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The Revenge of the Object

Villagers and Ethnographers in Đồng Kỵ Village

In 1996, the residents of Đồng Kỵ (Bắc Ninh) complained to the highest echelons of the Vietnamese state that a book published by the Institute of Cultural Studies depicted their village god as a former manure collector rather than as a mythical warrior. The villagers forced the Institute to produce new ethnographic materials that better reflected their own understanding of their current religious practices and ancient traditions. This paper locates the roots of the conflict between villagers and ethnographers in their clashing representational agendas. In their quest to document "authentic" Vietnamese traditions, urban ethnographers are also exoticizing customs rooted in a vanishing agrarian-based subsistence economy. From the perspective of villagers, however, the revival of these customs is a sign of their new prosperity which is based on the production of furniture for export. With unprecedented access to the outside world, villagers have become self-conscious about their "backward traditions" and now have the means to control how these traditions are portrayed, thus altering the relationship between ethnographers and the traditional objects of their study.

keywords: Vietnam—villages—modernity—religious revival—fertility—ethnographic practices

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On 26 September 1995, the inhabitants of Đồng Kỵ village in Bắc Ninh province began firing off letters to every conceivable level of authority, from the district, the administrative unit directly above the village, to the Office of the General Secretary of the Communist Party. They wrote to object to what they considered slanderous descriptions of a ritual practice customarily performed in their village that had appeared in two scholarly books: a collaborative work, *Lễ Hội Cổ Truyền* [Traditional folk festivals] (Lê Trung Vũ, ed., 1992), by members of the "rituals and festivals" (*lễ hội*) research team of the Institute of Cultural Studies (Viện Văn Hóa), then known as the Institute of Folklore Studies (Viện Nghiên Cứu Văn Hóa Dân Gian); and *Lễ Hội Truyền Thống và Hiện Đại* [Folk Festivals: Ancient and modern], which was produced by Đặng Văn Lung and Thu Linh (1984) of the Vietnamese Institute of Literature (Viện Văn Học).

The villagers were incensed by the claims presented in these two works that their village's tutelary deity (*thành hoàng*) was a manure collector (*thần thu phân*) and that they collectively engaged in fertility rites, which involved parading simulacra of human genitalia. To counter what they saw as ridicule by ethnography, the villagers invoked their community's long and glorious tradition of patriotism, going back all the way to prehistoric times. Their village god, they asserted, was a figure named Thiên Cương (Heavenly Bridle) who had fought against invaders from the north in the times of the (mythical) Hùng kings; furthermore, they had never engaged in lewd practices. Woven into this tale are several strands: relations between the state, scholars, and peasants; relations between observers and observed; and competing visions of modernity and tradition. The story of the villagers' conflict with the scholars also highlights the search for usable antecedents for present policies and the constant recycling of the past in late Socialist Vietnam. It also raises the question of who owns a community's history and who has the right to tell it.

Gayatri Spivak questioned the possibility of restoring the power of self-expression to true subalterns (Spivak 1988); Gail Hershatter (1993) cautioned about the possibility that, when urged to speak up, subalterns might reproduce ready-made tropes, thus acting as mouthpieces for the words of others. The story of Đồng Kỵ offers another perspective on the issue of ventriloquism and subalternity. As peasants addressing a Communist leadership brought to power by a peasant revolution in which they had played a considerable role, they enjoyed a degree of political access that scholars did not have. In the ensuing contest of wills with the Institute

of Cultural Studies, they refused to accept the passive role of objects of study. Claiming to possess a heroic history to counteract images of a fertility-obsessed unchanging village culture, they were able to force its ethnographers to give up their privileged perch as observers and instead assume the far more humble role of recorders in the villagers' quest for self-representation.

There are no subalterns here

Đồng Kỵ is the formal name of a village known more colloquially as Cối village, situated about twenty kilometers from Hanoi. It is one of four villages which make up Đông Quang commune in the Từ Sơn district of Bắc Ninh province. Đồng Kỵ first entered historical records when it was included in the *Dư Địa Chí* [Gazetteer] compiled by the scholar-statesman Nguyễn Trãi (1380–1442) (Lê Hồng Lý 2000, 33). The village possesses a number of royal certificates, the oldest of which dates from 1473. Its sacred genealogy (*thần phả*) was established in 1572 by Nguyễn Bình, the official in charge of documenting ritual practices at the time. According to this genealogy, Thiên Cương, the official tutelary deity of Đồng Kỵ, lived during the reign of the mythical Hùng kings in prehistoric times, and fought heroically against the Xia invaders from North China.

While most villages in the Red River Delta engage in a single economic activity (most often rice-growing), Đồng Kỵ villagers have shown a remarkable ability to adapt to changing circumstances. A folk saying describes Đồng Kỵ's multi-faceted economy:

Men go here and there on trading trips;
Women tend their looms, raise animals, and work in the rice fields.

Apart from rice-growing, Đồng Kỵ villagers have long engaged in trade, especially of buffaloes, and in carpentry and weaving. When mass-manufactured textiles destroyed Đồng Kỵ's cottage-weaving industry (Lê Hồng Lý 2000, 25), its villagers went back to their old craft of carpentry. But in the 1960s, carpentry, too, experienced a decline. As floods became common in the Red River Delta in the 1970s, the villagers turned to fishing and hiring themselves and their nets to other villages. Thanks to what they consider to be their energy and flexibility, even in hard times, Đồng Kỵ residents were better off than the majority of rural folks. Envious residents of nearby villages, however, are quick to hint that Đồng Kỵ villagers' current success is due to their long-standing experience with smuggling when trade was officially discouraged.[1]

Before the Revolution of 1945, Đồng Kỵ numbered one thousand five hundred inhabitants grouped into four hamlets (*ấp*); it owned five hundred *mẫu* (roughly one thousand acres) of rice fields.[2] It was a prosperous village. All its houses had tiled roofs and tiled courtyards. Instead of mud tracks, the village even had paved roads. The village boasted five gates and access to a nearby river. In the large marketplace situated next to the communal house, a market was held six days per month, a sure sign of bustling economic activity amid subsistence farming. By the

FIGURE 1. Main gate to Đồng Kỵ. All photos were taken by Nguyễn Quốc Vinh.

FIGURE 2. The Đồng Kỵ Firecracker inside the Communal House.

time the villagers lodged their complaints to the authorities in 1995, their numbers had multiplied. The 1998 census showed the population of Đồng Kỵ to be twelve thousand. By the century's end, it had expanded even further. Official figures do not take into account the daily influx of journeymen which swells the village population to nearly twenty thousand.

With the huge growth in population, the need for new housing reduced the acreage under cultivation, but improved agricultural technology now allows for two crops of rice to be grown instead of the single crop that was typical of northern agriculture before the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) reforms of the 1990s. Yet rice-growing has now become a secondary source of revenue for the villagers. Much of the village land is in fact rented to outsiders.[3]

With the onset of the market economy in the 1990s, villagers returned to their old trade of woodworking. Every morning, the road into the village is clogged with ancient Soviet trucks bringing in timber from other parts of the country or from Laos. Outside the gates, thousands of laborers wait hopefully to be hired for the day. Finished goods are shipped to the PRC, Macau, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Cambodia, and Thailand. Connected to the rest of the world through old Soviet trucks and new Chinese cell phones, Đồng Kỵ is very much part of the global economy.

Đồng Kỵ's current prosperity is not due to economic factors or to hard work alone. The villagers now make much of the fact that, during the Revolution, their village sheltered Trường Chinh (1907–1988), one of the top leaders of the Việt Minh who later became General Secretary of the Communist Party. When he was hiding from the French, Trường Chinh disguised himself as a Buddhist monk and lived in the pagoda next to the communal house. Another high-ranking member of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Lê Quang Đạo, organized an anti-imperialist youth group. An important meeting of the Việt Minh was held in the pagoda three days after the Japanese toppled the French colonial government on 9 March 1945.[4] On grounds formerly belonging to the pagoda, Đồng Kỵ villagers have built a commemorative exhibit house (*nhà trưng bày lưu niệm*) dedicated to highlighting the village's revolutionary history and its close links with the leadership of the Communist Party. Đồng Kỵ also derives pride from having thirty-one war dead who are officially listed as *liệt sĩ* (heroes). They are buried in its revolutionary martyrs' cemetery which is dominated by a statue with the inscription, "The motherland remembers your sacrifice" (*tổ quốc ghi công*).[5] In recent years, Đồng Kỵ has been visited by practically every high-ranking member of the state. Near the communal house are commemorative trees planted by visiting dignitaries, both domestic and foreign.[6]

Đồng Kỵ has chosen to remember its close ties to the Việt Minh and the Revolution, but, as in many other communities, villagers were split in their allegiances; unlike others, however, they were able to turn this duality to their community's advantage and protect its assets. While many other communal houses were destroyed during the Indochina War, either by the French (if they harbored Việt

Minh guerrillas) or by the Việt Minh (for siding with the French), Đồng Kỵ managed to keep its communal house intact. During the period of high Socialism, it did not share with other villages the ignominy of having its communal house converted into a warehouse, a school, or the headquarters of the local branch of the Communist Party. In recent times its communal house, its temple to Confucius, and its pagoda have collectively been classified as a historical-cultural complex (*cụm di tích lịch sử văn hóa*). Such a designation is a matter of pride and holds the potential for generating income from tourism. Thus, in its religious and commemorative landscape, Đồng Kỵ displays the same agility as it does in the political and economic fields. Proud of their village's long history, the villagers also consider themselves forward-looking. Politically connected and economically successful, they are a far cry from voiceless subalterns, and refuse to be patronized by scholars.

The return of tradition

Đồng Kỵ's claim to fame is the Firecracker Festival, which is held in honor of Thiên Cương. Before the August Revolution, the Thiên Cương celebrations lasted for three weeks, from the third to the twenty-second day of the first month of the Lunar Year. Later these celebrations were reduced to three days. In 1975 they were further reduced to a single day under pressure from the Culture Bureau and the Tiên Sơn District People's Committee. At present the Firecracker Festival is held on the sixth day of the lunar New Year and remains a key component of the New Year festivities (Nguyễn Thu Minh 1988, 85–89). These consist of a set of rituals (*lễ*) and an assortment of games (both legal and illegal), competitions, exhibitions, and banquets, which are collectively subsumed under the rubric of *hội* (assembly). While rituals are solemn, scripted affairs, the rest of the celebrations are more like a carnival.

In the old days (defined by villagers as before the 1950s), the village annually appointed a committee to organize the New Year festival. The committee included sixteen men from the four neighborhoods of the village, chosen from among those over the age of fifty-one. The most important of the four teams provided the food that the elders of various lineages then took to the Thiên Cương shrine to receive investiture. On the third day of the New Year, the villagers brought Thiên Cương in a procession from his shrine to the communal house. The following day, the firecracker competition was held.

Village families competed to assemble the biggest firecracker. This was a solemn undertaking. Before starting, they swept their courtyards clean and washed them with ginger water. They then set off their firecrackers from sunrise to sunset in the courtyard of the communal house. At the end of the competition, prizes would be awarded for the biggest firecrackers. The first prize consisted simply of a piece of rice cake, an orange, a stick of sugar cane, and some betel leaves and areca nuts. Such a modest prize hardly compensated for the cost of building a winning

firecracker. More important than the prize, however, were the honor and the good fortune it represented for the whole lineage.

Besides the family firecrackers was the giant firecracker built on behalf of the whole village by men aged between eighteen and fifty, except for the person mixing the powder who had to be a pre-sexual male; the selected men were expected to be honest, and also not to be in mourning. In 1923, the communal firecracker was reported to be fifteen meters long and one and a half meters in circumference (LÊ Hồng Lý 1993). After the cultural authorities pressured the village to curtail ceremonial expenses, the size of the communal firecracker was reduced to about six meters in length and sixty-five centimeters in circumference; the number of firecrackers that could be built by individual families was also limited to five, chosen by lottery.[7] Since the State-issued ban against firecrackers was re-asserted in 1995, a single giant firecracker has been built annually from a tree log but it is not lit (Order [*chỉ thị*] 406/TTG; see PHAN Hữu Dật and NGUYỄN Văn Toàn 1993, 157–64; LÊ Hồng Lý 2000, 78).

Possessing the material resources to hold an annual festival on such a scale is a source of collective pride, but it also attracts envy. Thu Linh and Đặng Văn Lung incurred the wrath of the villagers of Đồng Kỵ for reporting that, "In the province of Hà Bắc (now Bắc Ninh), in the realm of village festivals, people considered the Đồng Kỵ festival to be a social nuisance, for public opinion had long held that it was a rich man's festival, organized to show off" (ĐẶNG Văn Lung and THU Linh 1984, 82).

When the villagers lodged their complaint to the authorities in 1995, the two offending books had been in circulation for several years. ĐẶNG Văn Lung and THU Linh's *Lễ Hội Truyền Thống và Hiện Đại* had come out in 1984, but it was not until its findings were incorporated in *Lễ Hội Cổ Truyền* (LÊ Trung Vũ, ed., 1992) that the villagers of Đồng Kỵ became aware of its existence. While they found its contents even more objectionable than *Lễ Hội Cổ Truyền*, the study of customs was not the primary mission of the Vietnamese Institute of Literature and the book had not been a collective endeavor. This, however, was not the case for the Institute of Cultural Studies whose prestige was put on the line and had to bear the brunt of the villagers' ire.

Founded in 1979, the Institute of Cultural Studies is of relatively recent origin compared to other institutes which operate under the umbrella of the Center for Social Sciences and Humanities. Like them, it is part of the cultural-educational state bureaucracy. Both its director (*viện trưởng*), and associate director (*phó viện trưởng*) are required to be members of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Below them is an Advisory Council made up of Institute members and outside scholars. Together, they oversee about forty staff distributed into eight teams (*tổ*), each team with its own leader (*tổ trưởng*). The teams are respectively devoted to the following: festivals and customs (*phong tục, lễ hội*), texts (*ngữ văn*), performing arts (*biểu diễn*), plastic arts (*nghệ thuật tạo hình*), training (*đào tạo*), a center for the study of mountain people (*trung tâm nghiên cứu người sống miền núi*), a

studio, and a library. Researchers at the Institute were trained in China, the Soviet Union, or Eastern Europe in a variety of disciplines; there are also a few researchers who received their training during the French colonial period. Like Đồng Kỵ, the Institute of Cultural Studies received a boost from the *Đổi Mới* policy. But while Đồng Kỵ sees itself as an integral part of the modernizing project, the Institute, by its very mission, is dedicated to documenting—and even preserving—the past, especially the rural past.

In Socialist Vietnam, village customs had labored under the burden of being castigated as "superstitious," "wasteful," "backward," "feudal," and "oppressive." Disdain toward folk customs, and in particular fertility cults, was nothing new. In the nineteenth century, imperial magistrates had tried to ban the worship of unacceptable village gods (such as thieves, beggars, and other criminals) and rituals and games that transgressed Confucian notions of proper decorum. These included games, assemblies, and processions in which the sexes were allowed to mingle, and rituals that simulated sexual intercourse. The many ceremonies carried out in the rear chambers (*hậu cung*) of village temples may have been kept secret not only because they involved religious taboos (*hèm*), but also to shield them from the official gaze. The Vietnamese encounters with Western culture solidified an elite contempt for these aspects of popular culture. Phan Kế Bính, the author of a celebrated study of northern Vietnamese customs based on fieldwork dating from 1912–1913, was highly critical of what he called superstitions. His *Việt Nam Phong Tục* [Vietnamese customs] (1983) was not intended to be a mere work of scholarship, but a foundation for deciding what customs to preserve and what to discard. He wrote:

> In European countries, except for the worship of a religious patriarch as a sign of commemoration, there is no worship of saints and deities, there is no invocation to otherworldly powers, and yet, these countries are prosperous, and their people are rich. But in Asia where the worship of gods is widespread, how come the gods do not grant wealth and power similar to other countries? Such an argument goes to show that our beliefs are erroneous.... In my opinion, we should only preserve temples to loyal officials and righteous officers, or to great heroes. Their worship should be to express commemoration, not to ask for good fortune. We should consider temples the equivalents of bronze statues in Europe. (Phan Kế Bính 1983, 92)

During the 1920s, Vietnamese culture was subjected to a Western-inspired critique that focused with particular virulence on rural life. Villages were accused of being dens of oppression and antiquated customs, repositories of what Marx called "the idiocies of rural life" rather than of the nation's true spirit (Marr 1981; Tai 1992). Despite this opprobrium, patriotic pride and the search for national essence prevented the wholesale condemnation of tradition and even led to its periodic rehabilitation. With the end of the Indochina War in 1954, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was able to carry out its revolutionary agenda in the northern half of the country. Many traditional practices were banned because they

were seen to embody superstition, reinforce inequality of class and gender, and promote wasteful consumption; others were either abandoned or drastically modified. With the onset of war in 1960, poverty further altered traditional practices. As Lê Hữu Tàng put it, "during a period of several decades, because of objective conditions, especially wartime conditions and other factors, folk festivals were not held or, if they were, they were held on a reduced scale and many of their component rituals were also streamlined" (Lê Hữu Tàng 1993, 20).[8] Only large festivals such as the festival at the Hùng Kings' temple, the Gióng Festival in Phù Đổng, and the pilgrimage to the Perfume Pagoda were officially countenanced. The discouragement of customs that were deemed nefarious extended to their study. Nguyễn Xuân Kính put it bluntly: "The authorities and the world of scholars did not appreciate the truth about folk festivals as at present" (Nguyễn Xuân Kính 1994, 79). Lê Văn Kỳ amplified: "The study of festivals and cults was restricted, even prohibited" (1997, 8).

As the need to mobilize for war waned, the accent on patriotism and heroism began to diminish. The gradual rehabilitation of other aspects of tradition in the postwar era could be seen in the trickle of studies of village customs and festivals which started to appear in the early 1980s, including *Lễ Hội Truyền Thống và Hiện Đại*. But the early 1980s were still a period of state-imposed constraints as well as great scarcity. This limited both the revival of traditional ritual practices and their study; a severe paper shortage further restricted the dissemination of the books and articles devoted to these phenomena. By the early 1990s, however, the state had launched the *Đổi Mới* policy and the economy had improved. Within a few years of its launching, pre-socialist customs began to reappear and new ones were invented wholesale. What had been a trickle of scholarly books and articles became a flood.

Interest in local ritual traditions was not without political implications. The Institute of Cultural Studies was founded the same year as China invaded Vietnam. Less influenced by Confucian ideology than elite culture, village customs were deemed to embody the true national essence, thus satisfying patriotic feelings; as reflections of peasant mentality, they also met the appropriate class criteria (Taylor 2001). Yet, the sharp differentiation between elite foreign-influenced culture and peasant nativism was problematic at best. Đồng Kỵ's sacred genealogy had been drawn up in the late sixteenth century by Nguyễn Bình, who had been commissioned by the Board of Rites to document and rank deities so that appropriate offerings could be made to them (Lê Văn Kỳ 1997, 62).[9] His efforts at documentation provide the datable origin of many local cults in northern Vietnam. Nguyễn Bình did more than document existing cults; he actively shaped them. His work on behalf of the sixteenth-century state bears striking parallels to that of today's district authorities whose responsibilities include vetting local ritual practices. Like Nguyễn Bình and Phan Kế Bính, the Institute of Cultural Studies does not limit itself to researching customs; it seeks as well to help purify (*lành mạnh hóa*) and modernize (*hiện đại hóa*) them.

Seventeen of the Institute's forty researchers were involved over a period of two years in producing the book which contains ten essays and several appendices, each focusing on a specific village festival. Had the authors of the books in dispute come to their village, they would have been able to observe that the rituals they described did not exist. That was the gist of the villagers' complaint: the authors of the books had not conducted fieldwork in the village. In fact, both Lê Trung Vũ and Đặng Văn Lung *had* visited Đồng Kỵ, although they had not conducted extensive fieldwork there because the scope of their respective books extended well beyond a single village. Given the previous official discouragement of folklore studies, however, not to mention the difficulties of travel and the general suspicion of outsiders evinced by villagers, they were forced to rely to a very considerable extent on short visits, hearsay, and previously published studies, a very common feature of Vietnamese scholarship until recently.[10] What the resulting works lack in ethnographic detail, they make up for in coverage. This often produces a generalized ethnography that is not attached to a specific place but combines elements from many to generate a platonic, essentialized subject, *the* Vietnamese village. This tendency was reinforced by the classificatory tradition inherited from Soviet scholarship that emphasized sorting ritual practices into different typologies, a tradition that tended to produce static descriptions. Despite the rapid pace of economic and social change in the post-*Đổi Mới* era, the state-fed obsession with national essence—combined with over-reliance on past studies rather than actual fieldwork—reinforced the belief in an unchanging Vietnamese culture that was to be found in village customs. Members of the Institute of Cultural Studies claim that their intention was to document traditional (pre-socialist) customs, though they did not specify whether the traditions in question still existed or not. As a reminder that they could recall pre-socialist mores, many villagers included their age alongside their signatures on one of the letters in which they claimed that the disputed practices had never been part of their community's customs.

Fertile land, heroic people

The dispute between villagers and ethnographers boils down to the nature of Thiên Cương, the village's tutelary deity. Is he the embodiment of the glorious tradition of fighting against foreign invaders or is he an "obscene deity" (*dâm thần*)? The villagers are adamant that he represents their village's tradition of heroic resistance to foreign conquest, a theme that is entirely in tune with the state's historical master-narrative. The ethnographers are equally convinced that behind this mythical figure lurks an even more ancient one, a god who represents both agricultural and human fertility. Thiên Cương's duality is not unusual. In Vietnamese folklore, historical figures are frequently mythologized and mythical ones historicized; deities often have multiple origins and functions. The conflation of heroism and fertility is quite common, as in the cult of the Trưng Sisters. While the Trưng Sisters, who died fighting the Chinese in 43 CE, are honored throughout

the country as its first patriotic martyrs, their official cult was established in 1160 by a ruler to whom they appeared in a dream during a drought, claiming that they were able to bring rain.[11]

The clash between the villagers of Đồng Kỵ and the Institute of Cultural Studies is thus partially a clash of interpretation. Colonial-era ethnographic studies focused on the fertility-promoting aspects of rural rituals while Socialist-era scholarship emphasized the country's heroic traditions. Perhaps the most prolific writer on the subject of agrarian rites was the late Nguyễn Văn Huyên (1908–1975). Many village rituals, he reported, were designed to promote agricultural production and human reproduction. While not denying the heroic dimensions of many village gods, post-*Đổi Mới* scholars have adopted Nguyễn Văn Huyên's perspective on fertility rites. Kiều Thu Hoạch observed: "A characteristic of legends concerning heroes who fought against invasions is that they are often associated with harvest festivals and ritual ceremonies in communal houses, pagodas, and shrines" (KIỀU Thu Hoạch 1971, cited in LÊ Văn Kỳ 1997, 7). Our own research suggests that historical festivals have their origins in agrarian and fertility rites:

> A number of taboos in historical festivals, practices that are maintained and performed unconsciously, are keys to understanding these origins.… The customs of boys and girls chasing one another along the dikes in the Gióng festival, and the dances (symbolizing sexual relations) in Đồng Kỵ are manifestations of fertility among people engaged in rice-growing and agriculture [more generally].… The sound of firecrackers proves that before assuming historical guise, these festivals were in essence agrarian festivals. (LÊ Hồng Lý 2000, 88–89)

While Đồng Kỵ inhabitants claim that their Firecracker Festival commemorates Thiên Cương's fight against invaders from the North China plains, Lê Văn Kỳ and other scholars insist that this festival was originally a rain-making cult and that its commemorative dimension is a later addition. The rain-making aspects of the worship of Thiên Cương, now somewhat muted, persist in the form of statues of the God of Agriculture (*Thần Nông*) and the God of Rain (*Thần Mưa*) seated on either side of Thiên Cương on the altar (LÊ Văn Kỳ, 1997, 64–66).

Many villages (or sometimes the same villages that worship deities associated with water) worship the God of the Soil (*Thổ Thần* or *Thổ Địa*) or the God of Agriculture. As scholars see it, the worship of the God of Manure is just one aspect of the worship of agricultural production which revolves around four elements: "water, manure, labor, and seed (*nước*, *phân*, *cần*, *giống*)" (LÊ Trung Vũ 1992, 122). Indeed, some villagers put water and fertilizer ahead of other factors: "first comes water; second manure (*nhất nước nhì phân*)" (LÊ Trung Vũ 1992, 144). In northern Vietnam, manure includes both human (known as "northern manure" to indicate the Chinese origins of night soil collection) and animal waste. The God of Manure is typically a man who, when alive, had been a manure collector.

Popular cults often involved secret rituals that were taboo (*hèm*) and were performed in what was known as the rear chamber of the communal house. It is known that parts of the rituals were indeed conducted in the rear chamber of the

FIGURE 3. Altar to Hồ Chí Minh and Trường Chinh in the Commemorative House.

Đồng Kỵ communal house. It is there that, according to scholars, the worship of the God of Manure was carried out. Cultic objects were said to include tongs, baskets, and poles, which were lacquered and gilded. Offerings included pieces of peeled bananas or burnt brown sugar candy as a substitute for manure. After the ceremony to the God of Manure was completed, members of the village council and other elders distributed the offerings to fellow villagers for luck. Those who did not partake of the food would not prosper for the rest of the year (Lê Trung Vũ 1992, 142–43).

As for the human fertility rites, they were described in Đặng Văn Lung and Thu Linh (1984, 92–93), which reproduced almost word for word the description contained in Toan Ánh (1974). The latter cited an article by Lê Văn Hảo that referred to ethnographic research dating from 1905:

> In truth, this is a really obscene custom, but because it is an old tradition, people have to perform it; according to old people, if, in a given year people neglect to do it, the village will witness a lot of unrest. This custom is performed on the sixth day of the Lunar New Year (also the day of the Thiên Cương Festival). The procession from the shrine (*miếu*) to the communal house and back has to be led by a high-ranking elder. In his hands, he holds two wooden simulacra of human genitalia, one female (*âm*) and one male (*dương*). As he leads the procession, he sings an amusing tune full of double meanings:

> "How do you do it, you do it like that,
> It's like this, how is it?"
>
> As he sings, he dances something which can be called the *âm dương* dance, the dance that men and women usually perform together. He puts the two genitalia together, the male inside the female. He sings three times and dances three times. Once the rite is over, the genitalia are burnt. (TOAN Ánh 1974, 241)

A perusal of the ethnographic literature on northern Vietnam suggests that rites that celebrated the fertility of both the soil and human beings were widespread throughout northern Vietnam before the Revolution. Not all interactions between boys and girls at festival time were, strictly speaking, associated with fertility. Many represented a temporary relaxation of the strict norms of behavior that ordinarily governed relations between the sexes in Vietnam, norms that were heavily influenced by Confucian morality. While age-based precedence and gender discrimination dictated the degree and nature of participation in village affairs and community rituals, the festivals not only allowed young men and women to participate fully in public entertainment but also to set aside everyday rules of decorum. Despite the end of the strict sex segregation that had once been standard practice, this carnivalesque aspect of folk festivals continues to be an important source of their popular appeal today and is one reason behind the revival and even expansion of folk festivals throughout the Red River Delta.[12] Many villages held competitions to catch an eel swimming in a cistern (*bắt chạch trong chum*). Usually, the competing pair was made up of a young man and a young woman. While they sought to catch the eel with one hand, they fondled each other's breasts with the other (NGUYỄN Vinh Phúc 1993, 95–96; PHAN Kế Bính 1983, 115). Other games associated with fertility rites involved releasing birds, climbing a greased pole, and chasing a goat while blindfolded. Several of these games formed part of Đồng Kỵ's festival.

Although it may not be surprising that heroic and agricultural figures are often conflated, it is useful to explore why heroism has come to mask fertility. During the 1960s and 1970s, an all-out effort to mobilize popular sentiment first against the Americans and later against Cambodia and China involved promoting belief in a heroic tradition of opposition to foreign rule. This effort followed right on the heels of the cultural reform campaign of the 1950s, which was built on the earlier foundation of Confucian disdain for superstition and Western notions of rationality. As a result, the agrarian character of rural deities was downplayed and even denied, while their heroic deeds, real and mythical, were emphasized.

With the return of peace and the onset of *Đổi Mới*, religious festivals and cults revived, but the heroic character of tutelary deities continues to be emphasized. Aside from force of habit, a new factor may account for this trend: the decline of agriculture as the source of income in certain villages and the desire of their inhabitants to be seen as fully invested in the modernizing project of the state. Although eager to keep deities who have given their communities protection for centuries, they have no wish to be seen as backward, feudal, and superstitious. By

insisting that Thiên Cương was a war hero rather than a god of fertility, Đồng Kỵ villagers can cast themselves as patriotic upholders of the socialist state and as modern subjects.

Taking it to the top

Although the description of fertility rites and games performed throughout the northern countryside suggested far greater infractions against Confucian morality, only the inhabitants of Đồng Kỵ lodged a complaint against the Institute of Cultural Studies. The beleaguered members of the Institute have an explanation for this: money and power. Far from being a site of subalternity, Đồng Kỵ has both.

Upon receipt of the letter of complaint, the General Secretary of the Communist Party ordered the Director of the Center of Social Sciences and Humanities to look into the matter. The Director reported to the General Secretary on 28 December 1995 that he had met with Đặng Văn Lung of the Vietnamese Institute of Literature and had asked him "to coordinate with researchers from other institutes [that is, the Institute of Cultural Studies] to organize a meeting with representatives of Đồng Kỵ in order to clarify the matter, apologize to the elders and promise to correct the errors contained in the two books." On 16 February 1996, Đặng Văn Lung and Thu Linh duly promised that they would publish the required corrections in newspapers and on television as soon as possible.

Things would have died down were it not for the entrepreneurial zeal of the Hanoi newspaper *An Ninh Thủ Đô* [Capital security], which published an article by a certain Nguyễn Tiến Văn (the pen name of Nguyễn Văn Tiến) on 5 February 1998 under the title "Some strange games in ancient New Year festivals" (*Những Trò Lạ trong Hội Xuân Xưa*). Once again, the villagers protested. The editor-in-chief, Đào Lê Bình, replied on 7 April 1998, explaining that the author, a teacher at the Hanoi Normal School, had relied on information contained in two books: *60 Lễ Hội Truyền Thống Việt Nam*, published by the Social Science Publishing House (Thạch Phương and Lê Trung Vũ, 1995, 50–51), and *Tự Điển Lễ Tục Việt Nam*, published by the Culture and Information Publishing House (Bùi Xuân Mỹ; Bùi Thiết; Phạm Minh Thảo; 1996, 435). The newspaper suggested that the villagers address themselves to those publishers. As for the author, he eventually sent a conciliatory letter in which he pointed out that he had described the rituals as "ancient" and thus probably no longer performed. He also claimed to have based his article on the works of reliable scholars of "folklore" (his term) (Nguyễn Tiến Văn, undated letter). Clearly, the fault lay with the ethnographers.

Barely had that fire been put out when a new one ignited. A Đồng Kỵ woman going to a nearby market happened to read a newspaper in which a reference to Đồng Kỵ was made. As she read aloud, she became more agitated. Abandoning all the goods she had brought along for selling, she ran back to Đồng Kỵ to tell the elders of this new calumny which involved a geographic feature of the village.

"Don't drink the water from Đồng Kỵ," runs a popular saying. According to Toan Ánh, the water of Đồng Kỵ is opaque because it is located close to Goat Ravine, which runs from Đồng Anh in Phúc Yên to Đồng Kỵ in Bắc Ninh. The water in that ravine is said to be very dirty, and as Đồng Kỵ villagers supposedly do not dig wells but get water straight from the ravine, their buckets further roil the water and increase its opacity (Toan Ánh 1974, 42). Đặng Văn Lung and Thu Linh, however, had a totally different explanation for the injunction against drinking the water of Đồng Kỵ:

> The custom of not drinking the water of Đồng Kỵ can be explained thus: The Ngũ Huyền Khê River flows straight into Đồng Kỵ then makes a turn. That elbow of the river is called a ravine. This is where they built the communal house and worship a female deity. If you stand on the verge and look at the river, it is like a brown boat. But why call it Goat Ravine? That's because the villagers also worship a male deity, and the ravine is the meeting place of the two deities; therefore, if a girl drinks the water of Goat Ravine, she will become pregnant. In order to avoid such a disaster, the elders forbid everyone to drink the water of Goat Ravine. Visitors also adhere to this injunction.
>
> (Đặng Văn Lung and Thu Linh 1984, 85–86)

Thus confronted with further evidence of what they considered to be falsehoods, the villagers protested once again to the authorities.[13]

Though the offending explanation had been offered by two authors affiliated with the Vietnamese Institute of Literature, it was the Institute of Cultural Studies that was in a delicate situation: as the premier center for research into customs, it was collectively implicated in a way that the Vietnamese Institute of Literature was not. Its members were willing to be conciliatory but did not wish to undermine their scholarly credibility by retracting everything they had written about Đồng Kỵ's traditions. They held a number of "exchanges" with representatives of the village who, in a letter written on 28 April 1998, demanded that the Institute cooperate in the production of a gazetteer concerning

> the cultural and patriotic traditions of the people of Đồng Kỵ. This gazetteer will allow all to understand Đồng Kỵ on the basis of accurate and faithful information, to develop beautiful local traditions and at the same time shine a light on the sources used by the author which reflect some untruths about Đồng Kỵ.

The villagers pressed the Institute to hold a conference in Đồng Kỵ and asked for a visit by Professor Trần Quốc Vượng, who was regarded as the dean of folklore studies but had had nothing to do with the compilation of the offending books.[14] The conference was eventually held in late 1998. At first the atmosphere was tense as villagers seemed to scrutinize the faces of the outsiders for signs of disrespect. It was left to Trần Quốc Vượng to defuse the tension. He apologized on behalf of the members of the Institute of Cultural Studies, for whose training he accepted responsibility: "They're all my students," he explained. He bowed three times to the village elders then retreated to a mat spread out well in the back

of the hall to signify his lower status. The villagers were visibly gratified by his gesture of humility. The tense atmosphere gradually relaxed and the conference began. The scholars were shown around, but were allowed to see only what the villagers wanted them to see, and to hear only what they were supposed to hear. The media-savvy villagers had also demanded that a documentary be produced about their festival. The villagers organized what they claimed was an authentic festival, and this was what television viewers got to see. There were no fertility rites, no offerings of bananas or candy, and no bumping or wrestling.

As members of the Institute of Cultural Studies wrote up the proceedings of the conference, Đồng Kỵ villagers vetted every word and forced them to undertake considerable revisions before pronouncing themselves satisfied with the results.[15] Finally, pleased with the product of their joint authorship, the villagers proceeded to contribute two hundred US dollars toward its publication. Among the illustrations is a picture of the village well, said to be three hundred years old. The story of the meeting of male and female deities in Goat Ravine is, however, not in the book. Neither are the God of Manure and fertility rites, agricultural or human, though the Firecracker Festival is described in great detail as a celebration of Thiên Cương's heroic deeds.

Observers and observed

In celebrating the revival of festivals and rituals in their research, scholars believed themselves to be contributing to the rehabilitation of rural folkways. Folk festivals, they asserted, were "a giant history tome that contained innumerable customs, beliefs, culture, arts, and socio-historical events of the people"(Lê Trung Vũ, ed., 1992, 13). As Phan Đăng Nhật wrote in his introduction (Lê Trung Vũ, ed., 1992), whose compilation was begun under his directorship,

> We cannot afford not to seek to understand traditional Vietnamese through the lens of folk festivals. And we cannot not study "the living museum of folk festivals" in order to build a future Vietnamese culture of harmonious development, avoiding the danger that has developed in industrialized countries where the race to increase material production is harming the spiritual, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of life and creating severe imbalances between human beings and their natural milieu. (Phan Đăng Nhật 1992, 15)

As this quote suggests, scholarship is neither a detached endeavor nor without consequence. While the revival (and reinvention) of tradition has provided almost too rich grist for its mill, and its researchers now enjoy unprecedented mobility and access to the countryside, the role of the Institute of Cultural Studies has come into question. It is not a mere observer of customs, old and new, but an active contributor, though sometimes unwittingly, to the resurgence of tradition. In the early days of *Đổi Mới*, research into a particular practice was often interpreted by nervous villagers as a sign that the state would countenance its revival. Yet, despite their exalted status as members of the intellectual/political

elite, scholars have, since imperial times, functioned as well as scribes for peasant communities. They have the requisite writing style and are seen to have access to sources that are either denied or unavailable to villagers: documents deposited in some faraway archive or books and articles of whose existence villagers are unaware. Since *Đổi Mới*, villagers have used their newly acquired wealth to hire scholars to write up pamphlets that can be used to lay claim to cultural riches or historical antiquity and generate income from tourism for their community. The conference volume that was jointly produced by the Institute of Cultural Studies and the Đồng Kỵ villagers in 1999 could thus be seen as a variation on this form of scholarly ghost-writing.

Rumors, especially from neighboring villages, continue to fly about the true nature of Đồng Kỵ's village god; but members of the Institute of Cultural Studies have become cautious. They are wry about their recent encounters with the subjects/objects of their study. It comes down to a matter of seeing: "Who is to say what the meaning of each ritual is? Villagers and scholars tend to see things differently. I would not say that there is a right or a wrong way."[16]

Folklorists sought to use the Đồng Kỵ festival to illustrate the prevalence of fertility rites in rural life. Villagers, they claimed, valued anything that promoted production. But while they waxed nostalgic about the fast vanishing rural past, Đồng Kỵ villagers, whose horizons had broadened when they became part of a larger market economy, saw themselves as full-fledged members of the state's modernizing project. They became intent on sanitizing the very traditions that attracted folklorists in the first place and on controlling what was written about them. At the same time, in insisting that their god was a legendary hero rather than a former manure collector, Đồng Kỵ villagers showed that they had learned to look at themselves through the eyes of others and to fear ridicule. They wanted to control what was said about themselves, their village, its customs, and its history. The scholars involved in this enterprise were no longer flies on the wall, detached from the proceedings; nor were they able to train a powerful gaze onto objects of research. Instead, they had been reduced to the status of pens-for-hire. Scholars, the Vietnamese Communist state used to claim, are workers with a pen. But in the confrontation between Đồng Kỵ villagers and Hanoi ethnographers, it was the villagers who seized control of the pen. As state employees, the scholars could not afford to ignore an order coming down from the General Secretary's Office that they mollify irate farmers, while the latter, because of their long connections and revolutionary credentials, felt free to go all the way to the top with their complaints.

As the case of Đồng Kỵ illustrates, the revival of the past is highly selective and is a joint enterprise. What looks like a conflict between scholars and farmers over Đồng Kỵ's cultural practices may turn out to be just another installment in a long history of joint involvement in the invention and re-invention of Vietnamese tradition, a process in which neither side has complete control over what is produced and remembered.

Notes

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1. Michael DiGregorio, personal communication.

2. Toan Ánh (1974, 41–44) states that Đồng Kỵ had a population of two thousand and owned four hundred and fifteen *mẫu* of land, which differs slightly from the data in Lê Hồng Lý (2000, 84).

3. In 1988, the village economy was still described as primarily agricultural. See Nguyễn Thu Minh 1988, 85–89).

4. Letter addressed by Đồng Kỵ villagers to the Director of the Institute of Cultural Studies, 1998. Trường Chinh (1907–1988), who joined the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League in 1927, was General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party at various points, including in the 1950s during the Land Reform Campaign (1954–1956) and in 1987–1988 as the *Đổi Mới* policy was launched. Hoàng Quốc Việt (1905?–1992) joined the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League in 1928 and the ICP in 1930 when it was founded. Closely associated with the excesses of the Land Reform program, he lost his position in the Politburo in late 1956 but later became head of the Vietnam Federation of Trade Unions. He was the author of *Our People, a Very Heroic People* (Hoàng 1965). Thanks to Edwin Moise for biographical information on Hoàng Quốc Việt. By the time Đồng Kỵ villagers complained to the authorities, Trường Chinh had been dead for seven years but Lê Quang Đạo was still alive.

5. On revolutionary martyrs, see Malarney 2001.

6. Other trees were planted by Lê Quang Đạo, Trường Chinh, Lê Đức Thọ, Phan Văn Khải, Nguyễn Thế Xương, Nguyễn Thanh Quát, Hoàng Quốc Việt, and the Village Elders' Association. Thanks to Nguyễn Quốc Vinh for photographs of the trees and the commemorative plaques.

7. This seems to have been implemented since at least the 1970s (Lê Hồng Lý 2000, 77–78).

8. This was one of the opening speeches for the international conference on folk festivals held in March 1991, which culminated in the publication edited by Đinh Xuân Lâm and Phan Huy Lê, 1991.

9. These offerings ranged from some fish, alcohol, and a modest sum of money for a lower grade deity (*hạ đẳng thần*) to a buffalo and a larger monetary sum for a deity of higher grade (*thượng đẳng thần*).

10. Toan Ánh's (1974) own description of the fertility rites of Đồng Kỵ is, in fact, based on Lê Văn Hảo 1964.

11. The story is recounted in *Việt Điện U Linh Tập* [The forest of Viet spirits], an anthology dating from 1329. For a translation, see Taylor 1983, Appendix O. To this day, villagers in Hát Môn still pray to the Trưng Sisters for rain (Personal communication from the caretaker of the Hát Môn temple, 1995).

12. Lê Hồng Lý, fieldwork notes, 1998.

13. Nguyễn Từ Chi's 1996 article seems to have escaped the villagers' attention. The article states that "Đồng Kỵ worships an obscene god (*dâm thần*) in the stream by the communal house. When women cross it, they must raise their skirts (*váy*) though the water is not deep" in "*Góp Phần Nghiên Cứu*."

14. In imitation of the Four Pillars of the State (*Tứ Trụ*) in imperials times, four scholars are said to be the four pillars of contemporary scholarship: Đinh Xuân Lâm for modern

history, Phan Huy Lê for premodern history, Hà Văn Tấn for archeology, and Trần Quốc Vượng for the study of culture.

15. The book is viewed as something of a step-child for the scholars involved in its compilation.

16. Lê Hồng Lý's comments to Hue-Tam Ho Tai, March 2000.

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