Interactions with a Violent Past

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CHAPTER 3

War-Martyr Bia: Commemoration and Perdurability in Rural Vietnam

Markus Schlecker

Every human person records, reflects on, and must try to understand clearly the ancestral line and consanguinity, so as to consciously attend to the ancestral line, the stream of blood of the ancestral kin group, to keep this stream of blood scarlet forever and ever. That is the moral principle of human beings toward their ancestral lines, their ancestors, their families. ‘When drinking water, be conscious of its source.’

— From a preface to a genealogical record book of an ancestral kin group in Thanh Hà commune.

Introduction

In a recent contribution to a collection of essays on Southeast Asian ideas of power, Catherine Allerton (2012) describes Indonesian villagers’ idea of land as possessing agency (“the energy of the land”), which according to her informants had killed a visiting engineer after he had announced the opening of their native land for commercial exploitation. What her discussion gradually works out is an intertwining of spatial concepts of human and ancestral belonging to land. During fieldwork in Thanh Hà (2006–07), a commune in rural Northern Vietnam, I came across very similar expressions of local soil being angry, fierce and mischievous that caused harm. Unlike Allerton, I consider this not direct expressions of an agency of land; rather, as euphemisms to talk about angry and harmful ancestral spirits that were known to dwell below the earth.
When we speak of landscape, we tend to think of this in contrast to nature as that which human minds and hands purposively alter to serve specific needs or please certain aesthetic senses (Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995). In Vietnam, attentiveness has always been directed at the creation of physical markers that transform soil into a meaningful land or landscape. Halls, altars, shrines, temples, pagodas, graves, and even plain dwellings are such markers. They record previous human existences and at the same time assert that, as ancestors and other divinities, they continue to be present and hold sway over the locality. Physical markers make possible ritual encounters and thereby ensure a vital relatedness between past, present, and future generations through land.

One especially significant class of physical markers of land are commemorative stelae (bia). They are an important component of religious and sacred sites in Vietnam and inform visitors of the past heroic and meritorious achievements of persons associated with the place. Commemorative stelae are considered historically significant for two reasons. First, the custom of stelae harks back to ancient times and in this sense an aura of a long and dignified tradition surrounds them as a class of objects. One of the best-known bia are the stelae-carrying stone turtles inside Hanoi’s Confucian temple of literature Văn Miếu, built between the 11th and 14th centuries. Engraved on these bia are the names of successful candidates for offices in the feudal administration. Second, commemorative stelae are usually made of stone and their solid materiality, by resisting decay, inspires a general sense of respect toward them, as objects with their own long history. Social upheaval and natural disasters may have led to the disappearance of different stelae, but every now and then they turn up again as if to assert their authority.

This was also the case in Thanh Hà, a rural commune belonging to Hải Phòng’s impoverished coastal district Tiên Lãng in Northern Vietnam. Roadworks for the installation of the commune’s first sewage system had turned up a stone slab. Its rectangular shape and rounded edges on one side suggested that it had to be a stela of sorts. Villagers had soon gathered around the discovery and everyone offered ideas as to its origin and significance. It was then decided by a few elderly men that it should be immediately carried to the nearby pagoda and left there until its identity could be established.

The sudden presence of the stone in the pagoda’s courtyard was not entirely welcomed by the village’s Buddhist followers. Speculations were triggered by two outsiders, visiting elderly women from a nearby commune, who pointed out the stone’s peculiar green shading. They questioned that it was even a bia. For the two women, the color indicated the
presence of a goblin (yêu tinh) who had come to reside inside the stone. Soon, the pagoda’s elderly women grew very concerned that in the guise of a dignified ancient stela, a malicious power had been brought to their sacred place, akin to a Trojan horse. Fellow male Buddhist followers were called and urged to remove the stone from the pagoda’s premises swiftly.

The brief vignette from Thanh Hà illustrates that commemorative stones build an intersection of several important themes. The women’s anxiety about the stone being potentially harmful is instructive insofar as it was clearly triggered by its unknown origin, purpose, and history. Its shape, on the other hand, suggested that it had once informed its reader of past meritorious deeds. Clearly, there was a general sense of hope among villagers that the stone retrieved might add further prestige to their village. Third, the stone shared with other commemorative stelae the positive quality of being very solid and lasting, appreciated not only by villagers. Wandering ghosts, the souls of deceased persons whose passage to the other world had been obstructed, were known to seek refuge in solid places, such as a tree, a small out-door shrine, or stones, seemingly to compensate for their lack of stability.

Ritual Revival and War-Martyr Stelae in Thanh Hà

Commemorative stelae are not only being discovered in contemporary Vietnam. New ones are being made. Some of these merely replace older ones that were destroyed or had disappeared. Often this happens as part of larger reconstructions of pagodas, temples, and shrines. Others are specifically made to record donations, especially within the context of such reconstructions. The donor’s name, place of residence, and the donated sum are carefully engraved. These donation stelae, while their uses hark back to ancient times, were possibly the most common variant of all newly fashioned commemorative stelae in Thanh Hà commune.

Another one were bia hậu or bia mua hậu, which listed deceased persons without heirs who could perform ancestor worship. By paying a one-time sum, families could give the soul of a deceased childless relative into the ritual care of the ancestral kin group (dòng họ) where the name was engraved into the bia mua hậu and from then on included in regular prayers. Dòng họ groups, in other words, were at first taking over the task of family ancestor veneration, since a kin group only commemorates ancestors from the fifth generation backwards.³

The revival of village customs and reconstructions of ritual sites has been documented by several anthropologists (Kleinen 1999; Endres 2000;
Malarney 2002; Truong Huyen Chi 2001), as has been the post-reform flourishing of spiritual cults and mediums whose following transcend local communities (Taylor 2004; Endres 2008; Pham Quynh Phuong 2009). What has received somewhat less attention are the revival of local patrilineal ancestral kin groups, so-called dòng họ.4

In Thanh Hà, dòng họ groups had clearly become active since the inception of the economic reforms (đổi mới) in 1986, which initiated a full-scale shift from a centrally planned to a market economy within the unchanged political framework of a one-Party state. The changes involved a certain disentanglement of state and Party organs, the abolition of the rationing system, a long-term leasing of farming land to families, the transformation state-run cooperatives from employers to service providers, and the opening to foreign investment. One memorable comment by a villager was, “Our dòng họ is more actively meeting than [my hamlet’s] Party cell!” Their dignitaries, frequently old revolutionary or military heroes and retired cadres, set up various committees headed by a chairperson and vice-chairperson. One man compared the ancestral-cult committee to a “board of managing directors.” A basic contrast was, however, noticeable between those kin groups that gathered frequently and had reinstated their ritual practices and those that were either in a process of dissolution or a state of slumber. In the most populous of Thanh Hà’s four village communities (làng), 20 dòng họ groups had their main place of worship, though only eight, possibly up to 12 of them, were in a process of reviving their gatherings and expanding their activities.

Amidst this revival of annual or even semi-annual gatherings to venerate common patrilineal ancestors with a growing number of attendants, dòng họ groups also explored ways to enhance their prestige and influence. Ritual dancers from the local temple, who usually performed for village festivals, were invited to perform sacrificial worship at a dòng họ gathering. The highest-ranking dignitaries started to wear traditional áo dài style ritual tunics and circular headgear (khăn đồng), as had been the case before the revolutionary changes in the 1940s. Ancestral altars, halls, and graves were rebuilt and enhanced in an effort to outdo other dòng họ groups. The deeply entrenched ritual competitiveness among villagers over local prestige had been a main target of the socialist antilavishness policies, which by and large the Party leadership had kept in place after the economic reforms. It was noted by central and local authorities that since the economic reforms, ritual competitiveness in local communities was on the rise again. Not infrequently, local cadres were themselves taking part in the conspicuous consumption of precious resources, such as hosting lavish funeral banquets.
Most of the constructions had been done only since 1999 when dòng họ groups started to receive larger donations from well-to-do urban-dwelling members and overseas Vietnamese. These contributions were then recorded on separate donation steles, typically located at the entrance of the ancestral hall. The issue of donations pinpointed what was most vital for a dòng họ group: its scope. Patrilineal ancestral lines were eagerly traced back to increase the size of the dòng họ beyond Thanh Hà and to include as members heroic figures and more recent dignitaries, such as decorated revolutionary fighters and war martyrs. Elderly men designed large genealogical charts by hand or enrolled computer-skilled relatives to print impressively looking pedigrees.

To add further substance to their prestigious membership, dòng họ groups planned or had already fashioned another form of stele, what they called war-martyr bia. The ritual competitiveness clearly built an important background to the recent trend among dòng họ to fashion war-martyr steles. What is remarkable about these steles is that they conjoined two potentially antagonistic domains: the Party State’s cult of war martyrdom, as part of its wider sphere of historical truth and political instruction, and the non-state domain of ancestral worship, which celebrated the significance of particularistic kin ties, common patrilineal descent and common substance — the họ. Engraved on a war martyr bia were only those who were descendants of the dòng họ. These steles were thus breaking down the state category of war martyrs.

Perdurability

In the present chapter, I use the term perdurability to emphasize and explore the materiality of commemorative steles as solid, lasting objects in conjunction with their renewed significance in Thanh Hà for the commemoration of war martyrs. By deploying this term, I wish to capture a widespread appreciation among Vietnamese of manifestations of what I argue is a metaphysical quality, that of non-transience. In its pure state, it is imagined to reside as an immaterial quality in the spiritual realm of âm. Âm is the sphere of all sacred beings, ancestral spirits and other divinities. Perdurability refers to the materializations of non-transience as it enters the human sphere of mortality, transience and imperfection, known as dương. Âm and dương correspond to the Chinese cosmological terms yin and yang.

Perdurability is thus recognized and appreciated in its manifestation in things and events in the human world. The ethically highest-ranking
Plate 3.1 Ancient stela with chữ nôm inscriptions. Today situated on a village temple’s premises, but claimed to have been ancestral kin group stela.
instance of its manifestation is the ancestral gift of life. Vietnamese imagine the ancestral life-giving act in terms of a meritorious deed (công) which entails a moral indebtedness (ón) on the part of the recipient. The human person is construed in terms of this conjoining of non-transience, the divine soul (hồn) with the perishable substances of human “flesh and intestines” and the worldly life forces or energies (via). The materiality of a particular grave and the terracotta sarcophagus inside, for instance, are judged and appreciated in terms of their ability to resist decay, their **perdurability**. This is because, more significantly, they safeguard the **perdurability** of the bones, which I argue occupy an intermediary position between the highly perishable bodily substances and **via** and the non-perishable **hồn** (Schlecker n.d.).

**Perdurability** denotes a unity of two basic dimensions: a material lastingness and the idea of a continuous relatedness. The most obvious case of this moral conceptualization is the idea of the **họ**, which I translate as **ancestral relatedness**. People reckon their kin relations to one another through common patrilineal descent. Descent, referred to as the “flow of **họ**” (đông **họ**), is conceptualized as a unity of a common substance and relatedness through time. The idea of a continuous relatedness pertains most significantly to the moral concept of an enduring link between merit (công) and indebtedness (ón). This idea, I argue, is just as integral to the significance of a stela as is its solid materiality, its ability to persist through time.

The socioeconomic reforms of the country, which had begun in the late 1980s, entailed a disintegrative process for many rural communities, which in turn undermined the valued and desired manifestation of **perdurability**. In the past, the pre-reform household registration system, in conjunction with the all-pervasive rationing and state-employment systems, had prevented most people from migrating to cities. For Thanh Hà villagers, the disintegrative process in the reform era manifested itself primarily in the form of outward migration and a decoupling of state rewards from wartime achievements. Both were recognized as fatal for the community and it seemed that recent efforts to revive the local ritual life, especially among the village elders, constituted efforts to counteract this trend.

**Thanh Hà Commune: Depopulation and the Waning of War-Martyr Allowances**

Villagers recognized a pervasive disintegrative process affecting their commune through two chief changes: ever more local residents moved away
to urban and industrialized semi-urban places, often they did so for good. Second, the commune’s outstanding wartime achievements were becoming decoupled from state support as the generation of war-martyr spouses and veterans was dwindling. The first change affected especially the materiality of inhabited spaces and of the very bodies of those now absent, those who had previously contributed to the livelihood of the commune. The second change undermined especially the moral concept of a continuous relatedness, of an unceasing dedication to those who had given away their lives in war.

Rural communes in Northern Vietnam experience dramatic depopulation in the present era of economic reforms when urbanized centers hold the promise of much more profitable work. Thanh Hà’s isolated location meant that this trend was here especially pronounced. Three rivers geographically isolate its coastal district, Tiễn Lãng. Much of the traffic to and from Thanh Hà travels on timeworn rusty ferries. Villagers often explained to me their economic plight with reference to the isolated location. They spoke of being “cut off,” Thanh Hà being a “river islet,” and of living at the end of the district road. Many eagerly awaited announcements of any plans to build a seafood processing plant.

Visitors to the commune would soon notice the general absence of men and women in their 20s and 30s. There were also noticeably few families with young children. A good number of houses stood deserted in the commune with windows and doors shut by wooden boards. When I first accumulated basic biographical data on the local population of the most populous hamlet, known as Hamlet 7, the term cắt khẩu would often be read out, which meant that a family had formally deregistered from Thanh Hà. Roughly, one in three families had at least one member residing in an urban center or working abroad as a guest laborer. These villagers support their elderly parents and young children who have stayed in Thanh Hà.

Michael DiGregorio (2007) has argued plausibly that the ritual revival in his fieldsite — a Northern Vietnamese village of steel recyclers — is to be understood as a response to the “dissolution of locality,” as an outcome of labor migration. “The reconstruction of ritual space has become emblematic of an effort by the older generation to create this community and the claims on wealth, time and energy it entails” (ibid.: 464). My observations of commemorative practices in Thanh Hà concur with DiGregorio’s account. Yet I want to explore the idea that for villagers in Thanh Hà, the threat was as much about dissolution of space, epitomized by boarded up houses, as it was about an actual loss of bodies. Depopulation meant
that ever fewer people, especially the younger generation, would contribute to the livelihood of the village communities through productive work and offspring, but also through their continued ritual veneration of ancestors and local war dead.

The second major dimension of Thanh Hà’s disintegration in the reform era was that state commemoration of wartime achievements was becoming decoupled from actual state allowances. Many Thanh Hà families depended critically on these allowances. In addition, the commemoration of war martyr built for villagers the only remaining bond between their geographically marginal commune and the centers of power in Hanoi and Hải Phòng city. A widespread concern that the commune’s wartime sacrifices for the country were becoming insignificant meant that Thanh Hà was becoming ever further marginalized within the country.

Thanh Hà commune was said to be wealthier than all other communes in Tiền Lãng due to its large number of War-Martyr Families, an earlier state support scheme. According to record books in the commune’s Office for Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, over 18% of families had registered. War-martyr families, along with war-afflicted individuals (veterans, sick soldiers, Agent Orange victims), received monthly allowances, which constituted a considerable item in a peasant family’s monthly budget. In most cases, it was the aging mother or father, who lived with a son and his family, and who thus contributed to the family’s overall budget.

But this advantage over neighboring communes was on the wane. The younger brother of a war martyr put this most succinctly:

… many [from] here died [in the war] and that’s why here a lot of people receive payments; … and all the [other] communes along the main road are badly off; … but in a few years, all the old people will have died and then no more payments will be made; all of the old people are very old already, all of them are 60, 70, 80 years old, they will all soon die; in just over ten years, no more payments will be distributed by the state.

The limitation of war-martyr allowances to the remaining lifespan of one or two, often elderly, individuals was widely perceived in Thanh Hà as building a tension with the Party State’s commemorative slogans: “The Country of [our] Ancestors will always remember [your] Services” (tổ quốc ghi công) and “Forever Remembering Our Indebtedness” (đời đời nhớ ơn). Benoît de Tréglodé (2001) and Shaun Malarme (1996; 2002: 172ff; 2007) have detailed the ways in which the communist leadership fashioned a
state cult of worshipping exemplary persons who had accrued merit during the revolutionary struggle and Wars of Resistance. The cult was not built from scratch, but elaborated on existing concepts and ritual practices, in particular the custom of recounting heroic tales to educate people about moral conduct. For both authors, state socialist worship of exemplary persons was to instil a sense of unity among survivors and subsequent generations. Collective emulation of exemplary persons, often rendered an accrual of merit (công), was to help build the new society.

For Thanh Hà residents, the dwindling generation of recipients of war-martyr allowances heralded a more general reorientation of the Party State away from a rewarding, ideological, state to a post-ideological welfare provider. It is highly indicative that the more recent Poverty Household support scheme is not related to any meritorious achievement, but rather formally acknowledges the economic deprivation of households, irrespective of whether this is self-induced or not. In part, it reflects the growing impact of advisory bodies of foreign governmental and non-governmental organizations. Most importantly for us here is that the Poverty Household scheme signals the transformation of the Party State, which once laid great stress on the demonstration of meritorious service and loyalty as the precondition for dispensing support and other privileges.

The commune had received the highly prestigious 1st- and 2nd-Class Orders of Resistance from the national government. Every public event in Thanh Hà was suffused by references to the Wars of Resistance and the People’s Army, including elementary-school festivals, kin-group death-day commemorations, and village festivals. Local government cadres repeatedly spoke of Thanh Hà as having a “revolutionary tradition” (truyền thống cách mạng). Yet as war-related rewarding state support gave way to undiscriminatory poverty reduction programs, such laudatory speeches struck villagers as empty and fatigued gestures.

**War-Martyr Stelae as a Ritual Appropriation**

Both of these major changes, an increasing depopulation and the decoupling of state support from wartime sacrifices, prompted villagers to ritually appropriate the commemoration of the war dead. One especially noteworthy case was an annual commemoration of a raid on Thanh Hà by the French army in 1948 to quell the local anti-colonial resistance. The commemoration was organized by members of the lay Buddhists of the largest village community in Thanh Hà on their own initiative.
Another, somewhat less conspicuous, ritual appropriation of wartime commemoration concerned war-martyr stelae that listed members of an ancestral kin group, those who had been formally recognized by the government as war martyrs. This meant that the Party State’s broad category of war martyrs was being broken down according to blood ties and locality. Precisely the deep-seated preference for particularistic ties based on ideas of common descent and common region had become targets of the revolutionary crackdown on feudalist customs and institutions and were still throughout the pre-reform era, at least formally, discouraged.

War-martyr stelae were clearly also another instance of efforts to add further prestige — to honor (tôn vinh) — to one’s kin group, tacitly vying with other such groups under the watchful eyes of the deputy chairman for Cultural Affairs. Yet, I argue that the ritual fervor was more acutely driven by the above processes of depopulation and decoupling of state support from wartime achievements. Ancestral relatedness was seen by many elderly villagers as a way to counteract depopulation by holding regular gatherings that brought together villagers from afar. And as genealogical charts were redrafted and expanded, the scope of such gatherings could increase. At the same time, solid forms were clearly desired so as to enhance perdurability, the unity of a material lastingness and a continuous relatedness between villagers and meritorious ancestors.

Two elderly villagers from the wealthy Lương kin group of Hamlet 7, Mr. Huân and Mr. Khê, explained the large genealogical chart of their dòng họ and expressed the moral force exerted by the họ on people to gather in their native place.

Huân: Officially, this man’s branch is the main branch, but this man went into exile. [And after he] went abroad … [he] gave birth to many children, who adopted the foreign language. [They do] not [speak] Vietnamese anymore.
Khê: [But] when he comes back, [others] have to acknowledge that this man acts in the capacity of the head [of the ancestral line].

H.: His roots are here. That’s right. He may work as a director or a medical doctor [over there], but he still carries the name of his ancestral line. [Some come back] after five generations, [they] come back to affirm their ancestral line, sometimes even seven generations. They go abroad and then come back.

K.: He married over there. But he had to come back to his native land and affirm [his relatedness to] parents and grandparents. For however many generations, one still has to come back to reaffirm [one’s relatedness].
H.: That is, over here, one has to carry the ancestral-line name of one’s father … the father had become naturalized [over there], [but] the children are Vietnamese. … After seven or eight years of war, he still did not come back…

K.: That’s the way it is. It keeps being handed down from this generation onto the next generation; it’s still like that…

H.: [Pointing at the ancestral chart:] That is, from this one [founding ancestor] to that one [down] there are 11 generations. Each born [by the previous generation], [all the way] down. For instance, this man here. [Pointing at an ancestor high up in the chart] He lived in Huế. In feudal times, he went there to fulfil his duty, resisting the foreign aggressors, resisting the Chinese feudal clique who had come to fight us. So after that, he was conferred a title in the temple or pagoda [there]. They inscribed his name there, a kind of endowment from the emperor …

K.: … he became a general by resisting the enemy, was given a royal decree. This was inscribed into a stela in the shrine at the end of our village.

H.: And now, we transfer this all to a new bia [of the Lương ancestral-kin group]: who in our ancestral line, in which generation, has taken part in the resistance against foreign aggressors.

K.: The stela has to be made from stone. [It will be made] this year.

H.: Engraved in stone!

K.: This year, because [before that] we did not have the money. This year, we began a collection campaign. All the men support and contribute money to make this stone stela.

[…]

H.: Whether abroad or in this country, for the death-day commemoration, one comes back. All have to come back. Every year, they also worship and make offerings.

The way in which Huân and Khê repeatedly stress here the moral force of the họ, ancestral relatedness, that it supersedes the significance of economically superior urban centers and places abroad, exemplifies well a widely shared mode of reasoning among villagers. The moral force outlasted Thanh Hà natives’ migration histories and occupational changes. The making of a war-martyr stela indicates an effort to create tangible form (“Engraved in stone!”) for this moral force, to enhance perdurability.

The significance of the bia’s lasting materiality was expressed by Huân and Khê in conjunction with their effort to extend their kin group’s relatedness through time. Remarkably, the war-martyr stelae, most of them still in the planning and money-pooling phase, were to include ancestors
from feudal times whose meritorious service to the country long preceded the actual category of “war martyrs” (liệt sĩ). This was an effort to extend the lines of descent of meritorious persons far beyond the temporal frame of the state’s cult of war martyrdom. Thanh Hà villagers, in other words, both limited the veneration of war martyrs to selected individuals, members of one’s own kin group, and expanded membership beyond official frame of Era of the Wars of Resistance.

We recall the opening story, where the elderly women grew concerned that the mysterious stone, discovered during construction work, was possibly housing a goblin. Its unknown origin, history, and purpose had clearly triggered this unease. Here, in contrast, villagers were actively bestowing a history on their stelae. By engraving a long list of dignified ancestors, kin groups charged the solid materiality of these commemorative stones with a venerable temporal continuity, thus contributing toward the perdurability of the stela.

**Concluding Remarks**

Vietnamese appreciate the manifestation of *perdurability* in a solid stone stela. I have argued above that this appreciation centers most significantly on the enduring relationship between the provider of a meritorious service (*công*) and the grateful recipient who has become indebted (*ơn*) in this manner. The subject of memory has here less to do with European preoccupations with the problem of representation (Terdiman 1993). It is rather an ethically charged understanding. Here, memory is a moral stance, an acknowledgment of one’s indebtedness and commemoration of the appropriate action.

Many villagers experienced the reform era as one in which the Party State moved its attention away from the achievements of their family members and fellow villagers in the Wars of Resistance and their enduring of hardship throughout the pre-reform times. The shift from a rewarding ideological pre-reform state to a pragmatic welfare state since the reforms has entailed that communes’ wartime prestige is clearly moving off the agenda and becoming decoupled from material rewards. Mass organizations, revived in the 1990s, were considered ineffectual performances that only covered up the growing distanciation of the leadership from rural concerns. The transformation of state-run agricultural cooperatives into mere service providers had resulted in great income disparities among families, which also triggered demands for a greater appreciation of past wartime services by family members.
Local appreciation of *perdurability* in ritual objects, sites and events has become heightened against this background. War martyr stelae illustrate well the ritual appropriation of war-time commemorative forms whereby the commemoration of past merit is selectively caught in the fall, so to speak. While the Party State had fashioned a cult of war martyrdom that was to convey a sense of a national unity and supersede the role of particularistic ties, regional loyalties, and patrilineal descent, war martyr stelae reverse this program. Heroic ancestors who had fought against Chinese invaders in feudal times were being tied to war martyrs from the French and US-American wars. In another sense, this move paralleled the construction of a national history under the Communist Party, which also foregrounded continuities between revolutionary heroes and military leaders from feudalist times (Pelley 2002).

The increasing depopulation in Thanh Hà meant that ever fewer, especially younger villagers could ensure the commemoration of past merit as ritual performers and narrators of local stories of the past. The loss of an appreciative and materially rewarding attention by the Party State has prompted villagers to step up efforts and enhance *perdurability* in ritual contexts. The desire for *perdurability* is not limited to *bia*. It can be found in a range of ritual contexts, especially the construction of gravesites (Schlecker n.d.). Common to these activities are efforts to achieve a material lastingness of ritual objects so as to ensure a temporal continuity of the existential bond of merit and indebtedness between ancestral souls and human beings.

The ritual fervor among Thanh Hà’s *dông họ* groups is exemplary of wider trends in Vietnam today where authorities have recently taken up a more conciliatory approach to these groups. Through personal conversations, I learned of activities in another province where the local government had begun to award government certificates for *cultured* conduct to such *dông họ* groups, unthinkable until recently. Once considered a main obstacle to a successful transition toward a modern socialist nation, *dông họ* groups were now formally acknowledged in Thanh Hà’s village regulations as viable entities that helped to maintain social order and provided support to members in need. Many of these groups had set up specific hardship funds. Therefore, rather than consider the activities surrounding war-martyr stelae as simply opposed to the Party state, both its central and regional manifestations, it seems more appropriate to consider this as part of a process whereby the leadership is gradually shedding its role as an ideological educator of the masses and local non-state groups stepping
in to help people orientate themselves in often volatile and destitute circumstances.

The legacy of wartime sacrifices and its commemoration are central to this trend. With regard to soldiers who died violent deaths, the fashioning of war-martyr stelae is a deliberate attempt undertaken by local kin groups to extract, as it were, individual war martyrs from the state domain of historiography and war-time commemoration. War-martyr stelae can therefore be considered part of a wider trend to reclaim the significance of land as the medium for relatedness between those above and below it, against official representations of land.

Notes

1. The following discussion builds on 12 months of fieldwork, which investigated broadly social support with a special focus on kin relations and death rituals. In addition to the main methods of informal conversations with inhabitants and observations, basic biographical and socioeconomic data were collected on all families in Hamlet 7, the most populous hamlet with about 1,000 inhabitants and 350 households. Two-hour interviews were conducted with over 150 households in Hamlet 7 and additional data on remaining households compiled. The focus on Hamlet 7 and its village Đồng Úc was balanced with a participation in all major commune events in Thanh Hà.

2. One of the women was said to have extra-sensory or psychic skills and to run a private shrine in her own village.

3. Alternatively, a family could ask the local pagoda to perform worship for the childless relative where equally a one-time sum was paid and the name was then engraved into a bia mua hậu. The practice of paying a one-time sum for this service explains why this action contains the word mua (to buy).

4. Discussions of ancestral kin groups in the reform era have usually appeared as part of more encompassing accounts of cultural change and continuity (for example, Kleinen 1999; Luong Van Hy 1992; Jellema 2007). As part of a linguistic study, Luong Van Hy (1990) explored ideological structural dimensions of the Vietnamese kinship system. Previously, I focussed on the significance of kin metaphors of shared substance and actual kin relations for imaginations of the social in the reform era (Schlecker 2005).

5. Many dòng họ in Thanh Hà, however still lacked a hall of their own. In these cases, the large ancestral altar was housed in the private house of the head of cult. Several dòng họ had also become active in non-ritual domains. Some had set up their own stipend funds to encourage their members’ children to study hard and reward them financially. This move was to a considerable extent part of a recent rapprochement between government and dòng họ groups, also reflected in passages of the current village regulations, drafted
War-Martyr Bia

by Party members, which acknowledged the contribution of dòng họ groups toward the good “cultured conduct” of villagers.

6. Membership in a dòng họ group is determined by patrilineal descent rules, excluding all affines. Women, even after marriage, belong to their father’s dòng họ, but only men are registered as ritual actors, referred to as đinh. Currently, female members are often admitted, but clearly assume a marginal position. It was recognized among Thanh Hà villagers that the past had brought about changes and that nowadays, women were not as strictly excluded from ritual affairs as had been the case in the feudalist past. For some elderly villagers, the participation of women in traditionally male ritual affairs indicated the empty, mock character of contemporary performances.

7. My use of the term **perdurability** owes to anthropological adaptations of Peircian semiotics (see especially Metz and Parmentier 1985; Parmentier 1987; Munn 1992; Daniel 1996, Keane 1997). Different representational orders regiment a reading of signs in ways, where the manifestation of **perdurability** may or may not be recognized and appreciated. A modernist knowledge order, as it is driven by the Party State, discourages people to imagine a unity of a material lastingness and the idea of a continuous relatedness.

8. While my discussion here of these concepts of death, the human person, and afterlife derive mostly from my own fieldwork in Thanh Hà and previously in Hanoi, additional valuable sources were Chanh Cong Phan (1993) and Kwon (2006, 2008).

9. The “flow of họ” includes female siblings and excludes all affines. By custom, dòng họ gatherings are strictly male business, whose members are in this context referred to as đinh or, when counted, as suât đinh. In the current times, female members are often admitted, but clearly assume a marginal position.

10. The term **làng** had never been an administrative unit but, in the words of John Kleinen, denoted “a physical cluster of dwellings and at the same time a rural commune with a certain social cohesion, which does not exclude conflict … **làng** is the socio-cultural denominator of an administrative unit” (Kleinen 1999: 7). Up until the Revolution, the term **xã** had denoted such clusters of dwellings as administrative units. The interim revolutionary government then chose the term **xã** to designate its new commune units, usually comprising several **làng** communities, replacing and often subdividing the pre-revolutionary administrative units of cantons (**tông**). The **làng** communities were then formally subdivided into smaller units, first called **xóm** (neighborhoods), then during coop times (late 1950s–late 1970s) renamed and partly restructured as **đội** (brigades); after the inception of the reforms in the 1990s, they were renamed as **thôn** (hamlets; often also translated as village). In present-day Vietnam, a speaker often seamlessly shifts between the terms **thôn**, **làng**, and sometimes **xóm**, while referring to the same socio-spatial entity. The main focus of the present study, Ðông Úc is one of Thanh Hà
commune’s four làng communities and consists of seven of Thanh Hà’s 13 thôn or hamlets.

11. Most of families in Thanh Hà depended on the unprofitable rice cultivation, but typically augmented their income with work as hired laborers, side-line businesses, breeding poultry, pigs, fish, and shrimp, part-time work in a shoe factory or industrial park near Hải Phòng. The all-pervasive poverty is endemic to the whole coastal district Tiên Lãng, which in turn is the poorest in the province of Hải Phòng. Over 15% of Thanh Hà’s families had registered with the “Poverty Household” state-benefit scheme to be exempted from various fees, receive free medical care, and to obtain loans from the Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development for a much lower interest rate. Villagers estimated that around 70 to 80 percent of the population had taken out such loans.

12. According to the official guidelines for war-martyr allowances, recipients are either both parents, the spouse, or the person formally recognized as having raised and supported the war martyr as a child. For one war martyr, the allowance was about 355,000 VND a month (ca. 18 EUR, as of 2007), for two it was 600,000 VND (ca. 30 EUR). Where the war martyr had been posthumously recognized as such after 1 Oct. 2005, the recipient received a one-time lump-sum of about 7 million VND. If the war martyr had already children, they also receive about 355,000 VND a month during the whole time they are registered at an educational facility until they reach the age of 18. These amounts may not seem like much, but when set against the average income in Thanh Hà, one realizes that they are not insubstantial. According to my own semi-structured survey of 300 households, which took into account informal sources of income, a family who depends entirely on agriculture, earns often as little as somewhere around 200,000 to 300,000 VND a month, for the whole family. For inhabitants of Thanh Hà, this kind of income was comparable to a state salary. It was thought to be not terribly much, but it was stable, a quality much appreciated by those who struggled with unpredictable harvests and fluctuating market prices for agricultural produce.

13. The post-revolutionary and pre-reform Subsidy State (mid-1960s to late 1980s) under general secretary Le Duan bore resemblances with John Kenneth Galbraith’s (1983) concept “compensatory power.” This mode of power seeks to gain submission by offering affirmative rewards. Much of state practices during that time centered around the judging of actions and the dispension of graded rewards and privileges. The emergent Welfare State with its corporatist mechanism and co-optation strategies, on the other hand, comes close to what Galbraith called “conditioned power.” Rather than offering reward, submission is sought through persuasion that the interests represented by the corporate organizations is in every one’s interest. This mode of power is closely related to the growth of large organizations. In Galbraith’s work,
the focus lied on large corporate businesses in a capitalist order. Yet still it appears plausible that mass organizations and state bureaucracies in Vietnam deploy a very similar mode of power that seeks to condition belief. Co-opting and enrolling people into Vietnam’s re-animated mass organizations is a mode of persuasion that their interests are heard. Yet clearly in Vietnam, the power to condition is still very limited (see especially Jeong 1997).

14. Clearly, one major impetus for this event was that one of the victims was the village pagoda’s monk whom the French had tortured and killed. Significantly, this was done parallel to the decennial commemoration of the same event by the local government and various smaller annually occurring speeches. Yet while the state commemoration foregrounded a joyous and proud sense of victory, despite the eventual defeat of Thanh Hà, the Buddhists sombrely recalled the violent and untimely deaths of the victims. A Buddhist monk, together with different worship priests, performed prayers for the salvation of their souls at the pagoda. Ritual dancers from the local temple were invited to perform sacrificial worship to ensure the well-being of the village community. The local government representatives had been invited and were respectfully acknowledged in the speeches, but it was clear that they perceived the situation as highly ambivalent. The cadres kept a visible distance to the performance and waited inside a small room of the pagoda.

15. A commune in Northern Vietnam is governed by the People’s Committee (uỷ ban nhân dân), which is headed by a chairman and two deputy chairmen. In Apr. 2004, decree 107/2004/ND-CP by the central government determined that commune level People’s Committees were to divide responsibilities between two deputy chairmen, one responsible for economic and fiscal problems, the other for cultural and social affairs. The deputy chairman for cultural affairs determines whether ritual activities, including the construction of grave sites and ancestral halls, conform to laws and regulations. In practical terms, he or she keeps a close eye on the population’s cultured conduct, including quarrels, lavishness, gambling. In this, the deputy chairman is assisted by local residents in the villages and hamlets who are either part-time employees of his office or members of the watchdog Fatherland Front organization.

16. The war martyr category was according to Benoît de Tréglodé (2001; cit. by Malarney 2007) already fashioned in 1925, long before the national uprising in 1945.

17. This point is also supported by Malarney’s (2007) account of the connection between the commemoration of war martyrs and the ancient custom of venerating what he called exemplary dead.