

Is she a heroine? Memories of the past and re-politicisation of the sacred in ancestor worship

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Ancestor worship is the most distinctive of all beliefs in Vietnam. The Vietnamese worship their dead and spend time caring for their altars every day. They believe that spirits of the dead have a strong influence on the living because “the dead do not really depart from a real life – one joins the ancestors to exist as an unseen, but nonetheless present member”. Since socio-political liberalization in the 1980s, ancestor worship has been one of the religious practices which has received the state recognition as “national religious tradition”. Parallel to this process, the Vietnamese people have begun to engage ritually with spirits of the dead as a source of personal comfort or communal pride. Individual persons, lineages and communities seek governmental recognition of their dead, as well as legitimisation of their sacred places. In this paper, I will examine how the Vietnamese population attempts to establish continuity with the past through their ancestors and through the ways in which the past is remembered. I argue that a violent death serves as a pretext for the lineage or community to demonstrate responsiveness and efficacy of their ancestor, and to introduce him or her as a local hero who deserves merit of the nation. To reach such goal a lineage or community often looks for moral support from Vietnamese intellectuals. Based on ethnographic data, I will show the way in which one of the lineage in a rural coastal village of Central Vietnam re-claimed the story of their ancestor – Ba Roi and promoted their own particular memories of the past in order to demonstrate local solidarity, filial piety and patriotism.