among literati and mandarins that Catholics were in league with the imperialists and leading, after the French occupation, to an escalation of violence against Catholics (Ramsay 2004*a*).

[18] A legend about the Virgin Mary associated with her pilgrimage site in La Vang in Central Vietnam tells that in the early 1800s, after a long a traumatic period of civil war between rival political factions, she appeared to a group of Catholic refugees and provided them shelter and healing.

[19] Nguyễn Văn Huyên did not even mention Catholicism in his discussion of religion in *La Civilisation Annamite* (1944). In the Republican era, Buddhist activist Thích Nhất Hạnh argued that Catholicism was less tolerant of customary practices than the "Vietnamese traditions" of Buddhism and Confucianism (Thích Nhất Hạnh 1967, pp. 17–21).

[20] Despite all the print devoted to Catholicism's supposed antipathy to ancestor worship, Gerald Hickey noted that, in Catholic households in (pre-Vatican II) Khánh Hậu in the late 1950s, the position of the Catholic shrine was similar to that of the shrine to the ancestors in non-Catholic houses, and that Catholics also observed death anniversary rites and feasts for their departed family members (Hickey 1964, pp. 120, 128–29).

2

Returning Home: Ancestor Veneration and the Nationalism of *Đổi Mới* Vietnam

Kate Jellema

A few minutes before noon on 18 May 1994, a middle-aged foreigner in a business suit mounted the stairs of Đô Temple in the northern Vietnamese community of Đình Bảng. Villagers had just rebuilt the ancient temple, devoted to the worship of the eight kings of Vietnam's Lý dynasty (1010–1225), and a freshly lacquered altar shined bright red and gold in flickering candlelight. The stranger lit incense in front of the altar, got down on his knees, and bowed his head to the ground, overcome with the joy of a much-anticipated but long-delayed homecoming. After more than 700 years, Korean businessman Lee Chang Can, known as Lý Xương Căn in Vietnam, had at last been reunited with his Vietnamese ancestors. Căn descends from a branch of the Lý royal family that fled to Korea when the dynasty fell, and in 1994 he became the first person in his family to set foot on native soil since the thirteenth century. "Today, with a heart full of feeling, full of sentiment impossible to express, I have been able to return home," Căn inscribed in Korean script in the Đô Temple guest book. "As a result of this pilgrimage, I am basking in feelings of great warmth, honor and glory" (Lý Hiếu Nghĩa 1994, p. 21).

This chapter seeks to understand why, even as Vietnam rushes into a brighter, more cosmopolitan and prosperous future, its people ardently pursue homecomings and reunions. Why, in the midst of the forward-looking "Renovation" age, does the entire nation and its leaders seem transfixed by a quest to "return to origins" [*về nguồn*] and "remember the source" [*nhớ nguồn*]? Why do ancestors, royal or otherwise, exert such a strong pull on modern Vietnamese, and even more puzzling, why has the avowedly secular *Đổi Mới* state so enthusiastically promoted a revival of ancestor worship?

I argue that ancestor worship in particular, and the *về nguồn* movement in general, models a flexible "coming and going" engagement with the nation. As I hope to demonstrate with reference to the Đô Temple case, the revitalized practice of ancestor worship in *Đổi Mới* Vietnam is above all, a rite of return. Not only the dead but also the living are urged to come home, to *về quê* (return to the homeland). To *về quê* for the rituals is the ultimate act of filial devotion, at once expected and demanded, forced and desired. However, the unmarked corollary to the coming back must certainly be the going away, and thus buried within the trope of return and all its nationalistic implications, we discover, unexpectedly, hidden sanction for mobility. In other words, the emphasis on return accidentally configures ancestral rituals, and by extension the familial and national communities they generate, as occasional gatherings or temporary reunions. The disciplining *về* (to come back home) contains within it the liberating *đi* (to go out), and therein the possibility of a Vietnamese nationalism compatible with individual ambition and a global outlook.

This chapter draws on two years of dissertation fieldwork in northern Vietnam, including six months in 2001 living at the home of a local party leader, his wife and their three children in Đình Bảng village. My fieldwork, centred on the Đô Temple, took place at a time of mounting national interest in the Lý dynasty, as the country geared up for the 1000th birthday of Hanoi, founded in 1010 as the City of the Soaring Dragon by the first Lý king, Đình Bảng native Lý Thái Tổ. The discovery in 2001 of a grave site on the edge of Đình Bảng believed to date to the Lý era, the phenomenal find of the ruins of the old royal citadel in Hanoi, and a series of supernatural visitations by the dead kings themselves further incited public curiosity about the Lý dynasty. In this climate of enthusiasm for all things Lý, the leaders of Đình Bảng have been particularly ardent of late about their claim to live in the sacred land where the great dynasty

began. After decades of neglect, villagers recently rebuilt the Đô Temple, devoted to the worship and remembrance of the eight Lý kings and their mothers, and are eagerly transforming it into the spiritual, emotional and civic centre of the village, as well as a primary node linking the village to the nation.

Đình Bảng is situated on Highway One just north of Hanoi in Bắc Ninh province. Most villagers are ethnic Việt and at least nominally Buddhist. Đình Bảng is an exceptional place, and not just because it is the birthplace of the Lý dynasty; other reasons include its proximity to Hanoi, its glowing revolutionary record, and its above-average wealth. I look to it as a case study not because it is a typical or representative village, but rather because it is in many ways an exemplary village, often singled out for its laudable "return to origins" work. By studying Đô Temple in Đình Bảng, we are able to examine a community that places itself, and is at times placed by the state, at the vanguard of the *về nguồn* movement.

Religious Revival in the Post-modern World

The re-invention of ancestor worship across *Đổi Mới* Vietnam has to be situated within a larger pattern of religious revival sweeping across the country. The booming interest in spirituality in late socialist Vietnam reflects two global trends: the first towards religious revival in the developing world, often occurring in tandem with rapid integration into world markets, and the second towards spiritual rebirth in societies transitioning out of socialism.

Most scholarly explanations for the re-enchantment of the global South fall into two camps. First, many have argued that religion offers people an appealing way of dealing with the integration of local worlds into global capitalism, whether by helping them make sense of capitalism's own magic (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999); offering a framework for resisting the capitalist machine (Ong 1998); providing guidelines for the invention of a new moral order (Hefner 1998); or as Philip Taylor (2004*a*) argues in the case of South Vietnam's goddess cults, offering an empathetic ear to marginalized yet successful businesswomen. Rather than interpreting religious activity as a traditionalist hold-over, these post-Weberian scholars argue that religious revival in developing countries grows directly out of capitalism and is as intimately linked to economic changes as the creation of stock markets or the emergence of new patterns of consumption.

It is impossible to understand the contemporary practice of ancestor worship in Vietnam apart from a consideration of market reforms and the rapid development of capitalism within the country. Although it has deep historical roots, ancestor worship in Vietnam continues to be shaped by changing socio-economic and political exigencies. The upswing in the economy is reflected on a most basic level in the increasingly lavish consumer needs of the dead, as evidenced by the brand-name mopeds and home entertainment centres now available in votive form. The burgeoning middle class and the consumer culture it supports has also given rise to conspicuous investment in graves and altars, the state of which can serve as a quick index of both financial success and moral turpitude. Meanwhile, improved transportation and more disposable income, combined with the relaxation of central control in Vietnam, has meant both more mobility away from native places as well as greater ease in return journeys, with some family members now able to fly home from far-flung destinations for *Tết* or a special death-day anniversary. These family gatherings in turn can serve to open up new trade relationships or solidify business partnerships. The proper care of the dead is said to improve a family's commercial prospects, while particularly meritorious ancestors provide a partial explanation for the otherwise inexplicable or even unjust prosperity of a village like Đình Bảng compared to the relative poverty of a neighbouring hamlet. Interesting work remains to be done to systematically outline the complex and substantive ways ancestor worship has changed in tandem with macro-economic shifts from feudalism through the colonial then socialist economies and into the market era. Nonetheless, a narrow focus on the explanatory power of capitalism threatens to overlook other equally important dimensions of Renovation-era ancestor worship, most especially the role of commemorative practices in the reimagining of local and national communities in Vietnam.

A second and related approach to post-modern religious revival comes out of the study of transitional societies such as the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and late socialist Vietnam and China. Here religion often operates as a vehicle for alternative subjectivities and counter-narratives, creating a space relatively autonomous from the state in which people long forced to suppress their inner experiences and personal beliefs can finally express themselves. Looking specifically at the Vietnamese case, Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001) has argued that the passion for commemoration must be understood in light of heavy-handed state efforts to control history, particularly in the high socialist era of the 1950s to 1980s. As the state backs off, society gives voice to long-suppressed alternative histories and personal memories.

The new freedom the Renovation-era state accords society facilitates not only the expression of historical counter-narratives once deemed heretical but also the re-invention of a host of religious practices long condemned by the secularist state. Due to pressure from Western trading partners, a diminished capacity for social control, and a campaign to promote "traditional culture", the Vietnamese Government has relaxed formal and informal prohibitions against religious expression, and finally in 2004 passed a national ordinance pledging freedom of religious practice and belief.[1] Often, such as the case of the reconstruction of Đô Temple which began in the late 1980s, local groups take the lead on religious revival and exert pressure from below for the state to follow along; in other cases, such as the practice of goddess worship in the Mekong Delta, individuals have found a realm of autonomy outside the range of the state's peripheral vision (Taylor 2004*a*). Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to read the revival of ancestor worship strictly in terms of an antagonistic state-society dynamic or to see religion in modern Vietnam as a domain of civil society insulated from the reach of the party and the state (Ho Tai 1987). As the next section will show, the Renovation-era state does not merely tolerate ancestor worship; in fact, it is one of ancestor worship's most committed advocates, and invests significant public resources to promote the "return to origins" movement. Rather than imagining it a realm apart from party and state, it might make more sense to consider ancestor worship as a site of constructive dialogue between state and society, Hanoi and the periphery, a site where a common set of practices and a shared language create the conditions for civil discussion of major issues facing *Đổi Mới* Vietnam, not least amongst which are questions about the shape of nationalism in the twenty-first century.

Without discounting the importance of market forces nor dismissing the potential for religion to provide a measure of autonomy from the state, here I will focus on the way the state harnesses the potential of ancestor worship to advance a sense of national belonging in the post-war, late socialist moment. After demonstrating the strong government support for return to origins activities, I will argue that through the re-invention of ancestor worship as a rite of return, the party-state models a new form of nationalism well-suited to *Đổi Mới* Vietnam: a "coming and going"

nationalism that can traverse global terrain while retaining a strong sense of home; a nationalism that allows for individual mobility without sacrificing communal belonging.

"Remember to Return"

In a fluid age marked by separation, migration, urbanization and the centrifugal pressures of modernity, the Vietnamese construct ancestor worship as a rite of return. In rhetoric and practice, death-day anniversaries, *Tết* ceremonies and village festivals re-convene scattered communities, bringing them back in sentimental expressions of home, unity and togetheness. For example, in Đình Bảng, the three-day Đô Temple Festival held each year on the fifteenth day of the third lunar month acts as a great convener, gathering villagers and pilgrims, commoners and royalty, the living and the dead together in the same place at the same time for a brief but magnificent reunion staged at the point of personal, village and national "origins" [*nguồn gốc*]. When the festival ends, everyone disperses again to distant locales, repeating to themselves a poetic reminder to come back the following year:

> The sonorous prayer bells from Ứng Tâm pagoda on the fourteenth of the month,
> The resounding drums of Đô Temple on the fifteenth,
> The green fields and ripe red rice plants
> All tell those far away to remember to return!

Ironically, the reunions of the festival reveal a normative state of apartness. Cheerful reminders directing "those far away to remember to return" on special occasions give folkloric endorsement to time away even as they put pressure on far-flung kin to come home for holy days. As suggested by the emphasis on extraordinary togetherness a few times a year, the model community member produced through the practice of ancestor worship may actually spend most of his or her time elsewhere, following individual pursuits in distant lands, only returning rarely, at key moments, to demonstrate virtuous filiality.

Where the Souls of Lạc Việt Gather

As I discovered while living in Đình Bảng village in 2001, even before the main event begins, the Đô Temple Festival creates the occasion for an array of smaller events all geared towards reconstituting scattered communities.

For about a fortnight before the actual festival, I accompanied my host, chairman of the commune People's Committee, to more than a dozen reunions, including those of his elementary school classmates, everyone inducted into the army from that locality on the same day, an anti-colonial youth guerrilla brigade, the wrestling club, the opera club, the amateur poetry club, the "daughters and brides" of a village lineage, and, the next day, the lineage at large. All of these gatherings involved the delighted reacquaintance of old friends and relations who had not seen each other for months, years or in some cases even decades; all entailed the congregation of people normally apart. The reunions usually centred around the act of feasting together at a banquet funded by collection and hosted in the home of one of the local members, the shared meal symbolically underlining the momentary coevality.

Culminating the season of reunions each year in Đình Bảng is the Đô Temple Festival itself, reinstituted after decades of dormancy in the early days of *Đổi Mới*. The festival now attracts thousands of pilgrims each year, not least amongst them a large contingent of Đình Bảng natives living elsewhere. The big house of my host bustled with visitors during the festival, including old friends, business associates, impoverished kin from deeper in the countryside and well-to-do relatives from Hanoi. For three days, the courtyard roared with moped engines as clusters of visitors arrived, stayed for tea or a meal, and then left, only to be replaced by new groups, everyone in high spirits, laughing, drinking and bearing gifts: special fruits from the provinces, the best french bread available only in Hanoi, home brewed liquor and golden bottles of French cognac.

According to festival organizers, Đô Temple belongs to all of Vietnam, as the birthplace not only of one of her most illustrious dynasties but also of her national capital. As temple guardian Nguyễn Đức Thìn explained in an article for the provincial newspaper *Bắc Ninh*, "The Đô Temple Festival is not only of the village; from long ago it has been a festival for the whole nation."[2] Using an ancient name for the country, Thìn entitled his article "The Đô Temple Festival: Where the Souls of Lạc Việt Gather", making the point again that the festival convenes not just the village but also the entire "Lạc Việt" nation. "The Đô Temple Festival is a festival of return, an enthusiastic appeal to origins, a gathering of the souls of the children of Lạc and the grandchildren of the Hùng kings in order to *uống nước nhớ nguồn*," he elaborates later in the article, citing a proverb popular in Renovation-era Vietnam which means: "When you drink from the stream,

remember the source." Coming together at the temple generates a spirit of nationalism and camaraderie: "The festival is a warm meeting of brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins, all participating together in the sacred rites, the traditional rituals, the folk culture and the entertainment, thereby increasing the love they share for one another, their appreciation for national characteristics, and their aspirations for peace and happiness."

Calling the Dead

The reunions that occur around festival time involve not only the living but also the dead, who carry on busy lives in the underworld and have to be called home for special events. In David Haines' study of southern Vietnamese households relocated to the United States, immigrant informants said they appreciated the way lunar new year rituals brought together the whole family, including both living and dead relatives: "Both live somewhere else; both return for visits." What is unique about the holiday is not the interaction amongst family members *per se*, but rather that that interaction is "so extended and so dense", amounting to a "broad convocation of the living and the dead" (Haines 2006, pp. 130, 131).

Altars and graves in Vietnam are not permanent homes for the dead, but only meeting points from which the ancestors "come and go" [*đi về*]. To facilitate the return trips of the dead to these meeting points, the living take care to provide them with transportation: markets in Hanoi now sell not only votive mopeds, but also votive cars and airplanes. Sometimes the living, aware of the busy schedule of the dead, will host a notification rite to give ancestors advance warning of an upcoming ritual event and invite them to return. As one villager explained during a notification rite for a lineage apical ancestor, "This is the day to report to the ancestor that tomorrow is his death-day anniversary, so whatever he was planning on doing, he needs to drop everything and come here instead!"

Emperors of the Sky

Just like the ordinary dead, the royal dead have to be summoned back to participate in rites. On festival days and death-day anniversaries for the Lý kings at Đô Temple, the village elders dress in elegant ceremonial robes and spend the morning ritually invoking the monarchs. As fragrant smoke from smoldering incense drifts to the heavens, an elder cries out the names

of the royal dead, moving in slow succession through the dynasty. Leaning into a microphone, his voice travels through an amplification system set on the "reverberate" function. It fills the temple grounds with its eerie majesty, then rises into the heavens on a cloud of smoke. The list of names is punctuated by thunder claps from the barrel-chested temple drum, meted out with great flourish one at a time by man dressed in an embroidered headdress fringed with red pom-poms. "Lý Thái Tổ ... BOOM! ... Lý Thái Tông ... BOOM! ... Lý Thánh Tông ... BOOM!" After every resounding strike, the drummer holds the mallet still in the air and closes his eyes in perfect repose. Only a faint quivering of his pom-poms reveals the source of the other-worldly sound.

In recent years, following the post-war reconstruction of Đô Temple and the rediscovery of the Korean descendants of the royal family, the eight kings of the Lý dynasty have announced their own rare returns to their temple with semaphoric meteorology, making their temporary presence evident in fleeting cloud formations. Many such miraculous cloud formations occurred in the late 1990s. To give just one example, at noon on the main day of the Đô Temple Festival in 1997, the sky was a deep endless blue. Suddenly, just as a festival procession was returning to the temple courtyard, eight long thin white clouds, each in the shape of a sinuous dragon, appeared out of nowhere in the clear sky and drifted together over the roof of the temple. "The clouds only appeared for a moment, then they vanished like a dream," one witness told me. The elusive moment was captured on film in a single photograph by a man named Hoàng Tuấn Đại. This first and only photo of the eight clouds became nationally known. Observers see in the eight clouds "the souls of the eight Lý kings, gathering a moment to return, together with their descendants, on the ancestral death day".[3]

Party-state Endorsement of Ancestor Worship

In early 2005, the official website of the Communist Party of Vietnam featured a special video showing Secretary General Nông Đức Mạnh bowing before a small red-curtained altar. "Following the annual ritual", the accompanying text on the website reads, "during the traditional days of *Tết*, the comrade-leaders of the party and the government all go to the memorial for Hồ Chí Minh in the Presidential Palace to offer incense and solemnly remember Uncle, loved and respected leader of the nation." In a variety of highly public acts, ranging from this webpage display of

filial duty towards the avuncular Hồ, to the multi-day festival marking the death day anniversary of legendary national ancestors the Hùng kings; from schoolchildren bussed to Đô Temple in Đình Bảng to the language of National Assembly resolutions; in its laws, its policies, and its funding priorities, the *Đổi Mới* state indicates its endorsement of the practice of ancestor worship and related rites of return.

Bowing to the Lý Kings

The *Đổi Mới* state's commitment to "return to origins" reaches down into local communities, as evidenced by the participation of the Ministry of Finance, the state treasury, national leaders and myriad schoolchildren in everyday acts of ancestor worship at the Đô Temple. The Đô Temple complex, in its heyday comprising more than a dozen wooden structures harmoniously placed in a verdant landscape of ponds, fruit trees and stone statues, dates back to the days of Lý Thái Tổ, the dynastic founder, who was born in Đình Bảng in the tenth century.[4] After he was crowned emperor, he returned to his native village and built a shrine as a tribute to his ancestors. Over the centuries the temple expanded to serve as the official worship site for the Lý dynasty. However, neither historical nor religious significance could save the temple from the incendiary pressures of the First Indochinese War, and in 1952, French forces torched the ancient temple, convinced that it harboured anti-colonial guerrillas. Only a stone stele listing the accomplishments of the Lý survived. For decades, the temple grounds sat charred and empty, sometimes used by grazing buffalo and once, during the war with America, as a firing range. Not until 1989, three years after the tentative inauguration of *Đổi Mới* reforms, did Đình Bảng residents, backed by the local branch of the Fatherland Front, launch a grassroots effort to reconstruct the temple. Over the next decade-and-a-half, motivated by what temple guardian Nguyễn Đức Thìn calls a "profound sentiment of 'when you drink from the stream, remember the source'", villagers raised enough money to systematically rebuild every structure in the complex.

Over the past ten years, Đô Temple has enjoyed increasing attention from national-level leaders as the country catches the "return to origins" spirit and the state prepares to celebrate the 1000th birthday of Lý Thái Tổ's capital city. The government has taken a special interest in the temple's open-sided water pavilion, a small but elegant structure which

in 1930 graced the five-franc note issued by the colonial Banque de l'Indochine (Hội Tem Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh 1994, p. 59). The Ministry of Finance agreed to directly fund its reconstruction, and in 2001 the state treasury in Hanoi issued a commemorative 1,000-dong coin impressed with an image of the pavilion. The coin completes the return of the Đô Temple, and by extension the country, from imperial occupation to local stewardship.

State approval of the temple and its elaborate ritual cycle is also evidenced by the tens of thousands of public schoolchildren taken to Đô Temple on official field trips each year, their buses festooned with banners reading "when you drink from the stream, remember the source". Perhaps three days out of seven, schoolchildren carrying bright backpacks and sack lunches pack the brick courtyard and learn how to worship the eight Lý kings. The school visits, designed to acquaint a new generation with its national origins, include a lively history lecture by caretaker Thìn which interweaves stories about the Hùng kings, the Lý kings and Hồ Chí Minh; a worship service at the temple educating children in the proper veneration of royalty; "traditional games"; and a performance of regional folk songs called *quan họ*.

Ever since the temple's reconstruction, party and state leaders have visited Đình Bảng to burn incense for the Lý kings. The list of famous pilgrims in the past decade includes Secretary General of the Communist Party Đỗ Mười; President Lê Đức Anh; military hero General Võ Nguyên Giáp; Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt; and president of the Vietnam Fatherland Front Lê Quang Đạo, a Đình Bảng native instrumental in jump-starting the temple renovation back in the late 1980s. Mindful of the party's anti-superstition campaign and its policy of secularism, these leaders usually avoid talking about "worship" [*thờ cúng*] at the temple, preferring instead to describe their bows before the altar as acts of "solemn remembrance" [*tưởng niệm*] wherein they "remember the debt" [*nhớ ơn*] all subsequent generations of Vietnamese owe to the pioneering Lý kings. Party leaders share with the general public a commitment to "return to origins" and a basic posture of respect and gratitude with regards to the ancestors. "When you drink from the stream, remember the source" interjects Secretary General Đỗ Mười like the amen of a prayer in his contribution to the Đô Temple guest book, praising the people of Đình Bảng for rebuilding the temple and remembering the debt owed to the Lý kings (Lý Hiếu Nghĩa 1999, p. 1).

Hùng Kings' Holy Land Forever

The *Đổi Mới* state's commitment to preserving and promoting the values of ancestor worship are demonstrated with great pomp and circumstance at the annual death-day festival for the Hùng kings. According to legend, all Vietnamese people can trace their ancestry back to the marriage of the dragon father Lạc Long Quân and the fairy mother Âu Cơ. This magical union produced an egg sac from which hatched one hundred human children, including the first Hùng king. State commemoration of the collective death-day anniversary of the Hùng kings, celebrated on the tenth day of the third lunar month, has a long history, but in recent years has grown increasingly elaborate, each festival more fantastic than the last.[5] According to official estimates, more than a million-and-a-half people attended the five-day festival in 2005, which opened with "a lavish night-time performance of Hùng Kings' Holy Land Forever", featuring over 2,500 amateur actors.[6]

Staged at Mount Nghĩa Linh in Phú Thọ province, on the very site where fairy-mother Âu Cơ is said to have given birth to the Vietnamese race, the festival is known as the *giỗ tổ*, short for *ngày giỗ tổ tiên*: the death-day anniversary of the ancestor(s). The Vietnamese Government favours this terminology, historian Patricia Pelley points out, because its familial overtones evoke feelings of warmth and gratitude (Pelley 1993, p. 194); in addition, by calling the national festival a *giỗ tổ*, the state insists that all Vietnamese people share the same ancestry. "Every *giỗ tổ* for the Hùng king ancestors is an opportunity for children of the whole nation to remember their origins," cultural commentator Nguyễn Đăng Duy reminds his Vietnamese readers. "Those who can should make a pilgrimage to the native place of their father, the land of their ancestors, to light incense and solemnly remember the Hùng kings" (Nguyễn Đăng Duy 2001, p. 207).

In nationalist rhetoric, Mount Nghĩa Linh represents the simultaneous birthing of the Vietnamese people and the Vietnamese nation state. The most famous saying about the earliest denizens of this sacred space comes from Hồ Chí Minh, speaking in 1954 shortly after the end of the First Indochinese War: "The Hùng kings have merit for founding this nation. Together, we must preserve it."

Giỗ tổ activities planned and funded by the party-state demonstrate official endorsement of the ritual commemoration of the Hùng kings as nation-builders and national ancestors. As Nguyễn Hữu Điền, Secretary of the Phú Thọ provincial committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, explained in a recent issue of the *Communist Review*, the Hùng kings' festival offers an education in Vietnam's "tradition of patriotism" by encouraging participants to *biết ơn sâu sắc*, to recognize their profound moral debt, not only to the Hùng kings but to all predecessors who have contributed to the growth and protection of the nation. "Worshipping the Hùng kings carries the highest sacred significance", Điền explains, "returning to national origins in order to solemnly remember those people who have merit in the work of creating and building our country" (Nguyễn Hữu Điền 2005).

Ancestor Worship and the Law

In 1994, Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, then director of the state's Institute for Religious Studies, argued that ancestor worship should be considered the "national religion of Vietnam". Vạn's suggestion found validation ten years later, when the special status of ancestor worship was written into a new law on religion.[7] Article 1 of the Ordinance Regarding Religious Belief and Religious Organizations guarantees freedom of religious belief and declares all religions equal before the law. However, in a set of definitions found in Article 3, the rather limited list of approved "activities which arise from religious beliefs" singles out both ancestor worship and acts of commemoration for specific mention, relegating all other types of practices to a third catch-all category.[8]

Article 5 makes even more explicit the elevated status enjoyed by the worship of ancestors and the veneration of heroes:

> The State guarantees the right of religious belief and religious practice according to the provisions of the law; respects religious cultural and ethical values; [and] <u>preserves and promotes the positive values of the tradition of worshipping the ancestors</u>, solemnly remembering and respecting those people who have made meritorious contributions to the nation or the community, with the goal of contributing to the consolidation of the great national unity bloc, [and] meeting the spiritual needs of the people.[9]

Article 5 groups ancestor worship with the commemoration of national and community heroes and recognizes the "positive values" of both *về nguồn* activities, noting that they not only serve spiritual needs but also strengthen national unity. In short, in its new ordinance on religion, the *Đổi Mới* state promises to tolerate all beliefs (within the limits of the law), but pledges to actively "preserve and promote" ancestor worship,

thereby confirming in the law a measure of support also made evident in the actions, slogans and public displays of the party-state leadership. Faced by myriad challenges to the legitimacy of the party-state in the post-war, post-collectivization, post-Soviet, late-socialist moment, the Vietnamese Government warmly embraces ancestor worship, not as one acceptable religious practice amongst many but rather as a category apart, a privileged practice with special state sanction.

Kinetic Nationalism

As suggested by the recent rhetorical focus in state publications on the need to "consolidate the great national unity bloc and activate patriotism" nurturing nationalist attachments is a matter of no small concern to the Renovation-era party-state.[10] Throughout the revolutionary era from 1945 to 1986, the state consciously organized popular support around a defensive martial ideology which invoked a tradition of resistance to foreign invaders (Pelley 1995, 2002). However, in the peaceful, globalizing, market-hungry Renovation age, bellicose models which locate national unity in militant resistance are irrelevant at best, and actually risk being counter-productive, particularly in the international arena. As one Vietnamese historian reported to American academic Hue-Tam Ho Tai, the theme of heroic resistance served well during the war, "but we are now at peace and we need a new theme around which to organize history" (Ho Tai 1998, p. 198). Meanwhile, the thirst for foreign investment dollars has spurred a drive to shepherd overseas refugees back into the national fold, just as a broadening array of international opportunities lure a new generation of Vietnamese to leave the country for study and work. The collapse of the Soviet Bloc, the deflation of Vietnam's centrally-planned economy, "ethnic unrest" in the highlands, and democracy movements elsewhere in the post-socialist world call into question the legitimacy of a continued Communist Party monopoly on political power in Vietnam, and lend additional urgency to the party-state's quest for a useable nationalism able to coalesce disparate people at home and abroad around the goal of national development. In these unsettling times, the party-state has turned to ancestor worship to help consolidate what I call a "kinetic nationalism" relevant to the Renovation era.[11]

Reversing an earlier position of disparagement towards "superstitious" folk beliefs, in the 1990s cadres and state researchers began exploring the

potential for ancestor worship to facilitate what Đặng Nghiêm Vạn called "community consciousness".[12] In 1996, Professor Vạn argued that because the cult of the dead in Vietnam pays homage not only to deceased relatives but also to individuals who make meritorious contributions to the village and the nation, it has the potential to nurture national loyalty. Communities of different sizes, from the intimate to the imagined, can become helpfully conflated with one another in ancestral practices, to such an extent that "In the mind of the Vietnamese, it is difficult to separate the family from the village and the fatherland" (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn 1996, p. 38). With a little encouragement, filial piety in a family context might be translated into loyalty to the modern nation, in an updated version of Confucian patterns of governance.

Ancestor worship's appeal as a foundation for nationalism rests in part on the well-rehearsed if exaggerated claim that it is practised universally by all Vietnamese, at home and abroad.[13] In his World War II era study of daily life in Vietnam, francophone ethnologist Nguyễn Văn Huyên noted that the cult of ancestors "is observed by all Vietnamese, without any constraint whatsoever, no matter what level of the social hierarchy they belong to" (1995, p. 51). Ethnographic and anecdotal evidence suggest that the practice continued, albeit in a simplified and impoverished form, throughout the war era, even when discouraged during the Communist Party's campaigns against superstition (Nguyen Thanh Huyen 1994, pp. 27–28; Kleinen 1999, pp. 161–89; Endres 1999, p. 207).

Today, the imagined community of ancestor worshippers has expanded to include Catholics, Communist Party members, ethnic minorities and members of the diaspora (Unger and Unger 1997; Bảo Tàng Dân Tộc Học Việt Nam 2002; Nguyễn Đăng Duy 2001; Huyền Giang 2000). A small study conducted by a Vietnamese research team in Hanoi in the mid-1990s found ancestor worship practiced in every one of the thirty-five ethnic Việt households they surveyed, including the houses of party cadres (Nguyen Khac Vien and Nguyen Thanh Huyen 1994). Catholics in the survey also reported regular ritual activity in honor of the ancestors, their open acknowledgement of this practice indicative of more tolerant policies towards folk practices in the post-Vatican II church.[14] In their compendium *Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam*, Đặng Nghiêm Vạn and his colleagues Chu Thái Sơn and Lưu Hùng (1993) take a broad view of the practice, placing "the cult of ancestor worship" at the head of a list of spiritual characteristics shared by all cultures within a great Austro-Asian

civilization stretching from the Yangtze River to the islands of Southeast Asia; they go on to explicitly mention ancestor worship as a component of spiritual life for no less than thirty-four of the fifty-three official ethnic minorities in Vietnam. The Vietnamese Government is aware that the practice has been carried overseas as well, in part because return visits during the *Tết* holidays, focused on rituals for the ancestors, account for half of all trips by *Việt Kiều* back to Vietnam.[15]

Glossing over the diversity of ways different households and different communities express veneration to their forefathers, the *Đổi Mới* state has effectively parlayed the practice into a unifying characteristic able to integrate the disparate sectors of the nation. In a February 2005 statement meant to defuse ethnic and religious tensions in the highlands, the Vietnamese Government reported: "In Việt Nam, the worship of ancestors — the most popular form of belief — is practised virtually by the entire population."[16] If convinced of the claim that all Vietnamese worship their ancestors, it is perhaps not far-fetched to argue that to worship the ancestors is to be Vietnamese; that is, when someone burns incense at the altar, they actively and inconvertibly perform their Vietnameseness. This position allows the state to impute a cultural nationalism not only to the Kinh majority but also to ethnic minorities, Catholics and overseas Vietnamese. At the same time, ancestor worship as an ancient, shared folk belief can act as a bulwark against the impending tide of globalization. Professor Vạn hopes that in the face of a cultural invasion by all things Western, ancestor worship in Vietnam can serve as "one of the antidotes of ethnocide" (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn 1996, p. 50; see also Nguyen Thanh Huyen 1994, pp. 29–30).

The *Đổi Mới* state hopes to capitalize on the potential for ancestor worship and associated "return to origins" activities to counteract the fragmentation of the increasingly global and globalized Vietnamese populace by pulling wayward Vietnamese back home. However, to serve effectively as a foundation for national belonging, ancestor worship has to seem both appropriately old and appropriately new: at once a time-honoured, naturalized tradition and at the same time a flexible concept relevant to contemporary realities. The first task, making the Renovation-era re-invention of ancestor worship seem old, comes easily. Working in the employ of state research institutes, Vietnamese historians have presented evidence supporting the claim that a form of ancestor worship has been practised in the country at least since the early days of sinification in the first millennium if not since the Hùng kings era (Huyền Giang 2000,

pp. 432–44; Trần Bá Chí 2000; Nguyễn Đăng Duy 2001, pp. 188–95). Reinforced by these scientific studies, in the popular imagination both ancestors themselves and the practice of ancestor worship evoke a sense of origins, deep history, and tradition. Playing on these associations, the 2004 law discussed below describes ancestor worship not as a "religion" [*tôn giáo*] like Buddhism or Catholicism, but rather as a "tradition" [*truyền thống*]. In order to carry out the second task, making the old new by modernizing "tradition" so that it answers to Renovation-era realities, the state highlights the kinetic features of the practice. In the renovated form of ancestor worship approved by the party-state, practitioners ritually acknowledge the heightened mobility of contemporary life, demanding returns but simultaneously permitting departures.

Cycle of Movement

The return of the living and the dead celebrated in Renovation-era ancestor worship completes a three-stage cycle of movement, from the point of origin, out into the world, and back again. Festivals and death-day anniversaries are not a convening but rather, a re-convening. To be ritually satisfying, these reunions cannot occur just anywhere but must take place at the site of ultimate origins, in what the Vietnamese call the *quê hương*. *Quê hương*, an evocative and sentimental phrase usually translated as "native place", is closely associated with birth, childhood, mother love, ancestral lands, family history, village community and a simple rural life; in short, *quê hương* represents a feeling of being fundamentally at home. The *quê hương* is understood to shape its inhabitants, molding their identity, their livelihood and their character, such that it might be understood as a second womb, the womb of the community, from which young people must be born a second time when they reach maturity and venture out into the world. The soil of the *quê hương* holds the umbilical cords and placentas of all its children, and eventually must also hold their bones.

When away from the *quê hương*, many Vietnamese express an almost compulsive need to return, an idea eloquently expressed by the characters in Lan Cao's novel *Monkey Bridge* (1997), about a Vietnamese family forced to flee to the United States in the aftermath of the American War. The father figure, Baba Quan, links his ancestors to the soil of the

homeland. To live far from this soil "drains the heart" and leaves him feeling empty:

> The farther we wander from the earth and water of the burial ground, the weaker our ties to our ancestors become, and the separation is not good for the soul. It drains the heart of blood and leaves a profound hollowness in the center of our veins. (Lan Cao 1997, pp. 59–60)

Later in the book, we hear the story of a woman named Thanh who risked her life during the war to bury her mother in her *quê hương*.

> I knew I would have to find a way back there, back to the graves of my ancestors, back to the sacred land where my mother's placenta and umbilical cord had been buried and where her body would have to be buried as well. She would have to die where she was born, and I would have to construct this circle for her, a beginning and an end that converged toward and occupied one single, concentrated space. (p. 248)

The *quê hương* compels a return, completing the circle of a life, from origins out into the world and back again. There is a special verb in Vietnamese to describe this return movement: *về*, which means not just "to come back" but specifically "to come back home". The Vietnamese save this word to express a return to the homeland [*về quê*] or a return to origins [*về nguồn*]. No matter how many times I went back my field site, as an American I could only *trở lại Việt Nam* ["come back" to Vietnam] never *về*, whereas to America I could only *về*, never *trở lại*.

In between the origins and the return, the *quê* and the *về*, there is the *đi*: an outward movement from the safe womb of childhood into the world at large. While the *về* is the celebrated movement of Renovation-era ancestral rituals, it relies on the *đi* for its pathos and power. Without the foray into the world, return for ancestral rituals would be merely symbolic wordplay, not at the very heart of the ceremony. The going away enables the return, and as we will see later, the more distant the journey out, the more joyful the homecoming; the longer the separation, the sweeter the reunion. To celebrate the *về* is to give approval on some level to the *đi*, and thus government encouragement for the "return to origins" movement in Renovation-era Vietnam paradoxically normalizes the role of mobility, circulation and global exploration in the contemporary experience of the nation.

Policing the *Đi*: "Do Whatever You Can to Become Deserving"

The *đi-về* model for national belonging allows people to move freely through the world so long as they remember to return. However, ideally an ethic of responsibility to family, *quê hương* and nation governs even the time apart. Contemporary discourse about ancestors in Vietnam emphasizes the obligation for individuals to "be deserving" of their legacy, or in the words of former Secretary General Đỗ Mười, "to be worthy of being the descendants" of such great, meritorious figures as the Lý kings. Reiterations of traditional beliefs about filial obedience, strengthened by *Đổi Mới* government rhetoric, encourage contemporary Vietnamese to live at all times, wherever they might go, under a deep shadow of gratitude towards their ancestors. The story of Nguyễn Thìn Xuân is a case in point.

Xuân, a retired civil servant now living in Hanoi, spent forty years "in search of origins" [*tìm về cội nguồn*], hoping to find material evidence to prove family legends connecting his lineage with the royal Lý of Đình Bảng. When at last, after decades of dogged research, Xuân finally confirmed his family's illustrious pedigree, he felt both pride and anxiety. Immediately, he turned his full attention to his children and grandchildren, urging them "to bring to life the tradition of their forefathers". His mother's dying wish, Xuân told me, was that her descendants might live up to the standards set by their famous ancestors. Xuân passed her words along to his family.

> I was resolved to research the lineage, in order to tell my children that ... your ancestors are like this, you must strive upwards, do whatever you can to become deserving [*làm thế nào cho xứng đáng*]. Like my mother said, do whatever you can to be worthy of the Lý dynasty lineage.

Obligation to be worthy of their heritage inspires Xuân's family members to be good descendants, good people, and good citizens.

> Everyone [in my family] has strived to make their way, and up until now ... I can say no one has violated [the law]. Everyone has made meritorious contributions to the nation. ... I have to know my roots ... in order to educate the next generation to obey the laws of the nation, to contribute their own meritorious labour and to become useful citizens.

Family history is a burden as well as an inspiration, and can never be put aside, even during the "away" phase of the *đi-về* cycle: "Everyone [in my family], even when they travel far away, wherever they are, everyone always remembers 'I am a person of the Lý lineage'," Xuân told me.

The Contested Returns of the *Việt Kiều*

"A lot of people said 'Don't go, don't go,' but I said this is my home"

Overseas Vietnamese, known in Vietnam as *Việt Kiều*, along with globe-trotting young professional Vietnamese, are amongst the most coveted targets of the government's *về nguồn* initiative. An estimated 2.7 million Vietnamese live overseas, and in 2004 they contributed $3.2 billion in remittances to the Vietnamese economy; the Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development alone handled an average of US$1–2 million a day in remittances.[17] According to the World Bank, in 2003 remittance receipts equalled 7.4 per cent of the GDP and 160 per cent of FDI; another study shows that remittances contributed more to the domestic economy than oil, garment or seafood exports.[18] *Việt Kiều* have invested US$540 million in Vietnam under the Law on Promotion of Domestic Investment and another US$157.5 million under the Law on Foreign Investment.[19] The Vietnamese Government has been aggressively courting overseas Vietnamese, and pragmatic recruitment policies complement its promotion of rites of return. In 2004, the same year the National Assembly passed the law vowing to "preserve and promote" ancestor worship, the politburo issued Resolution 36, stating that overseas Vietnamese are an integral part of the nation, entitled to state care and privileges.[20] According to Phạm Thế Duyệt, chair of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, Resolution 36 responds to "the trend of Việt Kiều returning to their homeland" by creating a supportive environment in which Việt Kiều can "reaffirm a strong attachment to their homeland ... and fulfill their hopes to contribute to the country."[21]

Resolution 36 expresses great optimism about the warmth of *Việt Kiều* feelings towards their erstwhile nation, mediated in part by ancestors left behind: "Though living far away from their fatherland, overseas Vietnamese have always nurtured patriotism and national esteem, preserved cultural traditions, turned towards their ancestors and origins,

and kept close relationship with their families and homeland." The law vows to create favourable conditions for overseas Vietnamese to return to Vietnam in order to pursue business opportunities, visit relatives and "pay their respects to ancestors."[22] Overturning the unspoken policy of suspicion which has long governed party relations with *Việt Kiều*, a sheaf of programmes now warmly welcomes overseas Vietnamese home, with the state going out of its way to demonstrate a new willingness to take anyone back, regardless of their history, as long as they show evidence of a desire to make positive contributions in the future. At a *Tết* gathering in early 2005 that included former leader of the Saigon regime Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, the chairman of the Overseas Vietnamese Committee for Hồ Chí Minh City said the recent visits by Kỳ and exiled monk Thích Nhất Hạnh prove "Vietnamese people would never forget their origins no matter how far they are from home." At the same party, Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải declared Vietnam in need of more contributions, especially of brain power, from overseas Vietnamese, regardless of their political background or their personal past, calling them "Vietnam's flesh and blood".[23] A couple days later, Nông Đức Mạnh, the Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party, praised a group of fifty-nine representatives from the overseas Vietnamese community for their "warm sentiments toward the homeland" as well as their practical contributions to nation-building, but in words reminiscent of proud Lý ancestor Nguyễn Thìn Xuân, called on them all to "try their best to fulfill their duty" to the motherland.[24]

A survey conducted by Đặng Nguyên Anh, head of the Population Institute of Sociology in Hanoi, of skilled Vietnamese who came home after relatively short stints working or studying abroad found these well-educated returnees harboured a deep desire to contribute to their homeland. "The greatest passion once they returned was to utilise their acquired knowledge and experience to serve their country," Anh reports (2003, p. 167).[25] In contrast, *Việt Kiều* who have relocated to another country often couch their desire to return to Vietnam in more personal terms, whether to bury old ghosts or to revisit the *quê hương*. The journalist Nguyễn Quí Đức, for example, describes in his memoir the need of many in exile "to come back for the things we had left behind: our childhood home — the place, as the Vietnamese say, where our umbilical cords were cut" (1994, p. 299). Poignantly, his own deep desire to raise his children in Vietnam is thwarted by his parents, happily

relocated to California, who cannot imagine a return "until communism is destroyed" (pp. 263–64).

It is often through ancestral rituals that relatives long separated by politics, wars, embargos and oceans find a way to come to a new understanding; in her study of returning *Việt Kiều*, anthropologist Lynellyn Long found that renewing kinship and ancestral ties through specific rituals at altars and graves helped estranged relatives rebuild trust with one another and was especially valued by those who had never left:

> While the [returnees] did not necessarily attach the same importance to performing these rituals in Vietnam, the Vietnamese invariably saw the reintegration of their *Việt Kiều* kin in these terms. Vietnamese who entertained overseas kin during *Tết* often remarked how important it was for the *Việt Kiều* to worship at the ancestral altars again. (Long 2004, p. 83)

As observed by Long, many Vietnamese returnees describe a sense of post-facto inevitability about their homecoming, as if called back by the compelling logic of the *quê hương* cycle, despite the fact that most report they did not even consider a journey back to Vietnam before the *Đổi Mới* reforms (Ibid. p. 72).

Other *Việt Kiều* feel equally sure they can never return, or at least not while the current regime remains in power, and feel bitterly betrayed by those who do go back. As demonstrated by the case of General Kỳ, former premier of the Saigon regime, politics infuse discussions within the American *Việt Kiều* community about whether or not to return. In June of 2002, Kỳ made a speech at De Anza College in Cupertino, California, calling on the young generation to rebuild bridges between America and Vietnam and "help develop the land of their fathers". He also expressed a personal desire to go back to Vietnam:

> I am 72 years old now, an old soldier, and as Douglas MacArthur, one of your most celebrated generals, has said, "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away." In his fading years, this old soldier still yearns for Vietnam, the land of his ancestors. I offer the remaining years of my life to the service of my motherland and to my people without any ambition and without asking for anything in return.[26]

After rejecting several earlier visa applications from Kỳ, in 2003 the pro-return Vietnamese Government finally relented, and in January 2004, the exiled leader arrived in Hồ Chí Minh City. "A lot of people said 'Don't go, don't go,' but I said this is my home, my country," he told a reporter

shortly after he touched down. "We Asians, we believe in destiny, so it's the right time, the right moment to come."[27] In an official statement, the Vietnamese government said it welcomed his decision "to come back to the homeland ... after many years apart."[28] However, back in America, Kỳ's visit caused an uproar. "My husband stayed to fight while Kỳ fled and now he wants to make peace with the communists? It hurts and it's a shame," said one fellow *Việt Kiều*. "Why is he changing his mind and turning his back on the community?"[29] Many *Việt Kiều* organizations, including the *Mặt Trận Quân Dân Chống Cộng Bắc Cali* [Military and Civilian Anti-Communist Front of Northern California] and the *Tập Thể Chiến Sĩ Việt Nam Cộng Hòa Hải Ngoại* [Association of Overseas Veterans of the Republic of Việt Nam] issued angry declarations condemning Kỳ's return, accusing him of rejecting the overseas community and the nation and people of South Vietnam. A special webpage entitled *Nguyễn Cao Kỳ — Kẻ Phản Bội* ["Nguyễn Cao Kỳ — Traitor"] provides links to eleven such declarations, illustrated by photos of a "Down with Traitor Kỳ!" protest rally.[30] Even Kỳ's daughter Duyên, the well-known hostess of a popular *Việt Kiều* variety show called "Paris by Night", came under attack from her fan base because she did not object to her father's decision to return home.[31]

Official policies of welcome notwithstanding, those who do return to Vietnam from overseas inevitably find their homecomings fraught with misunderstandings and disappointments, ranging from distress at how much the physical landscape has changed to disgust with relatives eager to trade kinship ties for American dollars, from anger at corrupt customs officials to frustration with inefficient office environments.[32] Some *Việt Kiều* note that they never feel as fully American as when they are back visiting Vietnam, and even those who decide to relocate permanently take pains to maintain their international ties. As one returnee now living in Saigon's "*Việt Kiều* Village" explained, "Here, we remember America; there we remember Vietnam. We have two countries."[33] More and more people each year demonstrate a willingness to endure the inconveniences and heartaches of a life split between two homelands; the numbers alone make clear that the call to "return to origins" resonates with Vietnamese living around the world. An estimated 400,000 *Việt Kiều* will visit Vietnam this year, up more than 20 per cent from last year.[34] In other words, in 2005 alone, some 15 per cent of the total world population of overseas Vietnamese will return to Vietnam.

Return of the Royal Entrepreneur

The most treasured return visitor to the Đô Temple has been away more than 750 years, ever since a bloody dynastic transition in the thirteenth century, and demonstrates the ability of a well-timed return to make up for centuries of separation and neglect. When the Trần dynasty ousted the Lý, Prince Lý Long Tường,[35] fearing a bloodbath, took his chances on exile and escaped by sea with a retinue of followers. The prince won favour with the Korean court by warding off a Mongol attack and was awarded a fiefdom. To this day, the Lý Long Tường branch of the Vietnamese royal family is concentrated in the Hoa Son district outside of Seoul in what is now South Korea (Phạm Côn Sơn 1998). In the 1980s, one descendant of this wayward prince began researching the history of his family. When Lý Xương Căn discovered his Vietnamese roots, he vowed to make a return trip to the Lý native village of Đình Bảng.

The historic return took place in May, 1994, shortly after Vietnam and South Korea normalized diplomatic relations. Căn, then 36 years old, did not give advance warning about his trip. As Nguyễn Đức Thìn of the Đô Temple tells the story, during rites marking the celebration of the 1,020th birthday of dynastic founder Lý Thái Tổ, an unfamiliar Asian man simply appeared and kowtowed reverently before the altar. Afterwards, the temple elders learned that the visitor was a thirty-first-generation heir of Lý Thái Tổ. Lý Xương Căn showed temple elders genealogical records dating back to Prince Lý Long Tường's relocation to Korea. The revelation electrified the Đình Bảng community, which had been anticipating the return of the Lý family for centuries.[36]

Lý Xương Căn's first visit was followed by dozens more; one newspaper put the count at forty trips to Vietnam by late 2000.[37] Eventually Căn, along with his wife and young son Việt Quốc [Việt nation], sold their assets in Korea and relocated to Vietnam. Căn and his family became a celebrated feature of Đô Temple rituals, their remarkable homecoming a subject of widespread praise. To honour and celebrate the Korean branch of the royal Lý, Vietnam's Central Opera Company produced a musical epic in the style of the classical *tuồng* opera called *"Peaceful Mountain" Mandarin Lý Long Tường* recounting the prince's hair-raising adventures in the thirteenth century. Even if

they miss the opera, all visitors to the Đô Temple learn the story of Prince Tường, his descendants, and the eventual return of Lý Xương Căn, and can see extensive photographic documentation of the tale in a side hall. Amidst the dozens of pictures of the newly-discovered Korean relations, one of a sombre Căn praying in front of an incense urn stands out. "Lý Xương Căn, honorary leader of the commemorative festival for Lý Long Tường, stands quietly performing the rites of remembrance for the eight Lý kings," the caption reads, "deep in his heart expressing words of sincere veneration while remembering his origins in the Lý dynasty."

According to a *Saigon Times* article entitled "The Royal Entrepreneur", after re-establishing connections with Vietnam, Lý Xương Căn transformed the old Prince Lý Long Tường Memorial Society, established in 1967 by his uncle Lee Hyun, into the Korea-Vietnam National and Cultural Interchange Association "with the goal of calling for South Korean investment in Vietnam and introducing South Korean enterprises to do business here".[38] Right from the beginning, Căn's trips to Vietnam to search for ancestral origins have doubled as scouting trips for business opportunities. He now runs a joint venture in the recently-established Đình Bảng Industrial Zone. Sited on the national highway, Việt Lý Peasco, manufacturers of irrigation pipes made from recycled waste materials, greets pilgrims on their way to the Đô Temple. "I built my factory not solely out of respect for my ancestors, but also because there is a large amount of waste polluting the local environment," Căn told a Vietnamese reporter.[39] "Việt Lý does not belong to me only. When it begins to give profit I will set aside a certain amount to be used as scholarships for students and contributions to the building of Đình Bảng village. I really hope my ancestral land will be increasingly prosperous and beautiful."[40]

Căn balances his double role as filial son and foreign investor with skill. His connections to Đình Bảng have fostered overseas business opportunities for many in this village well-known for its entrepreneurial talents. One successful local businesswoman named Dung parlayed contact with Căn into trading relationships with five Korean companies. A photo in the temple hall shows Dung standing next to Căn's mother. "We are sisters from the same origins!" the caption imagines the women saying to one another, before going on to note Dung's many Korean business contacts. For Lý Xương Căn, investing in his native land makes filial

and financial sense. The denizens of Đình Bảng are equally happy with these arrangements, fully aware that as a living descendant of a Vietnamese royal family, Căn revitalizes Lý dynasty history and brings Đình Bảng onto the national stage, while as a businessman from Korea he provides valuable personal connections to one of Vietnam's largest sources of foreign direct investment.

Đình Bảng community leaders praise Căn as an exemplary native son who has gone out into the world and made good, but never forgets to return and lend a helping hand to those back home. On a national scale, a government eager to attract overseas Vietnamese and their investment dollars back to Vietnam has discovered in Lý Xương Căn a model refugee. What matters is not where you've gone, or when, or even why, but simply that eventually, you return. You never forget your origins. In a guidebook written to help Vietnamese families re-establish lineage organizations, author Phạm Côn Sơn (1998) devotes a chapter to the Korean Lý. It opens with a comment on the ways lineage organizations might nurture links between overseas Vietnamese and their sending communities. From here, the narrative shifts to the story of Prince Lý Long Tường and his descendants. The author argues that the Korean Lý who "made a pilgrimage back to the country of their ancestors" should serve as an inspiration to all wayward Vietnamese.

> The fact that the descendants of Prince Lý Long Tường, now citizens of Korea, sought their family records and returned to their ancestral land in order to visit the place of their roots expresses the family spirit of all people who carry the blood of Vietnam in their veins. This is a lesson deserving of serious consideration by all Vietnamese people whether they live inside or outside their beloved country.

The Đô Temple caretaker Nguyễn Đức Thìn calls Lý Xương Căn and his family "extremely filial children of our people, who followed their genealogical records to find the way home".

Căn exemplifies a new kind of nationalism rehearsed in ancestral rites of return. This is not the "tradition of resistance" model from the war era which demanded tireless, constant sacrifice to the cause of liberation, but rather a mobile *đi-về* nationalism better suited to the fluidity of *Đổi Mới* Vietnam. Unlike its martial predecessor, *đi-về* nationalism accepts the independent enterprises of its citizens both

living and dead, the overseas journeys and the capitalist business ventures, so long as they are carried out with a grateful heart, an earnest effort "to be worthy" of ancestral gifts, and a promise to some day return. Ancestor worship not only disciplines citizens in an entrepreneurial effort to be worthy of civilization's gifts, but also, by constituting community through occasional moments of togetherness set against the norm of separation, serves as an available model for a new kind of national belonging predicated not on steady presence but rather on momentous returns.

Local poetess Bồ Thị An waited half a century before she was finally able to get back to Đình Bảng, timing her arrival to coincide with the poetry club meeting held in conjunction with the Đô Temple Festival. In the meantime, while she waited, she held the village in her heart and anticipated her return:

> It's been fifty years
> I return again to participate in a festival of sentimental poetry.
> A time of memories quickly gone by
> The place of Đình Bảng has been constantly in my heart.
> Parting ways, our lives went on, but
> [I] still remember the careful instructions for the day of return.
> Listening again to an afternoon flute playing in my native place
> I take loving care of the memory, never allowing it to fade.
> Nearly my whole life has passed, but
> The place I love is still written within me. (Bồ Thị An 2001)

The loyalty of the poet An to her village is expressed not by her presence, but rather by her absence. Absence, the *đi* which precedes the *về*, allows for the nostalgia of distance and the promise of an eventual return to finally consummate her love of native place: "Parting ways, our lives went on, but/ [I] still remember the careful instructions for the day of return." In this era of kinetic nationalism, to be far away and carry the spirit of home "written within" is at least as laudable as never leaving in the first place, as suggested in a speech in 2001 by a local official honouring one Võ Vĩnh Bảo, a Đình Bảng native who moved to Hanoi but continued to contribute to the development of his village: "Although he left his native place, every second of every minute he constantly thinks back to his homeland Đình Bảng."

FIGURE 2.1
An Elder Calls the Royal Spirits Back to Đô Temple

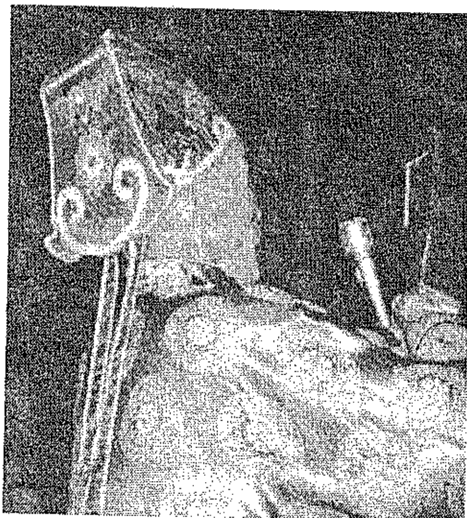

FIGURE 2.2
Many Centuries after their Reign, the Lý Kings use Natural Phenomena to Signal their Return to the Red River Delta, as shown in this photo available for sale at Đô Temple.

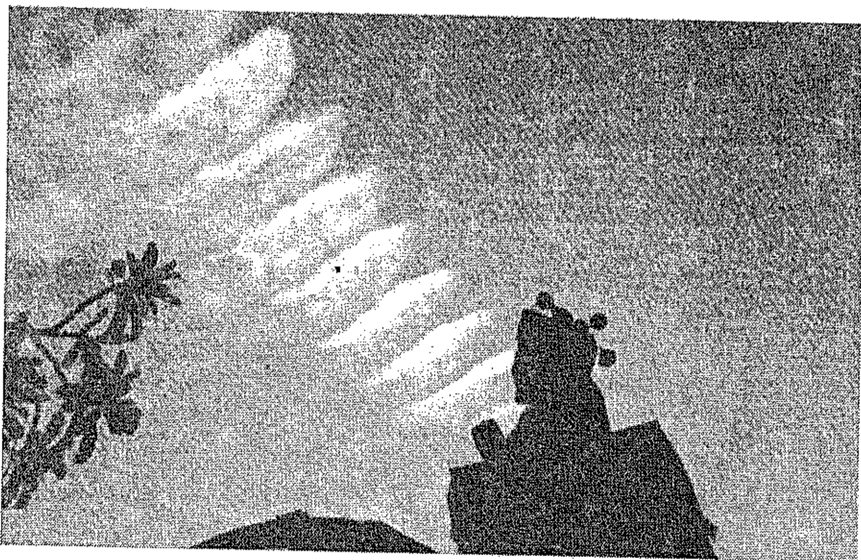

FIGURE 2.3
In 2001, Phạm Thế Duyệt, Chairman of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, Lights Incense to "Solemnly Remember" the Lý Kings

FIGURE 2.4
Korean-born Lý Xương Căn "Returned" to Vietnam after Centuries of Separation. Photo displayed in Đô Temple

NOTES

1 *Pháp Lệnh của Ủy Ban Thường Vụ Quốc Hội số 21/2004/PL-UBTVQH11 ngày 18 tháng 6 năm 2004 về Tín ngưỡng, Tôn giáo* [Ordinance of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly No. 21/2004/PL-UBTVQH11 of 18 June 2004 Regarding Religious Belief and Religious Organizations]. Hereafter cited as Ordinance No. 21/2004. Ordinance 21/2004 elaborates on Decree no. 26/1999/ND-CP of 19 April 1999 on Religious Activities, which ensured freedom of belief and encouraged "religious activities in the interests of the Motherland".

2 Nguyễn Đức Thìn, "Lễ Hội Đền Đô: Hội Tụ Tâm Hồn Lạc Việt," *Bắc Ninh*, no. 460 (16 February 2001).

3 L.X.S., "Bát Đế Vân Du", *Tiền Phong Chủ Nhật*, 30 November 1997.

4 Lý Thái Tổ was born Lý Công Uẩn. Following Vietnamese imperial conventions, the dynastic founder takes the name Thái Tổ, or Supreme Ancestor.

5 Patricia Pelley has explored the significance of the Hùng kings to the revolutionary government of the 1950s. According to her research, it was during the *giỗ tổ* of 1956 that the Hùng kings "were first presented as the truly historical rather than mythical ancestors of the Vietnamese: they became the *nguồn gốc của dân tộc* or 'roots of the nation'" (1993, p. 186). On much earlier applications of the Hùng king legends to Vietnamese statecraft, see Unger (1986).

6 Estimate from "Việt Nam Celebrates its Hùng Founders", *Việt Nam News*, 17 April 2005 <www.vietnamembassy-usa.org/news> (accessed 3 June 2005); quote from "Thousands Flock to Hùng Kings' Festival", *Vietnam News Service*, 15 April 2005.

7 Ordinance No. 21/2004. English translation provided by Human Rights Watch <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/10/21/vietna9551_txt.htm> (accessed on 13 March 2005).

8 "Activities which arise from religious beliefs express themselves as: ancestor worship; memorializing and honouring those who have rendered great services to the country and the community; the worship of divinities and traditional symbols as well as other folk beliefs and activities that represent fine, valuable historical, cultural, moral and social values." From Article 3, Ordinance No. 21/2004.

9 Article 5, Ordinance No. 21/2004; emphasis mine. This is my translation of the "preserves and promotes" phrase; the Human Rights Watch version reads: "...preserves and promotes the positive values of the tradition of ancestor worship and of honoring those people who have rendered great service to the country and community — which all contribute to further consolidate the great national unity bloc and meet the common spiritual needs of the people".

10 This phrase now peppers party-state documents. To give just one example, the long title of Party Secretary Nông Đức Mạnh's address on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party begins: "Consolidate the great national unity bloc and bring into play the spirit of patriotism..." *Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam*, 2 February 2005 <http://www.cpv.org.vn> (accessed 13 March 2005).

11 While agreeing that the state is seeking to renew "domestic bases of cohesion and external markers of identity," Philip Taylor (2003) argues that not only state goals but also the more personal concerns of *Đổi Mới* intellectuals give shape to this urgent quest for new forms of national culture. Ethnologists and folklorists accustomed to serving as the protectors of Vietnamese culture suffer fears of obsolescence and eagerly seek out vibrant folk practices around which to base their work.

12 Đặng Nghiêm Vạn served as the director of the Institute for Religious Studies from 1991 to 1999. On changing state attitudes towards folk beliefs, see Koh (2004), Malarney (1996), Endres (1999) and Taylor (2004*a*).

13 In reality, the unmarked content of the phrase "all Vietnamese" is often Kinh or Việt (the majority ethnic group), at times assisted by the ambiguous Vietnamese phrase *dân tộc Việt*, meaning both the Vietnamese people and the Việt ethnicity. On state efforts to clarify the meaning of *dân tộc*, see Koh (2004) and Pelley (2002, pp. 78–95).

14 For a history of the official Catholic position on ancestor worship in Vietnam, see Phan (2006); Nguyen-Cong-Minh (2006). Ancestor worship was banned by the church across Asia until 1939, a decision Barthelemy Nguyen Son Lam, bishop of Thanh Hoa, has called "regrettable" given its effect in estranging Vietnamese Catholics from "their Vietnamese roots." See Lam's contribution to the Ninth General Congregation of the Special Assembly of the Synods of Bishops for Asia (1998) at <http://www.zenit.org/english/asia/cong9.html>. In the wake of Vatican II, the Vietnamese church has not only encouraged ancestor worship at home, but also has incorporated the ancestors into the official liturgy.

15 "Tourism: 200,000 Overseas Vietnamese Return Home for Tết", *Vietnam News Briefs*, 17 February 2005, accessed through Lexis-Nexis on 11 September 2005. David Haines' (2006) work with refugees from South Vietnam found ancestral rites alive and well in America in the 1990s.

16 "Feb 2005 Update on Religious Issues and Central Highland", Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the United States of America, 4 February 2005 <http://www.vietnamembassy.us> (accessed 28 July 2005). In contrast, the same document states that a total of only twenty million people, or about a quarter of the overall population, follow the six next most popular religions, including Buddhism, Catholicism, Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, Protestantism and Islam.

[17] "Overseas Remittances Pitch in", *Saigon Times Magazine*, 7 January 2005.

[18] World Bank study cited in Bill Brainbridge, "Once Cursed, Vietnamese Welcomed Home", *The International Herald Tribune*, 18 March 2005; Tran Dai Duong, "Boon for Former Homeland", *The Saigon Times Magazine*, 12 January 2004.

[19] "Overseas Remittances Pitch in".

[20] *Nghị quyết số 36-NQ/TƯ ngày 26 tháng 3 năm 2004 của Bộ Chính trị về công tác đối với người Việt Nam ở nước ngoài* [Resolution No 36 — NQ/TW, March 26, 2004, by the Politburo on the Overseas Vietnamese Affairs]. Hereafter "Resolution 36".

[21] "Groundwork Completed to Realise Policies toward Việt Kiều", *VietNamNet*, 17 September 2005 <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/service/printversion.vnn?article_id=513254> (accessed 25 October 2005).

[22] Resolution 36. English translation provided by the Communist Party of Vietnam, available at: <http://www.cpv.org.vn/details_e.asp?topic=61&subtopic=160&id=BT2440043056> (accessed 25 October 2005).

[23] "Prime Minister Hosts Tet Gathering for Viet Kieus", 30 January 2005, Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the United States of America <http://www.vietnamembassy.us/news/story.php?d= 20050130190439> (accessed 28 July 2005); "PM Asks for Việt Kiều Contribution", 31 January 2005, *Vietnam News* <http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn/showarticle.php?num=08SOC310105> (accessed 28 July 2005).

[24] "Party Leader Welcomes Overseas Vietnamese on Homeland Visit", 2 February 2005, *Vietnam News Briefs*, accessed through Lexis-Nexis on 11 September 2005.

[25] Anh's survey was part of a multi-country study of return migration in the Asia-Pacific region. Compared to respondents from Bangladesh, Taiwan and mainland China, Vietnamese migrants were notable for their sense of nationalism, their strong emotional ties to Vietnam and their ongoing commitment to the homeland (Iredale, Guo and Rozario 2003, pp. 23–24).

[26] Speech by Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, De Anza College, Cupertino, CA, 13 June 2002, available at *Vietnam Research by Veterans*, <http://vietnamresearch.com/history/speech.html> (accessed 25 October 2005).

[27] "Return to Saigon", *CBS News*, 14 January 2004 <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/01/14/world/printable593058.shtml> (accessed 25 October 2005).

[28] Ibid.

[29] Mai Tran, "Entertainer Ky Duyen Nguyen Catches Flak over the Journey Home by her Dad, the Former South Vietnamese Premier", *Los Angeles Times*, 15 February 2004.

[30] *Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, Kẻ Phản Bội* <http://thuducnamdinh.tripod.com/NguyenCaoKy_KePhanBoi.html> (accessed 10 October 2005).

[31] Mai Tran, "Entertainer Ky Duyen Nguyen". In defence of her father, Duyên said he is just an old man who wants to visit his mother's grave.

[32] Long (2004); "Việt Kiều Still Discriminated Against", *Vietnam News Briefs*, accessed through Lexis-Nexis on 11 September 2005; Brainbridge, "Once cursed". A wealth of first-person accounts document the bittersweet return experience; see for example Nguyễn Quí Đức (1994, pp. 222–60); Pham (1999); Vu Thuy Hoang, "Stranger in a Strange Homeland: After 19 Years in America, My Wrenching Reunion with Vietnam", *The Washington Post*, 31 July 1994; Pham Thi Hoai, "What Remains: Vietnam in My Heart", 29 April 2005, translated by Nguyen Nguyet Cam and Peter Zinoman, available online at: <www.opendemocracy.net/arts/article_2464.jsp>; Dai Huynh, "Return to Vietnam, the Things I Left Behind," *The Houston Chronicle*, 24 April 2005. Tracing the return journey of an "Operation Babylift" adoptee who grew up in America with no memories of Vietnam, Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco (2002) have made a disturbing documentary about the misconceptions that can plague even the most well-intentioned homecoming.

[33] Phuong Ly, "In Vietnam, Finding the Comforts of Home: Former Refugees are Lured Back from US by New Laws and a Lower Cost of Living", *The Washington Post*, 12 October 2003; on returnees who maintain dual identities, see also Long (2004, pp. 83–86).

[34] "Tourism: 200,000 Overseas Vietnamese Return Home for Tết", *Vietnam News Briefs*.

[35] Second son of King Lý Cao Tông, r. 1176-1210.

[36] One traditional proverb, taking a millenarian tone, promises "When the Báng forest is gone and the Tào Khê stream dries up, the Lý will return again."

[37] "The Royal Entrepreneur", *Saigon Times Magazine*, 5 October 2000.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Huong Lan, "Why the Fatherland Proves its Full Pulling Power for one Exile," *Vietnam News*, 5 February 2001.

[40] Ibid.