted sacred spaces, though it is mistaken to conclude that it represents a complete relaxation of official control as some festivals remain banned and those that are performed are under some measure of official scrutiny. The transformation in official attitudes toward ritual indicates that the socialist state still employs ritual in its legitimation process, but that those rituals continue to change as Vietnamese society changes.

The re-emergence of large-scale festivals and other related ritual changes also illustrate the changes in which exceptional dead are given prominence in social life. In the period from the 1950s through the late 1980s, the state attempted to strictly control ritual engagements with the exceptional dead. Those exceptional dead that the state endorsed, which were primarily though not exclusively those with military or revolutionary achievements, were publicly celebrated in a wide variety of rituals, while those that the state was either ambivalent about or opposed to had their rituals restricted or banned. In the present context, this category of revolutionary exceptional dead has been to some extent displaced and the state has allowed the population to openly ritually engage a much wider group of exceptional dead, some of whom are even potentially mythical in character. This change indicates that in contemporary ritual practices, a broader set of sources for exceptionalism is receiving public acknowledgement, though as was shown in the communal house rituals examined by Endres, the exceptional character of particular dead was to some extent already recognised before the early 1990s and then the identities of which exceptional dead are

56 Phạm Quỳnh Phương, 'Hero and deity'.

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ritually celebrated is still influenced by state organs, notably the Ministry of Culture. As the historical evidence shows, these changes have resulted from a combination of popular pressures and official responses and initiatives. Nevertheless, it is clear that private citizens and groups now play a prominent role in publicly asserting and defining what sort of individuals belong in the category of exceptional dead.

Another significant transformation is the Vietnamese state's overall embrace of this broader group of exceptional dead. The contemporary Vietnamese state, though it still retains a good deal of its revolutionary rhetoric, in practice no longer exclusively defines itself as a revolutionary community. During the years of the greatest revolutionary activity, the state acknowledged though in many ways played down its links to the pre-revolutionary historical past and instead emphasised those participating in contemporary activities and the future community that was being created through revolutionary practice. This decoupling was particularly true of its approach to extant ritual activities, many of which were described as feudal, backwards, or wasteful, and therefore unworthy of organisation. As this emphasis has faded, the state has attempted to re-integrate itself with the pre-revolutionary past and this has allowed for formerly effaced dead to return to prominence in social and ritual life as officially accepted, though in some cases not exactly endorsed, exceptional dead. Although some of this has been through what can perhaps be described as private initiatives, such as the cases discussed by Endres and Taylor, the state has also been involved, notably through its appropriation of the Hùng Kings death anniversary ceremony. This ceremony in particular demonstrates that state officials recognise that in the contemporary environment the state needs to re-adjust its emphasis upon which exceptional dead to publicly associate with. It will still ritually engage the exceptional dead as part of its legitimation process, but by changing the dead involved, the state is making different claims regarding the sources of its legitimacy and links to the pre-revolutionary past. Phạm Quỳnh Phương's research on the re-orientation of the state's attitudes toward Trần Hưng Đạo demonstrates that this agenda extends to other pre-revolutionary exceptional dead as well.[57]

The final conclusion that emerges from an analysis of the exceptional dead in contemporary Vietnam is that the ritual engagement with them in festivals is an important part of social life. Be it as a moral guide, an example of virtue or a source of personal comfort, political legitimation or communal pride, a wide variety of Vietnamese actors expend their time and resources ritually engaging the exceptional dead in a wide variety of festivals. Stated simply, the exceptional dead matter in contemporary Vietnamese social life and different actors turn to and engage them as they seek to orient and anchor themselves in a dynamic world. Indeed, what stands out in the analysis is that in a very dynamic social world, the engagement with the exceptional dead in festivals is a common method used by many actors to deal with that ever-changing social world. Nevertheless, the identities of and ways in which actors engage the exceptional dead in festivals continues to change and will undoubtedly continue to do so as Vietnamese society itself continues to transform.

57 Ibid.

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