A world cannot be fictional in itself, but depends on whether one believes in it or not; the difference between reality and fiction is not objective, it is not about the thing itself, but it is within us, whether we subjectively see it as a fiction or not. The object is never unbelievable in itself and its distance from reality cannot shock us because we do not even notice it, all truths being analogical…. How could people believe in all of these legends, and did they really believe them? The question is not subjective: the modalities of belief stem from modes of possessing truth; there have been many programs of truth throughout the centuries, with different distributions of knowledge, and these programs explain the subjective degrees of intensity of belief, bad faith, and contradictions within a single individual.

Paul Veyne

In August 1956, South Vietnam made it a crime to be a communist. In the North, DRV leaders were carefully re-opening the debate on how to reappropriate their historical patrimony. While Western historians often point to the 1956 Hundred Flowers Movement in China as a great influence in the DRV’s identity construction, these historiographical debates were an even more radical shift. North Vietnam gradually (and discreetly) re-established a generational parentage that distanced itself from Beijing. The reclassification of illustrious ancestors for the sake of the nation — not just of class, as China wished — helped the DRV develop a new geography of patriotic rituals throughout the country. The veneration

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Figure 21. Map of the provinces
of “new heroes” helped strengthen the DRV’s power at the village level. In the early 1960s, the State’s forced march toward socialism was already faltering in some provinces. Some nervous cadres worried that these measures might divide the people in the push for patriotic mobilisation. In 1959, the guerrilla war against the South was being organised in Hanoi; in January, the fifteenth plenary session of the VWP began preparing resistance operations. With the war imminent, both the government and Party’s top priority was to mobilise the population. The new hero’s second career was about to begin.

Questioning National Heritage

On the eve of his army’s return to Hanoi on 18 September 1954, Hồ Chí Minh assembled the soldiers from Division 308 of the PAVN in a temple dedicated to the Hùng kings not far from the capital. Under the auspices of these mythical ancestors, the president reminded his men: “The need to liberate, rebuild, and defend our country is still very strong and very important. The Hùng kings did great things for our country, but we have the same duty to protect our country together.” The Hùng kings, like the Trưng sisters (?–43), Mai Thúc Loan [Mai Hắc Đệ] (?–722), Ngô Quyền (896–944), Lý Thái Tổ (1010–1028), Lý Thường Kiệt (1030–1105), Trần Hưng Đạo (1228–1300), Lê Lợi (1384–1433), Nguyễn Trãi (1380–1442), Nguyễn Huệ (1752–1792), and Phan Đình Phùng (1847–1895) were the glorious ancestors of the Vietnamese fatherland, a nation which had just defeated France in the muddy stronghold of Điện Biên Phủ in May 1954. With the return of peace, government ideologues reoriented official historiography toward the eternal principle of Vietnam’s “tradition of resistance against the foreign aggressor”. In the spring of 1955, the historian Trần Huy Liệu (1901–1969) wrote in the history journal Văn Sứ Địa that historians had been told to valorise “the fighting spirit of the Vietnamese people in order to protect the nation’s independence and peace”. The previous


4 Trần Huy Liệu. “Tinh thần đấu đế bảo vệ v hòa bình của dân tộc Việt Nam” (The spirit of the struggle to defend and bring peace to the Vietnamese people), Văn Sứ Địa, no. 6, March–April 1955: 1–8. See also Phạm Văn Đông. Our Struggle is in the Past and at Present, Hanoi: FLPH, 1955.
year, Hồ Chí Minh had strongly opposed a campaign to destroy the historical sites and monuments in Nghệ An during a visit by the agrarian reform teams. The DRV was not to erase its past. For centuries, Vietnam had turned to its glorious past to combat the cultural, political, and military weight of its Chinese neighbour; they had no intention of changing this tactic. Maoist China was still a delicate subject for the DRV, following the strategic disagreement between Võ Nguyên Giáp and his Chinese adviser, General Wei Guoqing, after the battle of Diên Biên Phủ. And in the spring of 1954, the DRV had very delicately negotiated with Beijing for the departure of several detachments of the Chinese Communist army stationed on the Vietnamese side of the border, from Hải Ninh province to the rich coal mines of Hồng Gai. Evidently, relations between China and Vietnam was already showing signs of strain well before the Sino-Soviet rupture of 1959.

In his speech at Tuyên Quang in May 1952, Trường Chinh had already stressed Vietnam’s deep commitment to its own national values before the Chinese advisors present. DRV leaders gave assurances to their new allies but without much conviction. In December 1953, the Central Committee of the Party formed a “committee for literature, history, and geographical research” to reinforce the continuity of Vietnamese history over the universality and historical discontinuity desired by Maoist ideologues. Leaders in Hanoi discussed and interpreted Chinese texts, while the intelligentsia spoke of this “new history with the age-old quest for unity and independence”. This new historiographical trend reinforced the

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6 CAOM, Coll. HCI, file no. 245/718, document no. 11162, 27 December 1951.


9 In 1954, the journal Văn Sứ Địa published an article by the Chinese theorist Tiền Ba Tấn entitled, “Một vài vấn đề trong việc bình luận nhân vật lịch sử” (Some problems in evaluating historic figures) (Văn Sứ Địa, no. 3, 1954: 58–70). It was re-issued in 1961 by the journal Nghiên cứu Lịch sử in a slightly modified version as “Một vài vấn đề trong việc đánh giá nhân vật lịch sử” (Nghiên cứu Lịch sử, no. 25, April 1961: 34–40.). In 1962 the Ministry of Culture also published the essay by the Chinese writers Trần Hoàng Mới and Lâm Sam on the construction of the new man in the arts (Sáng tạo con người mới trong điện ảnh, 1962).
myth of the “great Vietnamese family, united and indivisible”. In 1958, a National Committee for the History of the Party was established along with branches on the local level, completing the framework. Intellectuals were asked to write local chronicles (at the provincial, district, and commune levels) linking the fate of the local to that of the nation. The committee wanted to show that the communist movement had spread spontaneously in all provinces since the 1930s, and that throughout the nation, local Party cadres and young heroic figures inspired by its ideals played a key role in the resistance against the French at the local level. The young age of the heroic figures reinforced the virtue of the Party’s ideology. In 1961, Nguyễn Lam wrote in the journal Học tập (Studies): “The only examples for our youth are the [new] heroes Lý Tự Trọng, Hoàng Tôn, Võ Thị Sáu, Trần Văn Ơn, Bế Văn Dân, Phan Đình Giót, Cù Chinh Lan and Mạc Thị Buội.”

But even the presence of these worthy individuals could not adequately address the increasing identity crisis caused by the partition of Vietnam in 1954. To gain the support of the 50,000 Party members scattered throughout the South, they had to put more emphasis on the sacrifice of these young heroes and encourage them to join “the progressive forces that had taken refuge in the North”. The cult of heroic ancestors was an important part of the mobilisation of minds in the South, where people were less receptive to internationalist rhetoric. All Vietnamese, from the North to the South, from the plains to the remote mountainous areas, or even those living abroad, believed in the same founding myths.

In the inter-war years, “the history of resistance and/or the resistance of history” was key in the establishment of power in North Vietnam. A reinterpretation of national symbols did not necessarily mean a return to the nation’s essence. Historians were reinterpreting the heroism of national figures within the context of a universal and collectivist approach that was “faithful to the principles of Marxism-Leninism”. A key text by the
Chinese ideologue Chen Boda\textsuperscript{12} (translated by Vân Tạo) served as theoretical cover for the campaign to reinstate figures from their national heritage. Writing about China, Chen harshly criticised historians and ideologues who continued to judge “the personalities of yesterday with today’s eyes”.\textsuperscript{13} The Vietnamese advocated a re-evaluation of past heroes using the historical conditions of their time. But could a progressivist society venerate a landowning hero from the feudal era in the same way as an internationalist one? Intellectuals of the DRV answered this question without hesitation: “Yes, because both helped to protect the country and that is objectively of higher importance.” How did Maoist ideologues react to the nationalism of the DRV’s new historiography? For the Chinese, according to Chen Boda, “the spirit is the same, but the model is different.” Vietnam’s relationship to the past did not exclude loyalty to the essence of the Chinese culture and race:

Should we now study the example of Yue Fei and Zheng Chenggong? Of course. Yes, because in these men’s work we find an old Chinese cultural tradition. But our time is no longer that of Yue Fei or Zheng Chenggong; the political conduct, actions, and creations that we demand of our writers today are not those of the time of Yue Fei, and the spirit of resistance is no longer that of Zheng Chenggong’s time. Everything the writer of today needs to study can be found among the workers-farmers-soldiers because they possess an exemplary good political conduct and spirit of resistance.\textsuperscript{14}

In Asia, the feudal hero was granted a reprieve due to his participation in the nation’s glorious past. In China, however, his exemplary character did not give him the right to be a model for society.

The historical hero was portrayed as the essence of a people or a race, but Maoists believed that Marxism-Leninism, while not denying a particular historical patrimony, implied a rupture. This approach was not as

\textsuperscript{12} Chen Boda (1904–1989) was an intellectual from the Chinese Communist Party, private secretary to Mao Zedong during the campaign of rectification in the early 1940s, and member of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the CCP. He played a key role during the first years of the revolution but was later accused of leftism and lost his position in 1969.

\textsuperscript{13} Nguyễn Đông Chỉ, “Ý nghĩa truyện Chủ Đồng Tử” (The meaning of the story of Chủ Đồng Tử), Văn Sứ Đạ, May 1956: 53.

\textsuperscript{14} Tiến Bá Tân, “Một vài vấn đề trong việc bình luận nhân vật lịch sử” (Some problems in evaluating historic figures), Văn Sứ Đạ, no. 3, 1954: 68.
easily accepted in Vietnam, where “the new heroes are direct descendants of ancient figures, as they too transmit the glorious spirit of our people. We cherish today’s heroes as a way of paying respect to the great figures of the past.”¹⁵ The position taken here by Trần Huy Liệu, the most influential North Vietnamese historian and ideologue of the new historiographical approach, differed from that of Chen Boda. According to the latter, the break with the past was the result of a “superiority of the social logic of the toiling masses”. Trần Huy Liệu would never go that far. When he wondered, in October 1955, how the Vietnam of the 1950s could use the heroic example of Trần Quốc Tuấn (thirteenth century), Liệu chose historic analogy rather than the logic of rupture. Trần Quốc Tuấn was a profoundly Vietnamese figure, he wrote, which gave the DRV the certainty “to free itself from the yoke of American imperialism, from enemies and present dangers in order to achieve the reunification of the country”.¹⁶ The reinterpretation of the Trưng sisters’ revolt by the historian Nguyễn Minh in February 1955 reaffirmed the independence of this Vietnamese approach from the principles of Chen Boda. He first denied any Chinese involvement in the rebellion, then wrote that:

The revolt of the Trưng sisters ultimately teaches us many lessons for the patriotic struggle of today. In other words, history tells us clearly that we want to liberate our country and we want to strengthen society in order to provide the means to fight against invaders. Remembering the actions of our two popular heroines, Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị, strengthens our genuine patriotism and spirit of internationalism.¹⁷

In the 1950s in North Vietnam, intellectuals agreed to follow the approach of Chen Boda in which a historical figure was judged according to an anachronic ideological grid (class origin), but they refused to adopt the Maoist principle of a hierarchy of the heroic figures of the past and the new proletarian or peasant hero of today. The hero kept his place as intercessor between the people and the State; he was the regime’s spokesman for “celestial legitimacy”. His reinterpretation facilitated a dynastic change. Rather than representing the popular masses, the Vietnamese hero was

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¹⁵ Trần Huy Liệu. “Vai trò lịch sử của Trần Quốc Tuấn” (Trần Quốc Tuấn’s role in history), Văn Sử Địa, no. 10, September 1955: 16.
¹⁶ Ibid., p. 17.
¹⁷ Nguyễn Minh. “Ôn lại khởi nghĩa của Hai Bà Trưng” (Remember the uprising of the Trưng sisters), Văn Sử Địa, February 1955: 50.
positioned as their teacher. The rupture desired by the new internationalist framework was diverted in favour of a cultural logic. The re-evaluation of the historical figure helped displace the heroes of Tuyên Quang in favour of those issued from a long historical tradition.

The Patriotic Calendar

Creating new patriotic holidays was an important step for the DRV in reclaiming its patriotic imaginary. Propaganda and the mobilisation of the masses also made it an urgent matter. A cult of the nation was established throughout the country via ceremonies dedicated to a united and common past. The DRV had entered a new era, however, and the imprint of internationalism was impossible to ignore. A fifteenth-century uprising lent the government a valuable source of legitimacy for launching socialism across the country. Similarly, commemorating the thirteenth-century hero Trần Quốc Tuấn became a way for leaders to warn people against the dangers posed by the Southern regime to territorial unity:

Trần Quốc Tuấn is no longer with us, but his name lives on. The generation of Lê Lợi and Nguyễn Trãi in the fifteenth century, of Nguyễn Huệ in the eighteenth century, and of Hồ Chí Minh today continue the glorious deeds of Trần Quốc Tuấn. On this day in remembrance of Trần Quốc Tuấn, as the people of our nation prepare to fight for the reunification of the fatherland, they raise their eyes from the map of the country and wonder why we don’t follow the footsteps of Trần Thiềm Bình and Lê Chiêu Thống to liberate the South, which is being oppressed by American imperialism and the clique of Ngô Đình Diệm.18

The new patriotic calendar was supposed to promote the continuity of the DRV’s historical patrimony. Following the Geneva Accords of 1954, the government established three types of holidays: for the nation’s history, for historic and patriotic national heroes, and for the holidays of brother nations. The dates were listed in order of importance. There were initially four days of remembrance “of the first order”: 1 May (International Workers’ Day), 19 August (the anniversary of the August Revolution of 1945), 2 September (National Independence Day), and 22 December (the founding of the PAVN in 1944). There were eight holidays “of the second

order”: 3 March (founding of the VWP, 1951), 7 May (victory of Điện Biên Phủ, 1954), 20 July (Geneva Agreement, 1954), 27 July (Day of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans), 23 September (the Nam Bộ revolt, 1945), 23 November (the Nam Kỳ uprising, 1940), and 19 December (beginning of the Resistance, 1946). The Ministry of Culture added a few days dedicated to the great figures of the “defence against foreign aggressors” but did not, however, grant them the status of second order. They organised the anniversary of Quang Trung’s victory at Đố Trang (1789) on 12 February, the memory of Đề Thám (a.k.a. Hoàng Hoa Thám, 1913) on 10 February, the Trưng sisters on 14 March, the Hùng kings on 17 April, Ngô Quyền on 17 September, Trần Quốc Tuấn on 22 October, Lê Lợi on 24 October, Phan Đình Phùng (1894) on 26 October, and Nguyễn Tri Phương (1873) on 20 November.

The DRV then decided to add some more contemporary figures who were directly tied to the history of the Indochinese Communist Party. From then on, every 24 May the country would commemorate the memory of Hoàng Văn Thụ (1906–1944), the resistant fighter from Lạng Sơn, and 5 September was dedicated to Trần Phú (1904–1931), first secretary of the ICP. Unlike the holidays for historical heroes, the latter came directly under the propaganda section of the VWP, not the Ministry of Culture. Assigning responsibility for these various holidays was an important matter. In 1957, a Ministry directive decided who was to be in charge. The VWP was assigned its own commemoration (initially 3 March, then 3 February) and holidays in honour of Karl Marx (5 May), Hoàng Văn Thụ, and Trần Phú. The government was responsible for Labour Day (1 May), the anniversary of the August Revolution (19 August), and Independence Day (2 September); the Fatherland Front for the anniversary of the start of the anti-French resistance (19 December), as well as the revolts of Nam Bộ and Nam Kỳ; the Department of Defence took over the commemoration of the Geneva Accords and the anniversary of the founding of the PAVN (22 December); the Committee for Scientific Studies took on the celebrations of Hoàng Hoa Thám and Phan Đình Phùng; ceremonies conducted in the memory of all historical figures (Lê Lợi, Hai Bà Trưng, and Trần Hưng Đạo) were entrusted to the Ministry of Culture; and finally, the Vietnamese Committee for World Peace was put in charge of days honouring foreign dignitaries.

Established right after the end of the war, the new patriotic calendar reunified the national imaginary by linking the major stages of the nation’s historical heritage. According to the historian John Kleinen, this juxtaposition allowed the Marxist government to “reinvent a tradition for its own
The reinterpretation of the role and nature of the nation’s ancestors announced a reappropriation by the new regime of its historical heritage. With the return of peace, the government enacted legislation that banned the sale of antiquities without government authorisation and encouraged the protection of national heritage: “Our patrimony belongs to the people. It is vital that we protect these monuments for science, society, history and the culture of the nation.” Provincial committees were endowed with departments of cultural affairs, responsible for the registration of all historical relics in the country. The Franco-Vietminh war had provided the framework for a new local politics of commemoration.

In January 1956, the new cultural department of Lang Son province conducted a survey of the area and added a series of propositions for new memorials from its “new history”. Local cadres suggested that they erect a statue of the revolutionary Hoàng Văn Thụ in the centre of Lang Sơn prefecture. Thụ was important because he was a local man who had fought to defend his land; the fact that he was a Party member and fought for his country was of secondary importance. The VWP played upon these intersecting imaginaries in order to better control them. Despite the many demands coming in from the provinces, the central government preferred not to get involved. Vietnamese communist leaders had, after all, chosen the path of socialism along with their brother nations, so had to adhere to a particular binary reading of history. By 1960, the rupture between Moscow and Beijing was complete. The DRV took advantage of China’s unstable domestic political situation to accelerate its subtle ideological emancipation from the PRC. Throughout Vietnam’s history, periods of reform had always come about in times of weakness of the tutelary power. The DRV carried out a delicate balancing act between the two great socialist powers while cautiously reintegrating a nationalist strain at the heart of its discourse.

As the war approached, educating and training the masses became a top priority. By placing themselves at the head of a glorious genealogy, North Vietnamese leaders were better able to discuss foreign concepts with peasants unused to ideas from abroad. They waited until April 1963, however, to finally endorse the policy that they had been secretly pursuing for years: the government formally took control of the historical patrimony of

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20 AVN3, BVH, file no. 959, document no. 165 VH/VD, 2 February 1960.
a unified Vietnam in the name of the VWP. They drew up a list of figures who could be used in new street names, squares, parks, towns, and villages throughout the country. Public figures from the past and the present, as endorsed by the Party and the State, were now on equal footing. The directive recommended removing the names of “colonialists, imperialists, traitors to the nation of Vietnam, representatives of the exploiting class, and mandarins” and replacing them with those of Party leaders, revolutionary martyrs, and reformist heroes. Provinces were given lists of suitable names and events generated jointly by the Departments of the Interior and Culture along with the Historical Institute. If any events directly linked to the local heritage of the province were missing, provincial authorities had to immediately inform the central government to look into the missing information. Cadres had to utilise local figures while also including a balanced representation from Southerners, ethnic minorities, and women. At the communal, district, and provincial levels, lists were prepared by local cadres who were asked to explain “in simple terms” the central government’s reasons behind their choices. In 1963, historical continuity was achieved between the 45 “historic” figures (from Bà Triệu to Lý Thường Kiệt, Phạm Hồng Thái, and Nguyễn Thái Học) and the small band of heroes plucked from the progressivist or communist resistance (Trần Phú, Lý Tự Trọng, Kim Đồng, and Mạc Thị Bưởi, for example). In some cases, the Ministry of the Interior authorised a name change in honour of new heroes, sometimes while they were still alive. There was a fusion between the ruling power and geographical space. Place names such as Quốc Trị (hero, 1952), Trưởng Chinh (Deputy Prime Minister), and Quốc Việt (Attorney General of the DRV), and neighbourhoods such as La Văn Câu (hero, 1952) and Nguyễn Thị Chien (hero, 1952) sprang up throughout the nation. In the early 1960s, however, the movement only affected a limited number of communes, but it confirmed the villagers’ belief in the protective power of a heroic spirit. In the past, Vietnamese peasants worshipped a god of the earth who brought good fortune to the whole community. Implicitly, the directive of April 1963 occupied the space left vacant since the years of agrarian reform. The land of the nation’s ancestors and martyrs ensured as before the protection of its souls and spirits; the North Vietnamese

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commune clung to its new “guardian spirits” to confront the tense times leading up to the resumption of war. This State approval slowly gave birth to a patriotic cultural geography.

**Types of “New Spirits”**

The new geography of patriotic rituals included three types of heroes: early leaders of the ICP, heroic figures from the anti-colonialist era (1925–1952), and the imported “new hero”.

Most new ritual sites were dedicated to ICP leaders (or of the *Thanh Niên* before that) who were active from 1920 to 1940. Provincial cadres chose figures of national import (Ngô Gia Tự, Nguyễn Văn Cừ, Trần Phú, Lê Hồng Phong, Hà Huy Tập, Hoàng Văn Thứ, and Hồ Tùng Mậu) and others from the local scene (Phạm Quang Lich in Thái Bình, Nguyễn Đức Cánh in Hải Phòng, and Hoàng Đình Dong in Cao Bằng). Thái Bình province inaugurated a House of Remembrance to Phạm Quang Lich in the town of Dinh Phùng (Kiến Xương district) in an effort to symbolically link local history to that of the State, with its victory over “foreign invaders”. Phạm Quang Lich (1901–1937) had served as secretary of the ICP in Thái Bình in 1935–36 and was a key figure in the provincial revolutionary movement, so the day took on special significance as part of the the Party’s “glorious resistance nationwide”. Further north in the area of Lạng Sơn-Cao Bằng, local authorities took similar steps. The provinces of Lạng Sơn and Cao Bằng were home to the first revolutionary groups in the 1920s–1930s and gave birth to a host of revolutionary figures. Cadres from the two provinces followed the Party’s propaganda recommendations to the letter, matching a national figure with a local one. The illustrious Hoàng Văn Thứ (1906–1944) was honoured with two memorials by the province (one built in his hometown, which now bore his name, and the other in the centre of the village of Sơn La). He was paired with the cadre Lương Văn Chi, former resistance fighter from the Bắc Sơn uprising of 1940, who was celebrated in his home commune of Văn Quan (Bắc Sơn). Cao Bằng commemorated Hoàng Đình Dong, the province’s first major revolutionary, born in the commune of Đề Thám (Hòa An district),22 and

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allied him with the young Kim Động (1928–1943), a symbol of patriotic youth, active member of the Thanh Niên, and central figure of the new patriotic pantheon.

The VWP increased its visibility in the countryside through these images of the nation’s glorious children. Their aim was not so much to get the villagers to join the Party, but rather to offer them a unified vision of the nation’s diversity. In Vietnam, the land itself created meaning and a sense of belonging, so a government’s legitimacy depended on its visibility and material presence on national soil. The DRV praised the patriotic initiatives of the common man, stressing that one need not be a cadre, let alone from the central government, to challenge the colonial power. The heroic lives of the first mythical figures of the Resistance were in fact the easiest to transpose into the popular imagination. The ideal of the innocent young hero (from Phạm Hồng Thái to Lý Tự Trọng, Kim Động, and Lê Hồng Phong) had a broad appeal since they emulated their ancestors with simple acts of bravery when faced with the “loss of the fatherland”. As the war approached, the Party’s propaganda department tried to make the history of the movement more personal.

Meanwhile, the new hero was forging a place at the centre of the new system of patriotic veneration. Cù Chính Lan (1930–1951), hero of the Battle of Hòa Bình; Nguyễn Việt Xuân (1934–1964), the first martyr of Quảng Bình province; Mạc Thị Bưởi (1927–1951), the guerrilla fighter from Hải Hưng; Cao Lộc (1929–1974); and Ngô Gia Khâm (1912–1990) all joined the ranks of the DRV’s “army of shadows”. Far from the glare of the press and welcomed in villages, the proletarian hero integrated fairly easily into the patriotic network — he was basically an ancestor who happened to have intersected with the destiny of the nation. He profited from the government’s cult of continuity and his spirit deserved the government’s care. Foreigners, especially those from brother nations, had to take into account the cultural framework inherent in the political life of Vietnam.

23 The living were not generally worshipped in Vietnam. I did, however, find two religious sites dedicated to people who were still alive: a House of Remembrance for General Võ Nguyên Giáp built in 1986 in the commune of Lộc Thủy (Lệ Thủy district, Quảng Bình), and in 1995 a commune near Hanoi had to clamp down on a cult honouring Nguyễn Thị Bình (then Vice-President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam) in a temple dedicated to the Trưng sisters.
A New Geography of Ritual

With the approach of war, the establishment of the new patriotic geography was a key part of the DRV’s mobilisation efforts. The Ministry of Culture advised its provincial cadres to “build Houses of Remembrance for every hero, outstanding person, and great revolutionary in their jurisdiction”. The movement was launched in 1963–64 and was kept a high priority for decades — it was even stepped up during the period of Đổi mới (1986) to counter a weakening of national identity due to the policy of openness. The DRV wanted to mark its territory with the seal of this new patriotic imaginary. The decline of Chinese influence and rising tensions with the South shaped the new context: both feudal heroes and reformists now accompanied the people on their way to victory and national unification.

The creation of this new political and ritual topography was not widely publicised. As the nation continued its march towards socialism, with speeches advocating the end of archaic customs and beliefs, how did Party cadres react to the new campaign’s deployment in the field? Officially, the VWP continued to condemn traditional acts of worship that smacked of feudalism. As a result, any confusion between the two practices had to be avoided. A new terminology was adopted to distinguish the new ritual sites from the old. The government thus created a new semantics, a modern way to pay tribute to the nation’s illustrious ancestors. These new practices were apparently accepted in the countryside without the slightest problem. Provincial cadres stressed that the new memorials were needed to strengthen the patriotic education of the nation’s youth at the approach of war: “We must erect altars to honour our Party’s heroes. They help educate the new generation. Children know about these heroes, of course, but the cultural level in rural areas is low. The altars let us sustain a memory

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24 The text cites as example the commune of Đúc Lac (Lấp Thạch, Vĩnh Phú), which built a House of Remembrance in honor of the local war hero Trần Cự so that “the people learn from his example”. Đề án tổ chức cơ quan Văn hóa các địa phương năm 1960 và năm năm 1961–65 của Bộ Văn Hóa (Project of the Ministry of Culture to create a cultural bureau on the provincial level in 1960 and for 1961–65), in AVN3, BVH, file no. 752, single document, 1961.

25 The distinction between the two was subsequently adopted, more or less. I will return to this with the example of the patriotic cult dedicated to the heroine Mạc Thị Bưởi in Hải Hưng province. The term Khu di tích, which in theory had no religious or ceremonial connotation, was often replaced by the more traditional Khu vúc thơ or even Đền thơ in the areas where I did my research.
Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam

and a veneration that are useful in our daily lives.” Communal cadres encouraged people to get together in these new places of worship during patriotic holidays. At Nam Tấn (Hải Hưng), the memorial dedicated to Mạc Thị Bươi was integrated into a former religious structure. A 25-year-old soldier from a neighbouring village recounts: “I had never been there before I became a soldier, I didn’t even know where it was. Then I went there with my unit. It’s okay to go there as a group, but I wouldn’t go by myself. It’s part of local culture, and the commune had great respect for keeping the memory of difficult times alive.”

The success of the campaign was immediate. The people asked the government for money to build and organise rituals in honour of their illustrious children. The veneration of heroic figures within the commune was “a part of Vietnamese tradition”, but its use was now a privilege of the central government: “If the commune built a memorial in honour of a local figure, I would feel I had to go and pay homage, to venerate the spirit of the illustrious dead, for the sake of our people and our Party.” When a venerable person died, the decision to commemorate his or her memory fell to the State.

These new political rituals found no resistance from the people. Within the ranks of the Party, however, the issue continued to be divisive. The more orthodox among them criticised the move away from the internationalist ideals and the continuation of popular beliefs and practices from a feudal time, which they saw as anachronistic. A high Party official declared thus, “I think our country should not build altars or monuments in honour of individual people. It is understandable, of course, that the State sometimes needs to erect statues for particular heroes. But in my opinion, it is better to build collective memorials.” Some blamed the government for promoting the worship of low-level figures: “We don’t have any altars dedicated to official heroes in our district. You have to be very great, a great leader, to merit your own altar. A hero is just a normal person, which isn’t really enough. When La Văn Cẩu dies we could build him a statue, but not an altar. An altar is for people like Uncle Hồ or Trần Hưng Đạo.”

Officially, then, DRV leaders chose to keep a certain distance, insisting that the government had nothing to do with the indigenisation of the new hero. These practices came from below, from the people, they alleged,

26 Interview, Quỳnh Xuân commune (Quỳnh Lưu, Nghệ An).
27 Interview, Nam Tấn commune (Nam Thanh, Hải Hưng).
28 Interview, Nguyên Bình town (Nguyên Bình, Cao Bằng).
29 Interview, Quỳnh Ngọc commune (Quỳnh Lưu, Nghệ An).
30 Interview, Trường Khánh town (Cao Bằng).
spreading beyond the control of the State, which was only going along with them. This was the official line, and it suited the VWP agenda perfectly. It keenly maintained the idea that it was not involved when, in reality, the Party’s propaganda and political education sections were seriously dedicated to this project from 1962 onwards.

The New Memorials

Ritual ceremonies were a link between the living and the illustrious dead. On the family level, the veneration of heroes was the culmination of all ancestor worship: “The hero is the ancestor *par excellence*, whom we always invoke individually, while the worship of other deceased family members, as a cult of individual spirits, becomes optional after a while.”

The ritual was different from those for family ancestors, however, because it was public and usually held throughout the territory. The collective nature of the patriotic ritual necessitated a place where the communicants could come together. Four new forms of patriotic ritual architecture were established: Houses of Remembrance (*Nhà lưu niệm*), commemorative statuary sites (*Đài tưởng niệm*), funerary monuments (*Khu mộ*), and ritual sites (*Khu vúc thờ*).

The House of Remembrance was the most common type of building dedicated to the memory of a model citizen of the new regime. In the 19 provinces in North Vietnam where I found patriotic memorials, they had become the ideal type of new patriotic structure. They depicted the major phases of the honouree’s life, in which a “reformist” or proletarian iconography is intersected with a traditional aesthetic, incorporating an ancestral altar, a bust of the hero, incense holders, and “parallel sentences” written in his memory. Campaigns for building Houses of Remembrance were organised in two consecutive stages. During the first half of the 1960s, communes financed the renovation of a village house, often the repossessed house of a former landlord, into a memorial for the heroic dead or his lineage. From 1975 onwards, the central government chipped in to allow the construction of more impressive sites.

The second type of commemorative space featured a statuary, which was obviously a more foreign concept. A new phenomenon in Vietnamese

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32 Four of these provinces (Hoà Binh, Hải Phòng, Hà Giang, and Yên Bái) chose to use a different term for the structure.
Figure 22. House of Remembrance for Lê Hồng Phong, Nghệ An province

Figure 23. Commemorative statuary sites for Hoàng Đình Giong, Cao Bằng province
Figure 24. Funerary monuments for Phan Đình Giót, Hòa Bình province

Figure 25. Ritual sites for Trần Phú, Hà Tĩnh province
tradition, the *Khu Di Tích* (literally “place of relics”) consisted of a statue or monument dedicated to a key figure in the nation’s recent past, to which the government added a biographical plaque summarising the main stages of the hero’s life, as well as an ancestral altar so visitors could keep his memory alive. The DRV’s statuary programme was begun in tandem with its policy on martyrs. In Hòa Bình, a monument dedicated to Cù Chính Lan (military hero, 1952) was built at the site where he died (Bình Thạnh, in Ký Sơn district); in Hà Tĩnh, in the village of Cam Quan (Cam Xuyên district), a statue was dedicated to the soldier and hero Phan Đình Giót who fell in the battle of Điện Biên Phủ; and in Cao Bằng, on the road to Pác Bò, a monument was erected in honour of the young minority hero Kim Đồng and his family. The village community and mass organisations rallied around these grand, monumental architectural sites designed to bring people together and celebrate a shared heritage. The statues, which were common in urban areas, were thus also part of the emergence of a new political ritual in the country. Since the resumption of war with the South, the pioneers and youth groups of Hanoi filed past the bust of Nguyễn Văn Trỗi in the middle of Lenin Park in a show of piety, respect, and admiration for the exemplary life of their heroic elder. The cost of building these sites, however, and the novelty of the phenomenon, made it initially difficult for provinces to acquire this type of commemorative space.

The third type of patriotic ritual architecture was the funerary space. Unlike the martyrs’ cemeteries mentioned above, these were smaller constructions built around the tomb of an accomplished person. The monumental aspect of the site evoked the deceased’s power vis-à-vis his contemporaries. Whether outside of the commune (at the hero’s place of death, for example) or within the village limits, funerary spaces were physical proof of the government’s piety towards its illustrious spirits. Funerary spaces were found in most provinces. In Đa Lộc (Hậu Lộc district, Thanh Hóa province), a monument to the resistance heroine Tom (“Mother Tom” or Mẹ Tom) was erected behind the communal People’s Committee building. In the district of Hưng Nguyên (Nghệ An province), a small funerary monument was built in honour of Hoàng Hanh, the first Catholic hero of the DRV, amidst the graves of the martyrs’ cemetery.33 The largest of this type was dedicated to Hồ Chí Minh’s parents. It was built in 1975 by

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33 Hoàng Hanh never had the influence amongst Catholics that the government had hoped for. When he died (1963), his family asked provincial authorities for help in building a monument to him, but the authorities declined. Interview, Nam Đàn, Nghệ An.
The Cult of the New Hero

The provincial government in Nam Đàn (Nghệ An) on a hill overlooking the town of Kim Liên, Hồ’s birthplace. The government made an effort to embellish all of the graves of its model citizens, regardless of size, as proof of their piety and virtue. In short, the DRV financed and decorated the funerary spaces of its heroic dead, thereby situating them within a reworked hierarchy of patriotic merit.

The final type of patriotic architecture, the temple or ritual site, most clearly resembled the religious space of former times. Fewer in number, they were often built later than the other structures mentioned above. Called Nhà thờ (literally “church”) or khu vực thờ (ritual site), these commemorative structures maintained a direct link with traditional religious practices, with the altars and small temples of the past. Their construction or renovation was financed by the government. Traditional temples were not as common as Houses of Remembrance, which made sense given the DRV’s political situation, as the latter were more in line with internationalist ideology. Many communes wanted something with a bit more permanence, however, that did not conflict with the new government’s political agenda. Since the 1970s, a whole host of small temples were built in honour of Hồ Chí Minh, but some were also dedicated to new heroes. In Thạch Minh (Hà Tĩnh), for example, a temple was built for the pioneer Lý Tự Trọng, who was sentenced to death by the French in 1931 at the age of 16. An altar had been built just after his death, and the government decided to renovate it in 1978 respecting Sino-Vietnamese architectural traditions. From the outside it resembled a Đền thờ (temple) from the past. Inside, the composition and arrangement of religious objects honouring the young communist and his parents re-establish the traditional relationship with the sacred; the “parallel sentences” commissioned by the district government of Thạch Hà, meanwhile, confirm the site’s ritual function. Lý Tự Trọng became the new tutelary spirit of the village.

Houses of Remembrance, commemorative monument complexes, patriotic funerary sites, and new temples helped redefine the new patriotic ritual geography. By the late 1960s, 13 of the 23 provinces in North Vietnam already had patriotic ritual sites. Before examining this space in detail, we turn to the provinces that were apparently excluded from the movement.

The excluded provinces fall into three geographical areas: the mountainous northwest (the provinces of Lai Châu, Lào Cai, and Hà Giang); the

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Figure 26. Ritual sites for Lý Tự Trọng, Hà Tĩnh province

Figure 27. Ritual sites for Phảm Quang Lích, Thái Bình province
The Cult of the New Hero

populous and industrialised provinces (Hà Tây, Bắc Thái, Hanoi, Nam Hà, and Quảng Ninh); and Ninh Bình province, the Christian enclave in the North. The sparsely populated northwest was initially overlooked by the Party’s propaganda department, which preferred to focus on more populated areas. The northwest also had very few Kinh, who were the government’s main target for recruitment.³⁵ Lai Châu, Lào Cai, and Hà Giang were mostly populated by ethnic Thái, Hmong, Yào, Giày, and Kho Mú minorities before the government’s campaigns for economic resettlement, who had different rites and beliefs from that of the Kinh. Despite all the talk of unification, the minority peoples were always on the margins of national events. The DRV had a hard time ideologising them, and as the war approached, cadres from the propaganda department had other priorities. For example, all patriotic ritual structures in Nghệ An province were built in the lowland districts, inhabited predominantly by Kinh, or in districts that had been occupied by refugees from the South in the late 1950s. In the western part of the province, the mountainous districts of Quê Phong, Kỳ Sơn, Tương Dương, Quỳ Hợp, Quỳ Châu, Con Cuông, and Anh Sơn, inhabited by ethnic Thổ, Thái, Hmong, Kho Mú, Chứt, and O Đu, had no memorials to honour the heroes of the DRV. Thus, demographics and ethnicity were two main factors in the construction of memorials. There were also fewer memorials in highly populated urban and industrial areas such as Hanoi, Hà Tây, Nam Hà, Thái Nguyên, and Quảng Ninh. It appears that the DRV’s propaganda machine turned its sights from the centres of power (both political and intellectual) and production to focus on the poorly ideologised countryside. Finally, the third sub-group to be left behind had its own strong religious identity. Located 180 kilometres south of the Hanoi, Ninh Bình is the heart of Vietnamese Christendom (Phát Diệm diocese), and its inhabitants were mostly Catholic, a cause of worry for the DRV.

Patriotic rituals existed, thus, in 13 of the nation’s 23 provinces. For convenience, I have divided the ritual structures into two sub-groups: ritual sites dedicated to heroes of the Party and the Resistance, and those dedicated to new internationalist heroes. To avoid oversimplifying, however, I take a more detailed look at the structures of Nghệ Bình (Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh province) below.

The provinces north of the Red River Delta had been the heart of the nationalist and communist resistance against the French since the 1930s.

When Hồ Chí Minh returned to Vietnam in February 1941 after decades abroad, he established his camp along the Chinese border at Pắc Bó in Cao Bằng province. The government built a commemorative monument and a museum there, and later placed nearby a statue of the young Nùng resistance fighter, Kim Đồng, who was shot by the French in 1943. A few kilometres to the south, the provincial branch of the Party built a House of Remembrance for the revolutionary Hoàng Đình Đồng in his hometown of Đề Thám (Hòa An district). In Lạng Sơn, they honoured two heroic figures from the province: Hoàng Văn Thự and Lương Văn Chí. The government financed the reconstruction of Hoàng Văn Thự’s original house on stilts in his village. The commune was renamed after him (Hoàng Văn Thự commune, in Văn Lãng district), and an imposing memorial (100 m²/1,000 sq.ft.), a stele, and a small statue were erected. The city of Lạng Sơn erected a memorial stele and a small altar to him in the former Franco-Vietnamese school where he had studied. The commune of Văn Quan (Bắc Sơn district), on the other hand, built a monument in honour of a very local figure, Lương Văn Chí, the guerrilla hero of the Bắc Sơn revolt. Further south, in the Red River Delta, Hà Bắc province had had memorials since the 1940s in honour of Ngô Gia Tự (1908–1935) and Nguyễn Văn Cử (1912–1941), the first ICP leaders born in the area. In 1942, authorities built an altar near the Tự family home in Tam Sơn (Tiên Sơn district), which they later turned into a spacious House of Remembrance across from another building dedicated to his parents. Not far from there, in Phú Khê (Son Tiến district), there is another memorial in honour of Nguyễn Văn Cử.

In the coastal province of Thái Bình, in Đình Phượng (Kiểm Xương district), the former home of Party Secretary Phạm Quang Lích (1901–1937) was rebuilt and transformed into a House of Remembrance, as well as that of the former party secretary of the province, Nguyễn Đức Cánh, in the centre of Diêm Điển (Thái Thụy district). The construction of monuments was more sporadic in the remote western provinces of Lai Châu, Lào Cai, Sơn La, and Yên Bái. In 1980, Sơn La province only had a small commemorative space in its provincial seat, at the site of the old French prison, dedicated to the cadre Tô Hiệu, who died in prison in 1944. In Yên Bái, provincial authorities had established a memorial in the late 1940s to the Nationalist party leader Nguyễn Thái Học (1904–1930), who was executed by the French after the revolt of 1930. The new government paid homage to the former leader of the VNQĐĐ at his tomb, located in a neighbourhood of Nghĩa Lộ bearing his name.
The Cult of the New Hero

Figure 28. Commemorative statuary sites for Kim Đồng, Cao Bằng province
Starting in the 1960s, North Vietnam also built ritual sites honouring its new heroes, though slightly fewer in number. In the north of Tuyên Quang province, Đức Xuan commune (Nà Hang district) had a memorial space honouring the labour hero Ngô Gia Khâm, who earned a title in 1952 for his record-setting productivity in an underground arms factory. In Vĩnh Phú, the artilleryman Nguyễn Việt Xuân was venerated in his village of Ngũ Kiên (Vĩnh Tường district). In Hải Hưng, in the heart of the Red River delta, the commune of Nam Tân (Nam Thanh district) built a patriotic memorial for the young guerrilla fighter Mặc Thị Brô. Further south, a few kilometres from the town of Hòa Bình, the village of Bình Thạnh (Kỳ Sơn district) honoured the martyr-hero Cù Chính Lan (1952). Finally, in Thanh Hóa and Quảng Bình, there were two ritual sites built in honour of the heroic women who died in the struggle against France: “Mother Tom” in Đà Lộc (Hậu Lộc, Thanh Hóa) and “Mother Suốt” in Bảo Ninh (in the provincial seat of Quảng Ninh).

These new patriotic ritual sites were part of a complex network of commemorative sites. In 1962, in the former province of Nghệ Tinh, the
propaganda department of the People’s Committee asked the Party to erect an altar in memory of Trần Phú (1904–1931), First Secretary of the ICP, who was sentenced to death by the French at age 27 in his native village of Tùng Ánh (Đức Thọ district). At the same time, district authorities inaugurated a small temple to Phan Đình Phùng, a nineteenth-century scholar and instigator of the rebellion of Vietnamese scholars known as Cần Vương (Loyalists). Not far from there, in Nam Đàn, a ritual site was built in honour of the patriot-scholar Phan Bội Châu (1867–1940). A few kilometres away, authorities built a cenotaph (without the actual body) for Lê Hồng Phong, the charismatic former Secretary-General of the ICP from 1935–36, and an important funerary monument in honour of Cao Lực, labour hero of 1962 and president of the cooperative of Hùng Thái commune. In August 1975, the district of Nam Đàn also inaugurated an impressive memorial dedicated to Nguyễn Sinh Sắc and Hoàng Thị Loan, Hồ Chí Minh’s parents. In Thạch Hà (Hà Tĩnh) in 1978, the temple dedicated to the young patriot Lý Tự Trọng who died in 1934, was expanded. In 1980, the village of Tùng Ánh (Hà Tĩnh) added a House of Remembrance to the altar in honour of Trần Phú; and Hùng Nguyên district did the same in 1989 for Lê Hồng Phong, and then in the 1990s rebuilt the memorial to the young Phạm Hồng Thái. Also in Hà Tĩnh, the small town of Cẩm Xuyên celebrated the life of the 1930s revolutionary Hà Huy Giáp and the military hero Phan Đình Giót, honoured posthumously in 1955. Finally, Quỳnh Lưu district (Nghệ An) chose to remember Hồ Tùng Mậu, the revolutionary and friend of Hồ Chí Minh.

The real art of the VWP’s propaganda section and political education was their ability to express the difference between the old and new. The new ritual structures of the DRV were rooted firmly in secular ground.

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36 Lê Hồng Phong, first-generation revolutionary and husband of Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai, is buried at Côn Đảo (Poulo Condor), where he died in 1941.
37 “One day, one of Confucius’s disciples asked him: What if a king granted you a land that you could rule over as you wished; what would be your first act? ‘The first thing I would do,’ said Confucius, ‘would be to correct all names.’ The disciple was stunned: correct all names? This would be your first priority? Are you serious? Confucius explained to him: ‘If names are not correct, if they don’t correspond to reality, then language has no object. When language has no object, action is impossible, and as a result, all human efforts fall apart. It would be impossible and fruitless to try and control anything. This is why the first job of a real statesman is to correct all names.’” In Simon Leys. L’Ange et le cachalot. Paris: Seuil, 1998, p. 26. Available in English as The Angel and the Octopus: Collected Essays, 1983–1998. Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1999.
though commemorating the great men of the new regime was an obvious
continuation of customary traditional practices. The government officially
broke the relationship to the sacred, but retained a traditional relationship
with the heroic act.

Mạc Thị Bưởi, a Patriotic Rite

To better understand the interpenetration of cultural and political legiti-
macy, I examine the case of Mạc Thị Bưởi (1927–1951), a young North
Vietnamese woman whose life echoed that of the Soviet heroine Zoya
Kosmodemyanskaya (a Russian partisan killed at the age of 18 by the
Nazis in 1941). Martyr of the national resistance against France, Bưởi was
posthumously elevated to hero of the DRV in May 1955. A ritual was dedi-
cated to her in the village of Nam Tân (Nam Thanh district, Hải Hưng
province), 80 kilometres from Hanoi, where she was born in 1927 to a
family of poor peasants.38 She was a descendent of the sixteenth-century
scholar, Mạc Đình Chi, tutelary spirit of his village (Long Đông). At the
time of the insurrection of August 1945, she was a 18-year-old liaison
officer. In 1946 she was chosen as representative of the Women’s Associa-
tion of her village, and the following year was elected to its executive
committee at the communal level while continuing her activities as the
liaison with district authorities. In 1948 she joined the Party, where she
learned to read and write. She distinguished herself in the Resistance and
was recognised for her courage in slipping into enemy territory. The revo-
lutionary government placed great hopes in her. In April 1951 she was
stopped by a French army unit as she was going to the district prefecture
for further training. She was tortured but never broke her silence, as her
biographers proudly report. Hoping to die on her native soil, she told her
captors that she had secret documents, which she would surrender if she
were brought home. Once back in the village of Long Đông, she rebelled
and was struck down, swearing her loyalty to the Party and Hồ Chí Minh
with her last breath.

On 31 August 1955, the National Assembly awarded her the post-
humous title of “Hero of the People’s Armed Forces”. For the new regime,

38 This date is from the official biography in the first volume of Anh hùng lực lượng vũ
trong nhân dân (Heroes of the people’s armed forces), published in Hanoi in 1978 and
1994. It also appears in Trần Cần’s Mạc Thị Bưởi (Hanoi, 1957). The poet Trần Đăng
Khoa, however, has 1929 in his Khúc hát người anh hùng (Hanoi, 1974).
Mạc Thị Bưởi embodied the indomitable character of Vietnamese women. Her short biography, written in 1955 by the editorial board of the propaganda department, has never been rewritten.\textsuperscript{39} It was included in the series “Follow the Example of Communist Combatants”, published serially by the national press. It served as a backdrop for theatrical adaptations, screenplays, poems, and formal speeches that commemorated her memory. Over time, this official biography has taken precedence over oral memory, determining the type and meaning of the memories of those who knew her.

The commemorative and ritual apparatus dedicated to Mạc Thị Bưởi developed in the years following her appointment. She received her posthumous award in August 1955, which was a huge honour for her family. In

\textsuperscript{39} In the final years of the war with France, the editorial committee was made up of the following members (as well as some anonymous high Party officials): Nguyễn Đình Thị, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, Xuân Diệu, Nguyễn Xuân Sanh, Kim Lân, Tô Hoài, Vũ Cao, Từ Nam, Từ Bích Hoàng, Lê Đạt, and Nguyễn Hồng.
Figure 31. Cover of the biography of Mạc Thị Bưởi
July 1954, her sister, Mạc Thị Thành, became secretary of the communal Women’s Association. Shunted aside in December 1955 and August 1956 by the agrarian reform team carrying out the regeneration of Party cadres, and subsequently rehabilitated, Mạc Thị Thành served as party secretary and president of the commune until her death in the early 1990s. Mạc Thị Bưởi’s title lent her family a moral authority that underlay these new responsibilities. In return, however, as per the established custom, Mạc Thị Thành had to pay tribute to her illustrious sister. As far as anyone in the village remembers, Thành never neglected her responsibility in 30 years as head of the commune. The State showed the same piety to the heroine’s family. Every year they sent a car to the village to fetch Bưởi’s mother to ceremonies honouring her daughter.⁴⁰ They offered Mạc Thị Thành’s husband, Nguyễn Công Hùng, a job with the local government; their children’s future was also taken care of. The cult of Mạc Thị Bưởi is basically a relic of the notion of filial piety, which was the pillar of family morality with a political dimension, and which continued within the new ideological framework of the North Vietnamese regime. From the village to the district, Mạc Thị Bưởi was one part of a national project still in construction. She was the only national hero from Nam Thanh. She lent district authorities a strong political legitimacy and enhanced the region’s visibility. To its inhabitants, Bưởi gave a human face to an official discourse that was often far removed from daily village life. This native daughter served as a springboard to launch the government’s policies. Emulation campaigns held every year bore her name, alongside production groups, women’s associations, and cooperatives.

Although there is no archival proof, Mạc Thị Thành’s position in the government played a very specific financial and political role in the management of her sister’s memory. There were four main phases in the development of the ritual apparatus dedicated to Mạc Thị Bưởi. From 1955 to 1974, the district had three separate sites in her honour: a large funerary monument in the district seat, an ancestral altar in her family home that drew both family members and political pilgrims, and a cenotaph in the middle of the communal cemetery. In 1973, there were more visitors than

⁴⁰In early November 1956, for example, the government sent a car to drive her to a ceremony in Hanoi celebrating the issuing of a commemorative stamp for her daughter (there were four stamps in the series designed by Bùi Trang Châu: for 1,000, 2,000, 4,000 and 5,000 đồng). According to everyone I interviewed, the appearance of this car made an indelible mark on the collective memory of the hamlet of Long Động.
these structures could accommodate, so the district decided to build a bigger house called the “Mạc Thị_BROWSER_history” in honour of her family: Mạc Thị Thành, her husband, their six children, and Bướm’s mother. The government also built a tomb in the courtyard in honour of her father, who had died before 1945, and eventually her mother, who died in 1988. In 1983, the province funded the construction of an impressive, six-metre-high statue in Nam Thanh cemetery, depicting the heroine in full Socialist Realist style. But they did not stop there. In the early 1990s, the Party’s communal committee suggested they build a “Mạc Thị Bướm House of Remembrance” near the “Friendship House”, to match the newly renovated small temple dedicated to the tutelary spirit Mạc Đính Chi. The renovation of this temple relied on funds collected within the town, as opposed to the House of Remembrance, which came entirely out of the communal and district budget. The local government, probably afraid that the myth of the young revolutionary was not sufficiently rooted in people’s minds, wanted to retain control of the national cult. They tried to recuperate some of their financial investment, however, by keeping the money and gifts offered by each delegation at the building’s inauguration.

In September 1995, the town of Nam Tân had what was literally called a “ritual site”, divided equally between the altar of Mạc Đính Chi on one side and the Mạc Thị Bướm “House of Remembrance” on the other. Communal cadres preferred the term Khu di tích (patrimonial space), which excluded any religious or ceremonial connotations, but the villagers did not care for it and kept the more traditional term Khu vực thờ (ritual site). Village elders from the Bureau of Patrimony decided to compromise and called it the Khu di tích Điện thờ Mạc Đính Chi, Mạc Thị Bướm (Patrimonial space and temple for Mạc Đính Chi and Mạc Thị Bướm). The communal government invented this superposition of the two cults. The secretary of the local Party cell of Long Động summed up the pairing simply: “Mạc Đính Chi is an illustrious person, Mạc Thị Bướm is a heroine of the revolution; one was very learned, the other fought valiantly. In the end there is not much difference.”

The devotional house dedicated to Mạc Thị Bướm is 5.5 metres wide and 6.5 metres long (18 × 21 feet). It has a simple construction and is

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41 The building was not yet classified “historic monument” (di tích lịch sử) and in fact did not qualify for any public financial aid. See Interview (Nam Thành commune, Hải Hưng).

42 Interview, Nam Tân commune (Nam Thành, Hải Hưng).
divided into two separate areas. A short flight of stairs leads to a large outdoor terrace, which wraps around the main part of the building. A central doorway opens onto a single room, $4 \times 6.5$ metres ($12 \times 20$ feet), with two side windows. Furnishing is kept very simple. To the right of the entrance there is a low table and four chairs for visitors. Lining the walls are a dozen or so photos of the inauguration ceremony of 10 September 1995 and of events organised at the house. The altar to Mạc Thị Bưởi is in the centre, in a small niche 2 metres high and 1 metre wide. A large plaster bust of the heroine, painted yellow, sits in the middle, with a red cloth draped in the background. There are offerings around the altar (fruits, banknotes, etc.), as well as flowers and an incense holder filled with glowing sticks. To the right, at the foot of the altar, stands a stele inscribed with the names of the 31 martyrs of Long Đông village from the Franco-Vietminh war (1946–1954). On the left, a second stele honours the victims of the war with America (1964–1975), with fewer names this time. Between the two stands a red wooden box for offerings. The building and its interior decoration were entirely functional and austere. And the choice of location, between the Friendship House devoted to her family and the temple to her ancestor, the village tutelary spirit, gave it greater representative power. The sacred quality of the building was enhanced by its very structure, architectural style, location, and geomantic properties.

A visit to the ritual site of Nam Tân now entails two separate sites for a population that no longer distinguishes between the two figures:

The difference between Mạc Thị Bưởi and Mạc Đình Chí lies in their roles, one was a war hero, the other an intellectual from the old system. But they are both important, I don’t want to separate them, it’s the same thing. I will burn incense in both places. Our country is this way, this is the traditional system in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{43}

This architectural continuum allowed the DRV to reaffirm the continuity of the nation’s history. The ceremonies held for Mạc Thị Bưởi juxtaposed the two national calendars: the traditional lunar calendar and the new patriotic-revolutionary one. They intersected and complemented each other without overlapping, except during the new lunar year.

These two parallel religious cults did not come under the same authority, however. Moreover, followers of both sides were fairly intransigent

\textsuperscript{43} Interview, Nam Tân commune (Nam Thanh, Hải Hưng).
about the temporal organisation of their ceremonies. In theory, the village of Long Động observed dates only from the traditional calendar. A committee for the management of patrimony was created, consisting of 24 members (2 or 3 communal cadres, 7 or 8 representatives of various sectors, and a dozen village elders — both scholars and cadres) presided over by a president who was appointed head of the commune and delegate of cultural affairs. Within the hamlet itself, ritual sites came under the secretary of the Party cell. As a result, celebrations were held in two different places. Traditional rituals began in the temple dedicated to Mạc Định Chi and ended with a visit to the altar of his distant relative Mạc Thị Bưởi. While ceremonies honouring the Trần dynasty scholar were quite popular, those for Mạc Thị Bưởi took a while to gain momentum. Cadres from the province, district (usually from the cultural department or from the bureau of disabled veterans), and the commune attended the ceremony each year, and brought her family gifts. The village administration, made up of groups of five to ten people from each neighbourhood, would go in the morning, usually from 8–10 a.m., to burn incense at her altar and place offerings. Villagers took the opportunity to stop by her family’s Friendship House to show their piety and gratitude. At other times, the family, neighbours, and devotees of the heroine got together for commemorative services based on the traditional (lunar) calendar, which had been simplified by the new regime. Everyone still celebrated the first and fifteenth of each month, the spring and fall festivals, the fifteenth day of the first month, and the day of peaceful souls, but many holidays had been abandoned. For example, they no longer celebrated the beginning or end of the transplanting of rice,

44 I am aware of the distinction between a làng (village), a thôn (hamlet), and a xã, (commune, in the administrative sense), but in this particular case I use thôn to indicate the lowest level of village organisation.
45 He sometimes took on the ancient title of cự thủ tụt (ritual guardian) to define his role, as did a certain Mr. Mùi in the village of Thọ Hà (Văn Hà commune in Hà Bắc province), who was in charge of a small temple dedicated to former president Hồ Chí Minh (Đền thờ Hồ Chủ tịch).
46 The thôn of Long Động had 250 families, divided into 3 neighbourhoods (xóm). On the anniversary of Mạc Thị Bưởi’s death, 30 to 40 groups were organised and involved most of the villagers.
47 Trung thu is traditionally a festival honouring children. For the occasion, national and local authorities organised a variety of activities (carnival rides, games, parades, etc.) in their continued effort to win over the nation’s youth. This was the only traditional festival outside of Tết that came under the direct responsibility of the central government.
the new rice of the ninth month, or the opening of the seals on the seventh
day of the first month. Other holidays only concerned the immediate family
so did not involve a collective ritual. On these occasions, individual fami-
lies paid homage to the village’s two glorious ancestors or asked for help
with their troubles. Holidays of this type are: the day of seeking tranquil-
lity (the fifteenth day of the seventh month), the day of the deliverance
of souls, Têt, the third day of the third month, the fifth day of the fifth
month, and ceremonies at the end of the year (the second day of the
twelfth month). Other holidays related to daily events from the village
(marriage, death, special accomplishments, etc.) also required people to
honour the memory of the two village heroes. But the most important
ritual element took place outside of the traditional holidays. Mặc Thị Bươì
received special attention during the important dates in the new patriotic
calendar. Invariably, the year began with the anniversary of the founding
of the Party (3 February), then came Women’s Day (8 March), the anni-
versary of the liberation of Saigon (30 April), Hồ Chí Minh’s birthday
(19 May), the Day of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans (27 July), the com-
memoration of the August Revolution (19 August), Independence Day (2
September), and ended with the anniversary of the founding of the PAVN
(22 December).

The ritual around Mặc Thị Bươì was thus intended as a tribute to
the exemplary nature of this village ancestor. The authorities wished to
courage the population — usually via local government representatives
— to emulate the virtue of their fellow citizen. It was not exactly a ques-
tion of veneration but of creating a direct link between the actions of this
peasant girl at the height of the war with France and the daily struggles
of a farming village (increasing production, fighting illiteracy and social
evils, etc.). This political veneration was essentially a local one. A provin-
cial cadre, civil servant, or army officer was always on hand to represent
the government. The delegations first met at the People’s Committee
building of the commune and then went to the heroine’s House of Remem-
brance accompanied by a representative of the group in charge that day
(the president of the Women’s Association for Women’s Day, etc.). A
speech was given extolling the deeds of Mặc Thị Bươì and encouraging
everyone to follow her example. Then, one after another, the delegations
gathered before her altar to lay offerings and burn incense. The second
phase took place at the Friendship House dedicated to her family and the
tomb of her parents, where the delegations repeated the gestures they had
made at the devotional house. They sat and drank tea, and smoked the
thứộc lào (a water pipe, usually made of bamboo) with a representative of
the family. Some offerings and gifts were left in tribute to the deceased. After leaving the house, some delegates went to the town cemetery to pay their respects at the symbolic grave of the heroine. Finally, to close the half-day’s events, and when finances permitted, a reception was sometimes organised by the commune.

The simplicity of this political ritual only had meaning when juxtaposed with those of the past. The life of the young heroine Mặc Thị Buội embodied the evolution of post-colonial Vietnam. A valiant combatant, she was chosen among all others to satisfy the requirements of internationalist recognition. She had also been modelled on a foreign concept, so in order to gain legitimacy she had to assimilate into a cultural context that could be easily understood by her peers. Lastly, she was a symbol of identity transformation to those abroad, but an expression of continuity for her own community. She was both a daughter of the village and a child of the nation, and helped the State penetrate into the heart of village tradition behind the “bamboo hedge”. The land of the ancestors now had a remarkably effective tool for loosening the grip of its atavistic ethno-geographic beliefs. Martyr for a patriotic cause and mouthpiece for its political legitimacy, the new hero became rooted in the local and helped create a new imaginary for the reunified nation.