SEEING THROUGH THE INCENSE SMOKE: UNDERSTANDING THE MEANINGS OF ANCESTRAL RITES IN VIETNAM FOR THE SAKE OF A PASTORAL APPROACH IN CHRISTIAN MISSION

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Practical Theology
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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June 2025

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Vietnamese have a proverb, *gần mực thì đen, gần đèn thì rạng*. It translates literally as, "Near the ink, then black. Near the light, then bright." It is often used as a warning for kids to consider who they associate with, lest a bad crowd lead them astray. However, in the case of this dissertation, it is the second part of the proverb that resonates most deeply. This project has been a labor of love not just for me, but for countless others who have contributed in various ways towards its completion. I have been near many people who have illumined my life and work, for which I am most grateful. Throughout the process of finishing this dissertation, God always sent just the right people at just the right times. Their contributions must be acknowledged because this final product would not exist without them.

First, I thank the people of Vietnam. It was in this remarkable country that I first encountered ancestral veneration in homes that I visited and death anniversaries I was invited to. I was made to feel at home even though I was an outsider and did not always understand what was going on or how I should behave. I am grateful for the Vietnamese pastors and lay Christians who asked me questions about how to respond to ancestral veneration, questions for which I was wholly unprepared to even venture a thought, let alone an answer. They graciously humored me as I fumbled through it. Little did I know then that their questions and the struggles those questions represented would be the genesis of this project. In those first years, I had many dialogue partners on this issue, who patiently allowed me to observe rituals and ask questions.

I am enormously grateful to all those who formally participated in this project, especially those who were willing to donate their time to sit for an interview. I learned quickly that Vietnamese are rarely asked about motivations and beliefs concerning ancestral veneration, but not a single interviewee showed even the slightest hesitation to openly share about these

practices, sometimes in very personal and vulnerable ways. Interviewing them was by far the most rewarding part of this whole process.

I am also grateful to many institutions, including The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Office of International Mission, whose leaders first encouraged this endeavor and whose donors made it practically possible to pursue it. Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, has been a fantastic arena for these studies. In addition to generous tuition grants, the seminary provided a first-rate program in which to engage this topic, with courses and professors who sharpened my thinking every step of the way. Many of the insights I gained from them have found their way into this dissertation. Moreover, the staff at the seminary's Kristine Kay Hasse Memorial Library were tireless in hunting down obscure references.

Throughout the entire dissertation process, my advisor, Dr. Douglas Rutt, provided wise and timely guidance. He patiently and lovingly shepherded not only this dissertation but also my own emotions during the ups and downs of the project. Further, my readers, Drs. Jon Vieker and Kimson Nguyen, provided expertise that helped me consider new viewpoints, discover blind spots, find new sources, and write with more clarity and nuance. The contributions of all three of these scholars have strengthened the final product immeasurably. Whatever faults remain are mine alone.

Working across languages is never straightforward, but Nguyễn Hoài Anh made it fun. Her superior expertise in linguistics was integral in making sure the project's goals and questions were communicated accurately and sensitively to participants. Her help translating documents, scheduling interviews, and providing language support during interviews—all while dealing with my persnickety questions—was invaluable in making sure each step was conducted in a way that

removed as many barriers as possible. I am forever thankful to work on this project with someone I consider a dear friend.

Many others contributed in ways big and small, too many than can be listed here. But I would be remiss not to acknowledge the help of Kevin Armbrust, Đạng Trần Thi, David Fitzstevens, Carol Halter, Carl Hanson, Joel Hathaway, Beth Hoeltke, Jeff Hogue, Charles Keith, Robert Kolb, Jose and Carol Lima, Craig McCorkindale, Steven Oliver, Phạm Hoàng Đức, Peter C. Phan, Mark Rockenbach, Joel Scheiwe, David Schmitt, Stephen Wiesenauer, and Michael Winkelmann.

Chief among those who have sacrificed to see this project through to its conclusion are my family. My parents' encouragement was an anchor from the beginning. Though my father did not live to see the completion of this project, my mother's dogged optimism kept me afloat to the end. Despite the project requiring significant amounts of my time, my three children were always understanding and ready with an encouraging word and a hug. They learned well from their mom. My wife, Aimee, was everything I needed and then some: a dialogue partner when I was stuck, an accountability partner when I was behind, a listener when I was low, a supermom when I was preoccupied, and a tireless encourager all the time. Not to mention how she endured countless dinner conversations being taken over by talk of ancestors! She did it all with the utmost patience, grace, and joy. More than any other person on this planet, she inspires me.

God is the source of all good gifts and all good works. Each of the people named here are precious vessels of His goodness. But no gift is more precious than the salvation found in God's only Son, Jesus. His light shines brightest of all. *Soli Deo gloria*.

ABBREVIATIONS

CA	The Augsburg Confession
Ap	The Apology of the Augsburg Confession
LC	The Large Catechism
SA	The Smalcald Articles
SC	The Small Catechism
LW	*Luther's Works: American Edition*. 55 vols. ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Lehman Helmut. St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955–86.
CIM	China Inland Mission
IRB	Institutional Review Board

GLOSSARY

Accommodation:	In some usage, accommodation means adapting or adjusting the form or content of the Christian message for the sake of a person or people. In this study, accommodation means adapting or adjusting the practice of Christianity for the sake of a person or people.
Ancestor:	A deceased member of one's nuclear or extended family (usually through blood though not necessarily so) who is now in the afterlife but is venerated by the family.
Animism:	The attribution of supernatural power to material objects and the consequent practices that seek to harness that power.
Anthropology:	The study of humanity, with specific focus on human cultures.
Catholic:	Those Christian individuals or churches who are members of the Roman Catholic Church.
Contextualization:	The process of communicating and embodying the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ in terms and forms that are appropriate in, meaningful for, and targeted to a particular culture.
Culture:	The dominant artifacts, behaviors, norms, values, and beliefs that are shared by a social group and learned by its individual members, giving meaning to and shaping the possibilities of individual and societal life.
Đổi Mới:	"Renew" or "renovate." The name given to a series of reforms begun in the mid-1980s which moved Vietnam from a state-driven to a market-based but socialist-oriented economy (*kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa*), beginning a period of high economic growth.
Meaning:	The significance a person or people ascribe to a phenomenon.
Missiology:	The study of the purpose, history, and methods of God's ongoing redemptive intervention in the world—centered on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—and the church's role in it.
Pastoral Care:	The application of biblical and theological truth to the issues of an individual's life, with a view towards lovingly leading them to repent of sin, turn to Jesus for forgiveness, and live according to biblical truth. This care is not necessarily provided by a pastor.
Protestant:	Those Christian individuals, churches, or church bodies, distinct from the Roman Catholic Church, who follow the teachings of the Reformation.

Religion:	The beliefs, values, rites, and behaviors by which humans integrate their natural life experience with non-material supernatural actors.
Superstition:	A religious belief or practice that results from a mistaken view of both causality and God's and/or the supernatural world's spiritual power.
Syncretism:	The mixing of elements of Christianity with those of different religions to the point that the integrity of Christianity is lost.
Venerate:	To give honor and reverence to.
Vocation:	A station into which God places a person to carry out His purposes. A vocation includes engaging in specific relationships and performing their attendant duties.
Worship:	To ascribe ultimate allegiance to a deity.

ABSTRACT

Cima, J.P. "Seeing Through the Incense Smoke: Understanding the Meanings of Ancestral Rites in Vietnam for the Sake of a Pastoral Approach in Christian Mission." Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2025. 285 pp.

The veneration of ancestors at family altars has long been a defining feature of everyday Vietnamese life that poses a critical missiological problem for Christian mission in Vietnam. May Christians participate in ancestral veneration rituals? Current and historical responses to this question, among Protestants and Catholics alike, have not been uniform. Moreover, many responses have been based on assumed or oversimplified understandings of the rites' meaning which recent anthropological research have problematized. Further, these responses have been made without adequate consultation with the Vietnamese themselves. This qualitative study seeks to correct these shortcomings by utilizing in-person interviews to probe how non-Christian Vietnamese practitioners of ancestral veneration at the family altar describe its meanings. A deep analysis of the interviews reveals the meaning of ancestor veneration to be plural and fluid. The study identifies not one definitive meaning of ancestor veneration, but rather a variety of meanings, summarized under four broad categories: distinguishing form from content, understanding the individual in light of the family, securing human benefit and/or ancestor benefit, and connecting the past through the present to the future. Based on these results, the study argues that monolithic Christian responses to ancestor veneration are not helpful and instead suggests a pastoral approach that listens for and responds to the heart-level meanings of each practitioner. This approach is aided by the writings of Martin Luther (and others) on three relevant theological topics: the First and Fourth Commandments, the cult of the saints, and vocation. Luther's insights on these topics provide a theological foundation for a Christian ancestral practice but also clearly define its boundaries, allowing for a nuanced, compassionate, faithful, and contextual response to ancestral veneration in Vietnam.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROJECT INTRODUCTION

Early in my time in Vietnam, I received a phone call from a pastor serving several small congregations in northern Vietnam. He was seeking my advice about a local family who had recently begun joining the church's weekly gatherings, their first experience with Christianity. After some weeks, they had expressed to this pastor a desire to be baptized. He was audibly excited about these developments, but then expressed his hesitation to move forward. He shared that the family, like most Vietnamese, practiced regular ancestral veneration.[1] An ancestral altar was kept in their home, functioning as the locus of their engagement with the ancestors. The pastor then asked me, "Should I allow them to keep their ancestral altar, or should I instruct them to take it down before I baptize them?" While I had witnessed ancestral veneration often during my time in Vietnam, in that moment I was first compelled to consider it missiologically. As a Lutheran pastor trained in the United States, I felt entirely ill-equipped to answer this pastor's query. I had no answers for him but was myself filled with questions. What was the nature of their interaction with the ancestors? Had that changed since becoming Christians? What role does the altar play in that interaction? Have they been taught the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3 ESV)? What compels them to keep engaging the ancestors? What have other Christians taught on this issue? Is it even my place to offer an answer?

[1] Choosing English words for ancestral practices is difficult, lest they be infused with foreign semantic or theological baggage. Most scholars use either "ancestor worship" or "ancestor veneration." This study uses veneration and its cognates for reasons specified below in Chapter One, "Definition of Terms." Nonetheless, the term "veneration" is used only tentatively, since the relationship of these practices to Christian notions of worship and idolatry is precisely what the study probes. In addition to "veneration," to reduce repetitiveness the study will also use "ancestral practices" or "ancestral rites" to refer to the same phenomenon.

I fumbled through the conversation with the pastor; at that time, I did not yet appreciate that I was being asked to consider a missiological quandary that had been plaguing missionaries, pastors, and local believers alike for hundreds of years. The proportion of Vietnamese engaging in ancestral rites has been said to reach 98%,[2] making this a crucial issue for Christian mission in Vietnam. The story above is but one representative example of the questions that ancestral rites pose not just for Vietnam, but for large parts of Asia. These questions are not merely an abstract academic curiosity for historians and missiologists, but rather affect the spiritual, economic, social, and political lives of millions of Asian Christians across the world even to this day. Its pervasiveness and sensitivity have caused David S. Lim to assert that "ancestral veneration remains the biggest hindrance in evangelizing [many Asian countries'] vast populations."[3]

The pastor's phone call that day, along with countless subsequent similar stories, taught me that at the center of a Vietnamese experience of Christian conversion is a clash of two key influences: orthodox Christianity's exclusive monotheism[4] on the one hand, and the widespread and deeply ingrained practice of ancestral veneration[5] among Vietnamese on the other. At a basic level, this project aims to explore this clash. That is, it will have its eyes turned in two directions. First, and primarily, this project explores ancestral veneration in Vietnam, in particular the meanings it holds for the Vietnamese who practice it. Second, based on these described

[2] Tran Van Huan, "The Tradition of Ancestor Worship in Vietnamese Families from the Beginning to the Present Day and Some Current Problems," *International Journal of Research in Sociology and Anthropology* 5, no. 4 (2019): 16, doi:10.20431/2454-8677.0504002. A recent Pew Research Center study found that 97% of Vietnamese surveyed reported burning incense at an altar within the past year. Pew Research Center, *Religion and Spirituality in East Asian Societies* (Washington, DC, 2024), 83, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/06/PR_2024.06.17_religion-in-east-asia_report.pdf.

[3] David S. Lim, "Contextualizing Ancestor Veneration: An Historical Review," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 109.

[4] In light of postmodernism's emphasis on pluralism and radical subjectivity, the exclusivity of Christian claims has been challenged in recent years. Nonetheless, as a confessional Lutheran Christian, this author writes from an exclusivist viewpoint.

[5] On the use of the term veneration as distinct from worship, see the section, "Definition of Terms," below.

meanings of ancestral veneration, the study asks how Christianity has and might respond with both compassion towards Vietnamese converts and fidelity to the exclusive claims of Scripture.

Background of the Problem

Ancestor veneration is based on the belief in spirits which has, from the earliest times, been the centerpiece of Vietnamese spirituality. Historically, these spirits might be people like saints and heroes, natural forces, or objects. Even today, all Vietnamese know the myth of the *Việt* people's origins as the offspring of a dragon (*Lạc Long Quân*) and a princess (*Âu Cơ*),[6] which led to the establishment of its first dynasty, the *Hùng* kings, who continue to be venerated today, particularly during the annual Hung King's Festival (*Giỗ Tổ Hùng Vương*).[7] Today's veneration of ancestors is an amalgamation of these native animistic practices and the influence of three imported influences from China: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Daoism and Buddhism provided a metaphysical framework while Confucianism, particularly notions of filial piety, provided moral and social force.[8] Kimson Nguyen summarizes, "The Three Teachings [of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism] indeed integrated and," together with native traditions,

[6] The longevity of these names and this myth is reinforced by their use as street names in urban areas. The myth is summarized nicely in Kimson Nguyen, *Cultural Integration and the Gospel in Vietnamese Mission Theology: A Paradigm Shift* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Academic, 2019), 89–90.

[7] When including Vietnamese terms and names in this study, the use of diacritical markings will be retained when available. Though they will be unintelligible to readers unfamiliar with Vietnamese language, they should not prove a distraction given modern Vietnamese's Latin script. On the other hand, those who do understand Vietnamese will find them most helpful.

[8] Two key Confucian texts describe the importance of filial piety. See "Three Character Classic," Ying-lin Wang, *San Tzu Ching*, trans. Herbert A. Giles (Shanghai: Messrs. Kelly & Walsh, 1900); and "The Classic of Filial Piety," James Legge, trans., "Xiao Jing (孝經) [The Classic of Filial Piety]," http://ctext.org/xiao-jing.

"formed a syncretistic belief system in the Vietnamese spiritual life."[9] Nguyen argues that this system is unique to the Vietnamese people, calling it "Vietnamese syncretistic spirituality."[10]

Despite, or perhaps because of, the mixing of religious traditions over many centuries, ancestor veneration remains the heart of Vietnamese spirituality even today. As Philip Taylor notes, this is true despite the Vietnamese state's "restrictive regulations" from the early 20th century, which ensured "religious activities are subject to curtailment."[11] Scholars of post-revolutionary Vietnam[12] are astounded by the vibrant resurgence of multiple religious expressions, with ancestral practices chief among them. As Endres and Lauser write, "[Spirits] have returned (if they had ever disappeared) with a vengeance."[13] Further, regarding the phenomenon in post-revolutionary Vietnam, researcher Kate Jellema emphasizes the role of ancestor rites in the creation of cultural and national identity. She contends that the state "has effectively parlayed the practice into a unifying characteristic able to integrate the disparate sectors of the nation," to the extent that "when someone burns incense at the altar, they actively and incontrovertibly perform their Vietnameseness."[14]

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[9] Nguyen, *Cultural Integration and the Gospel*, 95.

[10] His whole chapter on the topic is essential reading to understand the unique mix of local and foreign religious influences that contribute to a unique Vietnamese spirituality. He observes a dual force in Vietnamese spirituality that resists certain elements of these foreign influences while assimilating others. These resistance and assimilation forces continue to this day, according to Nguyen, and includes the ways Vietnamese have responded to Christianity in the past century. Nguyen, *Cultural Integration and the Gospel*, 85–119.

[11] Philip Taylor, ed., *Modernity and Re-Enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 8–9.

[12] The term "post-revolutionary" Vietnam refers to the period after the achievement of independence from French colonialism in 1954, and after the "resistance war against the United States" (*Kháng chiến chống Mỹ*) was ended in 1975, when the entire country was reunited under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

[13] Kirsten W. Endres and Andrea Lauser, eds., *Engaging the Spirit World: Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern Southeast Asia*, 1st ed. (New York: Berghahn, 2012), Introduction, Kindle.

[14] Kate Jellema, "Returning Home: Ancestor Veneration and the Nationalism of Đổi Mới Vietnam," in Taylor, *Modernity and Re-Enchantment,* 72.

Vietnamese families today spend enormous amounts of time and money promoting ritual interaction with the ancestors, with a locus of that activity taking place at altars in homes (*bàn thờ tổ tiên*). This ritual interaction happens at a variety of times (e.g., Lunar New Year, death anniversaries) and in a variety of ways, including arranging the altar, cleaning the altar (*lau dọn* or *dọn dẹp bàn thờ*), bowing (*khấn*) at the altar, making food or other offerings (*đồ cúng*) at the altar, praying (*cầu*) at the altar, conducting a ceremony (*cúng*) at the altar, and gathering at the altar. Because of the pervasiveness and variety of these interactions, ancestral altars become a focal point for social and religious life, through which Vietnamese promote harmony and unity among the living and the dead alike.

Turning the project's gaze towards Christian mission, the clash between Christianity and multivocal ancestral veneration is hardly a new phenomenon, but rather has been a key missiological concern since the beginning of Christianity's encounter with Vietnam. Alexandre de Rhodes (1596–1660), the most famous of the early Jesuit missionaries in Vietnam, encountered the rites during his first mission to Cochinchina,[15] begun in 1624.[16] In his biography of the famous missionary, Peter C. Phan notes that de Rhodes, based on eyewitness observations of the rites, was "adamantly and vigorously opposed to the practice of ancestor worship because he considered it religious."[17] So central were these rites to Vietnamese identity, however, that de Rhodes' rejection of them, and his instruction to local converts to abandon them, had direct

[15] This exonym originated with 15th century Portuguese traders to designate what is today southern Vietnam. It was distinguished from Tonkin (today's northern Vietnam), and later during French domination, from Annam (today's central Vietnam).

[16] Peter C. Phan explains the history and significance of Alexandre de Rhodes missions in Vietnam. See Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam*, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005).

[17] Peter C. Phan, "Doing Theology in the Context of Mission: Lessons from Alexandre de Rhodes, S.J.," *Gregorianum* 81, no. 4 (2000): 42.

bearing on his multiple expulsions from Tonkin and Cochinchina at the decision of various rulers.[18] As shall be discussed below, later Roman Catholic evaluations of the practices would surprisingly reverse de Rhodes' position, and today Vietnamese Roman Catholics incorporate a robust ancestral practice into their liturgical and devotional life.[19]

Meanwhile, since their entry into Vietnam in the early 20th century[20] Protestants missions of all kinds have been consistent in their broad rejection of ancestral rites.[21] While there was some amount of debate about ancestral rites among early Protestant missions in China, that debate never reached the breadth or length of the controversies among Roman Catholics.[22] Instead, Protestant missions reached broad uniformity in rejecting ancestral rites entirely rather quickly. This continued in Vietnam, where early evangelicals took an "iconoclastic, critical approach toward Vietnamese tradition," as Vince Le puts it.[23] With regards to ancestral veneration, this critical approach continues today in most evangelical churches.[24]

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[18] Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 74–75. It should be noted that Alexandre de Rhodes, while rejecting the rites, did recognize their critical cultural importance, and thus sought functional substitutes. See Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 92–96.

[19] Minh and Zaragoza provide an example of how ancestral practices have been incorporated into church life. Alphonse Minh and Rufino Zaragoza, "Vietnamese Lunar New Year: Ancestor Worship and Liturgical Inculturation within a Cultural Holiday," *New Theology Review* 27, no. 2 (2015): 105–8.

[20] Two English works summarize the history of Protestant missions in Vietnam. See Reg Reimer, *Vietnam's Christians: A Century of Growth in Adversity* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2011); Phu Hoang Le, "A Short History of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (1911–1965)" (PhD diss., New York University, 1972), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

[21] This will be explored in Chapter Three. Reimer provides a short summary. Reginald E. Reimer, "Religious Dimension of the Vietnamese Cult of the Ancestors," *Missiology* 3, no. 2 (April 1975): 155–68.

[22] Lim, "Contextualizing Ancestor Veneration."

[23] Vince Le, *Vietnamese Evangelicals and Pentecostalism: The Politics of Divine Intervention* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 80.

[24] This will be discussed more fully in Chapter Three. Two recent studies are particularly helpful: Joan M. Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation among Vietnamese Evangelicals" (PhD diss., Middlesex University, 2020), https://repository.mdx.ac.uk/item/8955w; Quynh-Hoa Le Nguyen, "Tin Lành: The Bible and the Construction of an Evangelical Vietnamese Christian Identity (1975-2007)" (PhD diss., The Claremont Graduate University, 2013), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Statement of the Problem

Because it is so central to Vietnamese cultural identity, ancestral veneration continues to pose unique challenges for Christian mission in Vietnam. For converts, the strong sociocultural pull towards ancestral veneration seems at odds with Christianity's call to worship God alone. Many Christian converts feel caught between these competing influences, desperately wondering whether it is possible to reconcile Christianity's exclusivity with ancestral veneration's plurality, their Christian identity with their Vietnamese identity.

Contributing to and flowing from this tension, Christian missionaries and churches have not, as hinted at above and explored further below, spoken with one voice on the issue of ancestor veneration.[25] One of the factors contributing to the wide spectrum of missiological approaches to ancestral rites throughout history is confusion about their meaning. Are they religious and therefore idolatrous? Or are they benign expressions of merely social realities? In elucidating a typology of Christian responses to ancestor worship, Henry Smith notes, "Types differ from each other in the relative emphases on the religious versus the social nature of ancestor worship."[26] Those who accommodate them usually presume a meaning that is civil rather than religious,[27] while those who reject them presume the opposite. Which meaning is correct? As will be shown below, recent anthropological research has shown that this bifurcated view does not do justice to ancestral veneration's plurality of meanings. Kate Jellema notes, "the

[25] This has been true even since the early Roman Catholic missions to Asia in the late 16th century. Early missionary orders had different approaches to ancestral veneration, igniting the "Chinese Rites Controversy." See Chapter Three for further discussion of this controversy.

[26] Henry Newton Smith, "A Typology of Christian Responses to Chinese Ancestor Worship," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26, no. 4 (1989): 628.

[27] This is the basis for Roman Catholicism's current openness to the rites (see the discussion of *Plane compertum est* below). One exception is Roman Catholic scholar Peter Phan, who acknowledges the religious nature of the rites but still argues for their accommodation. See Peter C. Phan, "Culture and Liturgy: Ancestor Veneration as a Test Case," *Worship* 76, no. 5 (September 2002): 420.

practice of ancestor worship defies easy categorization precisely because it is so central to *so many* realms of everyday experience, including both spirituality and social life, both public status and personal morality" (italics mine).[28] In ancestral observances, the spiritual and material, the temporal and eternal, the personal and social, are intertwined.

The confusion, however, is not only over the content of ancestral veneration's meaning but also the location of its meaning. In their varied approaches, Christians have established the meaning of these practices on a variety of foundations.[29] The early Jesuits in China took an *ad fontes* approach that sought authoritative interpretations in the Confucian classics. Other orders looked to the practice of the rites themselves, insisting on, for example, the religious nature of certain ritual actions like bowing or lighting incense. At different points in time, guidance on the meaning of the rites was even sought by Christian missionaries from native non-Christian rulers.

And yet, throughout the long discussion of ancestral veneration's meaning and the Christian response, it is the voices of missionaries, ecclesial authorities, and occasionally rulers, that have been the loudest, while the voices of everyday local people have been conspicuously silent. Speaking of early Chinese missions, Phan regrets that decisions about ancestral veneration were made by missionaries or authorities in Rome "without a serious consultation with the Chinese churches and the Chinese Christians themselves."[30] Mark Luttio emphasizes not only the lack of local input, but even the Western orientation of the discussion itself. He states, "It seems that amidst all this spillage of ink no one has ever stopped to ask whether [the distinction

[28] Kate Jellema, "Everywhere Incense Burning: Remembering Ancestors in Đổi Mới Vietnam," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2007): 469.

[29] These will be explored in Chapter Three in a discussion of the Chinese Rites Controversy. For an excellent account of the controversy and its importance, see George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy: From Its Beginning to Modern Times* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985).

[30] Phan, "Culture and Liturgy," 417.

between religious and civil functions of ancestral rites] was an appropriate question to ask in the first place; whether it was, for instance, a question that a Chinese would ask."[31] Locals were not only cut out of giving input, but had no power to even frame the questions and terms of the discussion even though it had direct bearing on their lives.

Unraveling this confusion of meaning is crucial because of the real consequences of whatever response is taken. Among Catholics, who view ancestral rites as civil/social, selected rites are permitted and even incorporated into church life. Among Protestants, who view ancestral rites as religious, converts are often taught to completely reject them. Both answers pose risks. On the one hand, Reginald E. Reimer observes that overaccommodation risks "producing a syncretistic Christianity."[32] On the other hand, underaccommodation risks social ostracization which Quynh-Hoa Le Nguyen contends is a "major obstacle to evangelism."[33] Vietnamese converts, who feel caught between their obligations to their religious convictions and their obligations to their family, bear these risks every day.

A Christian response to ancestral veneration based on a simple distinction between the rites' religious and social meanings is not adequate. Any meaningful consideration of the question of ancestral rites in Christian mission must discover the complex of meanings of the rites themselves for a particular people at a particular time. This approach is warranted by recent studies in linguistics that problematize any intrinsic relationship between "texts" (whether that text is a word, a visual, or in the case of ancestral veneration, a ritual performance) and their

[31] Mark D. Luttio, "The Chinese Rites Controversy (1603–1742): A Diachronic and Synchronic Approach," *Worship* 68, no. 4 (July 1994): 304.

[32] Reimer, "Religious Dimension," 155.

[33] Quynh-Hoa Le Nguyen, "Tin Lành," 194.

meanings.[34] James Voelz notes, "language and its usage must be studied synchronically (at a cross section in time)."[35] Voelz goes on to say, "readers/receptors of any text play an important role in the process of interpretation."[36] As such, our understanding will benefit from probing this complex of meanings emically, i.e., from the perspective of non-Christians who practice the rites in their everyday lives.[37]

Research Question

This project asks a deceptively simple question: how do non-Christian Vietnamese who practice ancestral rites at the family altar describe their meaning? Using qualitative methods, the study relies on a demographic survey followed by live interviews with a random sample of Vietnamese practitioners of ancestral rites to discover these meanings.[38] The study will focus on the most fundamental and pervasive location of ancestor veneration: the family altar. While there are other legitimate sites for veneration, there are three reasons to justify singling out the ancestral altar for study. First, the ancestral altar is the most ubiquitous location of ancestor veneration.[39] Almost all Vietnamese have some form of altar in their home. Second, it is the most

[34] The relevance of modern linguistics in tackling ancestors, introduced in passing here, will be most evident in Chapter Three.

[35] James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World*, 2nd rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 93.

[36] Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 208.

[37] Emic descriptions are distinguished from "etic" descriptions, which Emerson explains as "based on concepts that come from outside the culture studied." Instead, the receptor-oriented approach of this study strives for "emic" descriptions that "use categories from within that culture that would be used or recognized by its members." See Robert M. Emerson, ed., *Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations*, 2nd ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 2001), 31.

[38] Qualitative methods are appropriate for this study precisely because they focus on "the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study." See John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 44.

[39] A recent Pew Research Center showed that 95% of Vietnamese respondents had a family altar at home. Pew Research Center, *Religion and Spirituality in East Asian Societies*, 77. This is confirmed by historical and

frequent expression of ancestor veneration. In addition to annual ceremonies, most Vietnamese interact with the ancestral altar at least once per month.[40] Third is the ancestral altar's centrality in social life. For example, in Vietnamese weddings it is common for the bride and groom to venerate the ancestors at both family's homes.[41]

How do Vietnamese describe their motivations to maintain family altars and perform rituals there? Do they describe these motivations in terms of moral duty or obligation, a desire to give honor or express gratitude, psychological comfort, the achievement of social status, the promotion of family identity or harmony, national solidarity, hopes/fears regarding the ancestor's ability to stave off calamity and bring prosperity, or perhaps a mix of all these and others still?[42] If many of these motivations (or others) are prevalent in respondents' descriptions, which ones come to the fore as primary and which fade into the background as secondary? How do Vietnamese describe their beliefs about the role of votive and food offerings? To what extent do they believe that the ancestors have power to influence their lives for good or for ill? Attentively listening to Vietnamese practitioners expound on these questions is the heart of this study.

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recent anthropological research. Gerald Cannon Hickey, *Village in Vietnam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964), 32; Shaun Kingsley Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 17; Pham Van Bich, *The Vietnamese Family in Change: The Case of the Red River Delta*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Vietnam in Transition (London: Routledge, 1999), 35.

[40] This was true for 100% of the interviewees in Chapter Five.

[41] This was observed directly by this author numerous times, most significantly during a wedding he joined in 2009, in which he participated in celebrations at both the bride and groom's hometowns (in two different provinces). It was also observed by Gerald Hickey a half-century prior during his field work in Vietnam. Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 99–107.

[42] The categories listed here are not arbitrary but rather reflect insights in recent anthropological research on ancestral rites among Vietnamese. See Chapter Two for more discussion on this research.

Purpose of the Study

The study explores the extent to which the meaning made of ancestral rites is plural and will, based on the initial survey and sensitive listening during interviews, along with deep analysis of the data they both produce, seek to describe the content of that plurality. This information is useful for the discussion of Christian responses to ancestral rites in a few important ways. By hearing from everyday Vietnamese in their own words, base motivations for performing ancestral rites and beliefs about their nature and purpose can be discovered rather than assumed. The data will help uncover a plurality of meanings, but more crucially reveal how those meanings relate to each other qualitatively. The data will test the broad Protestant assumption of primarily religious meanings in the rites. It will also test the broad Catholic assumption that the rites have become merely civil in meaning. Moreover, it will problematize the reductionist, western distinction between civil and religious meanings entirely. Most importantly, then, a clearer understanding of ancestor veneration's meanings provides a more stable framework on which the contours of a nuanced, compassionate, faithful, and contextual Christian response to ancestral rites in Vietnam can be traced.

Tracing this response also involves interpreting the data's significance *vis a vis* relevant theological and/or missiological considerations. This study will suggest that a Lutheran theological lens provides unique categories and distinctions that will be helpful in formulating a faithful and fruitful Christian response. Utilizing core confessional documents of the global evangelical Lutheran church, and other relevant writings of Martin Luther, the study will explore three key theological topics and relate them to the issue of ancestor veneration.

First, the study will consider a Lutheran understanding of the First and Fourth Commandments.[43] Unlike the Roman Catholic Church which defined idolatry ritually, Luther identified it as a matter of the heart's allegiance. In response to God's command to have no other gods, Luther explains, "What does this mean? We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things."[44] Meanwhile, Luther extols the paramount importance of the Fourth Commandment, asserting that "after faith in God there is nothing greater than obedience to parents,"[45] and "even almsgiving and all other works for our neighbor are not equal to this."[46] For Luther, following both commandments is critically necessary for the Christian life.

Building on this foundation, the study will ponder whether the Fourth Commandment might provide a biblical/theological context in which ancestor veneration might find a home, while the First Commandment places limits and qualifications on those practices. Such an analysis would help Christians identify the positive aspects of ancestral rites while also alerting them to the potential dangers of idolatry. Put another way, Luther's insights might inform an ancestral practice that is a contextualized expression of the Fourth Commandment that does not fall afoul of the First Commandment.

Second, and flowing directly from the above, the study will explore the early Lutherans' measured approach to the veneration of the saints. The idolatry of the cult of the saints was a

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[43] The Fourth Commandment reads, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Exod. 20:12 ESV). Note that some Protestant churches count this as the Fifth Commandment. The difference is due to different numberings of the commandments among Christian churches. In fact, the Hebrew text of Exod. 20:1–17 does not number them at all, and so any numbering system is a matter of interpretation and convention. This study will use the Lutheran numbering which, like the Roman Catholic numbering, combines Exod. 20:3–6 into a single command.

[44] Small Catechism I.1–2 in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 351. Hereafter SC.

[45] Martin Luther, "The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows" (1521), vol. 44 in *Luther's Works: American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Lehman Helmut (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955–86), 326. Hereafter *LW*.

[46] Large Catechism I.126 in Kolb and Wengert, 403. Hereafter LC.

common target for Luther's ire, but he never taught to do away with the saints entirely. In the Augsburg Confession, a decisive document in the early Lutherans' break from Rome, Philip Melanchthon set clear limits on the saints' role, asserting, "it cannot be demonstrated from Scripture that a person should call upon the saints or seek help from them."[47] But in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Melanchthon sets out a positive Christian three-fold honor to the saints: thanksgiving, the strengthening of faith, and imitation.[48]

The reformers' middle way between idolatry and iconoclasm might provide helpful boundaries for articulating a Christian ancestral practice that seeks to give appropriate thanksgiving and honor to those that have come before us. Indeed, Scriptures are replete with reminders of those whom God has used in the past, and exhortations for them to be remembered.[49] Historic liturgical festivals honoring individual saints, as well as the annual All Saints Day, have sought to heed Scripture's enjoinders in this regard. Of course, the ancestors cannot simply be equated with the saints, chiefly because Vietnamese ancestors are largely non-Christian. Thus, a key question will be the extent to which, and on what basis, if any, Christians can appropriately venerate non-Christian ancestors.

Third, Luther pioneered the concept of vocation, i.e., the various callings into which God places the Christian to love and serve their neighbor. His theology of vocation developed from his reflections on monastic vows, which, during his time, were extolled as higher callings over pursuits outside the Roman Catholic Church. Luther had no tolerance for this view. Instead, he

[47] Augsburg Confession XXI.2 in Kolb and Wengert, 58.

[48] Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXI.4–6 in Kolb and Wengert, 238. Hereafter Ap.

[49] In both the Old Testaments, God refers to Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (e.g., Exod. 3:6, 15). Jesus quotes this passage in Matt. 22:31–32, specifically to make the point: "He is not God of the dead, but of the living" (Matt. 22:32b). Moreover, the writer of Hebrews exhorts his readers to remember and give thanks for the faith of many key Old Testament figures.

bemoaned how church vocations took people away from their other God-given callings. He wrote, "Let the man be anathema who has taken a vow or will have kept a vow in conflict with his responsibility toward his parents and toward his neighbor."[50] According to Luther, parents are "God's representatives" and so they are honored, "as if for God."[51]

The implication is that duties as sons or daughters are not merely social vocations. For Luther, the social *is* religious. The religious *is* social. Luther views the world, and our actions in it, not as merely material and natural, but rather suffused with immaterial and supernatural significance. As this study will show in Chapter Two, this permeation of religious significance across all arenas of earthly life has commonalities with the worldview of Vietnamese today. On this basis, some interaction with the ancestors might be conceived of as an appropriate vocational duty of Vietnamese Christians.

Definition of Terms

The study's use of the terms *veneration* and *worship*, in reference to ancestors, requires comment. Indeed, deciding which term to use cuts to the heart of the problem. For the sake of this study, basic and broad definitions will be used. *Veneration* refers to the giving of honor or reverence. *Worship*, however, refers to the attribution of ultimate allegiance to a deity.[52]

Nonetheless, it must be admitted that even in English, the two terms contain overlap in meaning and use. To Western Christian English-speakers, using the term *worship* in reference to ancestors implies an idolatrous action because worship is reserved for God alone. For this reason, many Christian missionaries and scholars, when speaking of ancestral rites, use the term *worship*

[50] *LW* 44:326

[51] LC I.108 in Kolb and Wengert, 401.

[52] The reader should note that these definitions will not hold true for quotations of others' work.

precisely to cast the practices in that light. However, because the *a priori* assumption of their idolatrous nature is precisely what this study problematizes, *veneration* will be used throughout unless quoting others. Reinforcing this choice is the author's experience, in which Vietnamese themselves would never claim that ancestral practices venerate the ancestor in the same way a formal deity might be worshipped.[53] That Vietnamese language uses a variety of terms which cannot easily be fit into exclusive meanings with clear boundaries only highlights the need for such care in terminology.[54] Michaël Singleton has wisely written, "in representing dealings with the departed in terms of what their own culture took to be religious belief and behavior, western anthropologists started out … on the wrong metaphorical foot."[55] This study will endeavor not to repeat the mistake.

Inevitably, however, this study will need to discuss ancestral veneration in relation to Christian notions of worship and its relationship to idolatry, which take on distinct nuances that broad definitions cannot account for. In Chapters Three and Six, then, the term will be used more flexibly. Readers will be alerted to the sense being used.

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[53] David S. Lim makes a similar point: "in these cultures, these acts of worship do not confer any belief that the departed ancestors have become some kind of deity. For these cultures, ancestor practices are not the same as the worship of the gods." David S. Lim, "Ancestor Veneration and Family Conversion Revisited," in *Family and Faith in Asia: The Missional Impact of Social Networks*, ed. Paul De Neui, SEANET (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2010), 184.

[54] By far the most common term used to refer to engagement with the ancestors is *thờ cúng*. The first part of this word, *thờ*, connotes affective meanings while also implying ritual action. *Cúng* denotes ritual offering. *Thờ cúng*, then, is often translated as "worship" or "venerate." Also common when referring to interactions with ancestors is *tưởng nhớ*. This word refers to a recalling to mind. It is usually translated as remember or commemorate. Slightly less common is *tạ ơn*, which connotes gratitude and thankfulness. It can be rendered as "give thanks." Also used is *cúng bái*, which refers to ceremonial offerings. It might be translated as "make an offering." Finally, some use the world *thờ phụng/phượng*, though much less commonly among non-Christians. *Phụng* or *phượng* connotes service and obedience. Together with *thờ*, it is commonly translated "worship." Interestingly, it is this final word that is mostly commonly used by Christians to refer to worship of God.

[55] Michael Singleton, "From Worshipping Ancestors to Respecting Senior Citizens," *Civilisations* 63, no. 1&2 (2014): 238.

Chapter Guide

This introductory chapter has introduced ancestral veneration's relevance to Christian mission and appropriate background. Further, it has identified the specific problem the study will grapple with and laid out its purpose in doing so, while also addressing any preliminary matters. Before proceeding further, it is wise to chart the course for the dissertation's structure, to aid the reader in grasping the full scope of the project.

Chapter Two will review the recent anthropological literature related to ancestor veneration. Specifically, it will identify key trends and patterns in how their meanings have developed in recent decades, being influenced by diverse actors and sectors. A review of the literature will show that evaluations of ancestral rites reveal a plurality of meanings that tend towards three broad non-exclusive categories: political meanings, economic meanings, and social meanings.

Chapter Three will explore the various ways Christians have responded to the issue of ancestor veneration in Asia. Starting with 16th-century missions, the chapter will show how Roman Catholic approaches have changed dramatically over the centuries, while Protestant approaches, arrived at relatively recently, have remained unchanged. Most importantly, the chapter will show how all those approaches seem to be predicated on a faulty understanding of ancestral rites' meaning that has not considered the input of local practitioners.

Chapter Four will outline the study's qualitative methodology. The core of the project is in-person interviews with non-Christian practitioners of ancestor veneration to understand how they describe its meaning. This chapter will explain the specific procedures that will be employed to recruit participants, interview them, and analyze the data obtained.

Chapter Five will present the data from the interviews. Representative responses will be shared and interpreted. The chapter will identify key patterns in responses, including patterns in

the substance of the answers as well as patterns related to the respondents' demographics. The aim of the chapter is to analyze the data to delineate broad themes of meanings for ancestral rites.

Chapter Six will explore the implications of these broad themes of meanings for Christian responses to ancestor veneration. Historical and current approaches will be evaluated. Moreover, the data will also be put into dialogue with relevant categories of Lutheran theology—the First and Fourth Commandments, the veneration of the saints, and vocation—to suggest new or amended approaches to the issue.

This study is undertaken out of deep concern not only for the well-being of Christians in Vietnam, but also for their witness to their fellow Vietnamese and to other cultures struggling with the question of ancestral rites. Charles Van Engen offers a bold, and still unfulfilled, challenge: "a careful, culturally appropriate, biblically faithful, and missiologically intentional theology of ancestral veneration cries for development."[56] Though this study will not accomplish that worthy and lofty goal, it will, it is hoped, make a small contribution.

[56] Charles Van Engen, *Transforming Mission Theology* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2017), 251.

CHAPTER TWO

ANTHROPOLOGICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Originality

In recent decades, anthropological research in Vietnam has blossomed.[1] This is due in no small part to ethnographers' increased access to Vietnam for fieldwork and data collection since the *Đổi Mới* reforms of the 1980s that shifted the country to a market economy and opened it to global integration. Further underpinning this interest has been the rise in postcolonial critical theory.[2] Perhaps to exorcise the ghosts of Vietnam's colonial past, in which Eastern peoples were conceived of only in contrast to perceived Western cultural superiority, international and local ethnographers alike are (re)discovering the rich cultural, social, historical, political, and religious data that Vietnam holds for anthropological study.

In these recent studies from across a broad spectrum of anthropological interests, ancestral practices have played a prominent role, precisely because they are so pervasive in multiple domains of everyday life. One cannot study the Vietnamese without encountering ancestral rites in some form. Kate Jellema notes, "The ancestors were a near-constant presence: part of the everyday domestic routine, a considerable household expense, the guests of honor at family gatherings, a frequent subject of conversation and stories, a vehicle for making social connections, and moral exemplars for children and a focus for prayers."[3] The ancestors' pervasiveness in multiple domains of life, and as a result in a wide spectrum of anthropological

[1] Hy V. Luong provides a helpful review of trends in anthropological research in Vietnam in the post-revolutionary period. See Hy V. Luong, "Structure, Practice, and History: Contemporary Anthropological Research on Vietnam," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1–2 (2006): 371–409.

[2] Lois Tyson writes, "postcolonial criticism seeks to understand the operations—politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically—of colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies." Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, Third edition. (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 399.

[3] Jellema, "Everywhere Incense Burning," 468.

research, only strengthens the thesis of this study—that the meaning of the rites is radically plural. Happily, then, this proliferation of anthropological work in Vietnam provides this study with a solid foundation built on a wealth of germane data about ancestral rites and their meanings.

However, the anthropological literature usually tackles ancestral practices in two ways. First, in works with a broad focus, these rites appear descriptively and generally, without being singled out for any significant discussion about the rites' meanings. These works clarify the broad importance of ancestral practices, but lack the specificity and depth needed for this study's purposes. The trees are lost in the forest. Meanwhile, in other works the rites themselves are tackled specifically, but usually from a narrow angle, e.g., economic, political, social, ritual, etc. These works helpfully bring the issue of ancestral rites into sharp relief but can be so focused on one particular aspect of the rites' meaning as to underappreciate other important aspects and how they interrelate. The forest is missed for the trees.

This study distinguishes itself by focusing narrowly on the issue of ancestral rites while retaining a broad view of the issue. Specifically, this study aims to identify not one aspect of their meaning, but rather to explore the plurality of meanings that Vietnamese associate with ancestral practices. This approach appreciates the importance of individual trees but desires first and foremost to describe the forest of which they are a part.

It is precisely this fuller picture that would be beneficial to Christian mission efforts in cultures that have robust ancestral practices. Unfortunately, however, recent anthropological insights on ancestral practices have not yet been adequately grappled with when considering the question of a Christian response to these rites. As Chapter Three will show, Christian responses have been based on assumed, simplified, and even artificial understandings of the rites, without

adequate contributions or leadership sought from local Christians. Through a review of the relevant anthropological literature and a historical review of the Christian response, followed by fresh in-person interviews, this project will correct that omission and give voice to those who have remained voiceless. The data gleaned will provide occasion to evaluate previous responses as well as suggest new or modified approaches to this thorny missiological problem.

In this way, this study brings new anthropological insights into dialogue with an old missiological problem. This dialogue is justified for three reasons. First, it is a *practical necessity* because, as Paul Hiebert laments, "past missionaries often understood the Scriptures well, but not the people they served."[4] This study strives to implement Hiebert's exhortation for missionaries to "study the Scriptures *and also* the sociocultural context of the people we serve."[5] Second, this dialogue is a *methodological necessity* because missiological questions are born, and inextricably bound up in, the concrete cultural contexts of those to whom the mission of God comes *and* of those who bring it. There is no a-cultural gospel, but rather, as Leslie Newbigin notes, "every communication of the gospel is already culturally conditioned."[6] Anthropological studies, then, are valuable resources for missiological reflection. Finally, this dialogue is a *theological necessity* precisely because of the incarnational nature of Christianity itself. Christians worship Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:6–7). The incarnation of Jesus is, in the words of A. Scott Moreau, "central to both the possibility and the necessity of contextualization."[7]

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[4] Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 10.

[5] Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 10.

[6] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 142.

[7] A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012), 133.

Orientation of the Literature Review

Among the first of the modern anthropologists to engage southern Vietnam in English, Gerald Hickey sought to broadly describe a southern Vietnamese village via extensive fieldwork in the 1950s and 1960s.[8] His work remains a staple for anthropologists interested in Vietnam. References to ancestral practices are scattered throughout the book, and his descriptions remain strikingly relevant. For example, in his description of a typical rural house, Hickey observed a main room that almost always contains an altar dedicated to the ancestors.[9] Others continue to make the same observation even decades later.[10]

In a survey of Hickey's descriptions of ancestral practices, one can discern broad categories of meaning that have shaped discourse on ancestral veneration in anthropological research in the decades following. This chapter will focus on political, economic, and social meanings of ancestral rites, using Hickey's observations as a starting point in each section. These categories are not exhaustive of the potential meanings of ancestral rites. Rather, these three capture the bulk of recent anthropological writing on the topic. The separation of meaning categories into different sections in this chapter in no way suggests that these categories of meaning exist independently of one another. As will be shown below, these broad categories are not mutually exclusive but rather are interrelated and in dynamic tension, sometimes reinforcing, complementing, or overlapping each other while other times complicating or pushing against each other. Underscoring this point, because religious meanings permeate throughout, and

[8] Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*. Hickey's achievement is truly remarkable given that his fieldwork was conducted just after Vietnam's war to gain independence from France, and just before and during its war with the United States.

[9] Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 32.

[10] See Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution*, 17. Also, see Pham Van Bich, *Vietnamese Family in Change*, 35. This is true despite a decades-long attempt by state authorities to purge the country of "superstitious" practices.

because they will be discussed extensively in Chapter Three, they will not receive a separate section here but will instead be incorporated as appropriate within each section and discussed specifically towards the end of the chapter.

Relevant literature was discovered through an organic process of database searches, bibliography mining from secondary and tertiary literature, and suggestions from colleagues—usually moving from one to the other and back again. Key databases used include ATLA Religion Database, JSTOR, and ProQuest. Key words used for searching included the following words and various combinations thereof: ancestor, ancestral, Annam, anthropology, Chinese rites controversy, Christian, Cochinchina, colonial, colonization, contextualization, conversion, evangelism, family, Indochina, mission, practice, rite, ritual, venerate, veneration, Vietnam, Vietnamese, and worship.

Review of the Critical Literature

The Politics of Superstition: Political Meanings of Ancestral Rites

Introduction

The discussion of the political dimensions of ancestral rites will focus on the role of the state and other political apparatuses in the ritual life of Vietnam. Two phenomena are apparent. First, attempts of the ruling authorities to purge the country of "superstitious" practices in the name of the socialist revolution pervaded the middle decades of the 20th century. Even though ancestral practices persisted, these official efforts had a profound effect on their performance and meaning. Second, in recent decades the state-endorsed gradual reintroduction of traditional religious practices into public life has solidified these practices as a part of the national cultural identity of the Vietnamese people.

Hickey's Findings

Doing his fieldwork before the unification of the country under the Communist Party severed the state from religious rituals, Hickey observed a high degree of participation in, and even direction of, the ritual life of Khanh Hau village by the local and regional authorities. Like most southern villages at the time, Khanh Hau was administered by a local Village Council, which was accountable to district and provincial authorities.[11] Hamlet chiefs were appointed as liaisons between the Village Council and individual hamlets. The hamlet chief's (along with the Village Council's) duties included "roles in the Cult of the Guardian Spirit."[12]

These administrative units were involved in key rituals in a variety of ways. For example, Hickey reports the hiring of religious specialists for the purpose of cleansing the village of evil spirits.[13] The village chief even initiated a plan to renovate the long-neglected tomb of a local hero, both directing the project and allocating public financial resources towards its completion.[14] The first death anniversary celebration after beginning construction was attended by local and regional officials, "giving it the air of an official village celebration," including an address by the provincial chief.[15] Officials were key leaders and donors in the development of the community's ritual space, as well as actively participating in and even leading the rituals performed there. Not only were religious spaces legitimized by state presence, but public offices themselves were enchanted. For example, Hickey noted that "the interior of the Council House [the office space

[11] Hickey explains the intricacies of village administration. See Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 178–213.

[12] Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 185. Guardian spirits were appointed by imperial decree to villages of sufficient size. They became a locus for village ritual life, venerated for their protective powers. For an example of this veneration, see Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 225–32.

[13] Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 209.

[14] Hickey describes the renovation of the tomb and subsequent rituals, see Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 211–13.

[15] Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 212.

of the Village Council] is a curious combination of the sacred and the secular. In the rear there is a large altar dedicated to the 'venerable ancestors'—deceased members of the Cult Committee."[16]

While the Village Council's participation in the ritual life of the community was only one aspect of their duties, and thus they might be distracted by other non-religious administrative issues, the Cult Committee was a local administrative subunit given specific responsibility to "organize and perform rituals honoring specific deities revered by the whole village."[17] The Cult Committee also had responsibility for the upkeep of the *đình,* a communal house in every locale which held religious, administrative, and social functions, most important of which was to house the village's guardian spirit.[18] In Khanh Hau, the Cult Committee was not made up of a specialized group of religious professionals, but rather was made of up of the village's elite citizens who worked closely with the Village Council. In fact, in parts of Khanh Hau there was significant overlap between the two groups' membership. This only highlights the ways state authorities and religious ritual were intertwined amicably.

The Revolutionary Period's Privatization of Ritual Life

That situation would change dramatically in revolutionary Vietnam, with the relationship between state actors and traditional religious practices becoming adversarial (though no less intertwined). Communist Party rule, first in the north and, after reunification, in the south, would bring sweeping changes to all areas of life, not least the ritual life of the common people. These

[16] Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 186.

[17] Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 214. Hickey explains the Cult Committee thoroughly, 214–32.

[18] Thien Do describes the importance of the *đình* in local village life. Thien Do, *Vietnamese Supernaturalism: Views from the Southern Region* (London: Routledge, 2003), 19–62.

ideological changes, while not fully eradicating religious practices, did push them into a narrow private sphere.

Kate Jellema identifies three broad contributing factors to this privatization of native religious practices. First, the state redistributed and redefined human and material resources for the cause of "national liberation and socialist construction."[19] Up to that point, even unwealthy villagers would spend proportionately vast amounts of money and time on frequent and complicated ancestral rituals. According to Shaun Kingsley Malarney, the new ideology viewed such practices to be "both 'wasteful' and to provide contexts for ostentatious display and status competition."[20] For this reason, cadres reformed funerary rites to be more cost effective and more reflective of revolutionary values. Beyond this "revolutionary thrift," ritual space was also repurposed as a part of systematic but haphazardly implemented land reforms. Land was reappropriated and redistributed for the revolutionary cause, with many ritual buildings being repurposed. Jellema reports one ancestral house in a Red River Delta village that was made to share its space with a new weaving factory. Nonetheless, rites at this location continued to be performed, albeit "sporadically and in greatly simplified form."[21]

Second, Jellema notes the ideological foundations of the Communist Party, which "embraced a scientific secularism" that was skeptical of unscientific, immaterial practices.[22] Philip Taylor explains that, with a materialist view of the world, communist state actors were "uncompromising in their criticism of 'backward' traditions," that is, those traditions that did not

[19] Jellema, "Everywhere Incense Burning," 486.

[20] Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution*, 110.

[21] Jellema, "Everywhere Incense Burning," 484.

[22] Jellema, "Everywhere Incense Burning," 486.

conform to the new ideology.[23] The ruling authorities aimed to create a socialist culture that would be purged of "superstitious" elements, augmenting or replacing them to conform to sanctioned ideology.[24] These efforts were not limited to the ethnic majority, but ethnic minority groups were also subjected to these sweeping changes. Speaking about the Hmong people, among the largest minority groups in the country, Tâm T.T. Ngô reports, "In the name of modernization and development, minority communities were subjected to a rapid series of campaigns aimed at radically transforming their traditional lifeways. Their religious beliefs and practices—the core of their identity as Hmong—were deemed superstitions that must be eradicated."[25]

Malarney, who did field research in a post-revolutionary northern Vietnamese village, notes the broad ways in which this redefinition of religious life was carried out: "ritual life was … controlled through such practices as the insertion of officials into ceremonies, the monitoring of unsanctioned ritual specialists and locales, and even raids into local homes to confiscate forbidden ritual paraphernalia."[26] Even religiously tinged Vietnamese values were reinterpreted through a revolutionary framework. Chief among these values was the Confucian notion of filial piety (*hiếu thảo*), which undergirded social relationships and ritual practice among both the

[23] Philip Taylor, "Modernity and Re-Enchantment in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam," in Taylor, *Modernity and Re-Enchantment*, 9.

[24] The importance of the term superstition for this study cannot be overstated. Malarney writes, "When investigating the category of superstition in Thinh Liet life, it is clear that the party and the state have exercised a dominant role in defining what superstition is." Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution*, 105. Interestingly, similar phenomena have been noted by scholars of the medieval Roman Catholic Church during the time of the Chinese Rites Controversy (see the next chapter). The Church's concept of superstition "always had a certain elasticity about it." Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), 55.

[25] Tâm T.T. Ngô, *The New Way: Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam*, Critical Dialogue in Southeast Asian Studies (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 9.

[26] Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution*, 1.

living and the dead.[27] Pham Van Bich shows how Ho Chi Minh, the famous leader of the revolution, took the concept of filial piety and "changed its meaning completely," away from traditional interpretations governing family ritual life to instead emphasize filiality as loyalty to the Party and to the revolution.[28]

Third, Jellema rightly emphasizes the toll that war, poverty, and near-constant political upheaval took on the Vietnamese people in the mid-20th century. Internal and external forces were vying for political and ideological control of the country. Millions were killed or lost in multiple wars, while countless more were scattered all over the country. Kinship networks were severed, leaving lineage organizations and ritual cycles to languish without leadership. Large gatherings were either practically impossible or legally forbidden. In such circumstances, "quiet prayers uttered alone in stolen moments, often in hidden-away corners with the simplest of props, became a common form of religious expression."[29]

The Post-revolutionary Period's Resurgence of Ritual Life

The vigor with which ritual life was restricted and transformed during Vietnam's revolutionary period only makes the recent resurgence of religiosity in the post-revolutionary period the more remarkable. Visitors to today's Vietnam will find ancestral altars in frequent use in almost all homes, temples and pagodas teeming with activity, and spirit mediums and other religious specialists practicing publicly.[30] Along with the significant societal changes brought

[27] For a brief synopsis of filial piety, see Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution*, 112–13. The topic will be taken up again below.

[28] Pham Van Bich, *Vietnamese Family in Change*, 51–52.

[29] Jellema, "Everywhere Incense Burning," 486.

[30] The phenomenon of resurgent religious life is not unique to Vietnam but has been noted in most countries of Southeast Asia. See Volker Gottowik, ed., *Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia: Magic and Modernity*, Global Asia 2 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

about by the *Đổi Mới* economic reforms which opened the country to foreign markets, the Party itself has changed its official stance towards religion, becoming increasingly open to forms of religious expression previously forbidden. As a result, what had been pushed into a narrow private sphere is now tolerated, and sometimes embraced, publicly. This has taken place independently of but even with state endorsement. Philip Taylor writes,

> The endorsement of religious activities by Vietnam's leaders contravenes the notion that communist states are opposed to religion on ideological or institutional grounds. The seemingly autonomous development of some religious activities also calls into question the capacities attributed to such states to co-opt or contain religion or suppress non-sanctioned practices.[31]

Malarney's fieldwork in Thinh Liet, which documents the nature and scope of the revolution on the community's ritual life, acknowledges the limits of the state's power to completely supplant the meaning and values of religious practices. His firsthand interviews revealed that "the majority of residents never accepted the idea that the world is void of supernatural forces or entities."[32] More surprising are the ways that the Communist Party has not only tolerated these forces, but even embraced them. While the reasons and purposes of such a shift are a topic of heated debate, its reality has transformed the relationship between politics and religion.[33] For example, whereas in the revolutionary period religious buildings were desacralized and repurposed by land reforms for the sake of the revolution, in recent years state funds have even been used for the upkeep and maintenance of religious structures.[34] Jellema notes the prominence of ancestral rites in particular: "In its laws, its policies, and its funding priorities, the *Đổi Mới*

[31] Taylor, "Modernity and Re-Enchantment," 1.

[32] Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution*, 219.

[33] For a good summary of the debate, see Taylor, "Modernity and Re-Enchantment," 7–15.

[34] This was observed by the author in 2009–2010. Using state funds, temples were cleaned and renovated in the leadup to Hanoi's 1,000th anniversary. However, this government aid was only given to certain religious groups and structures that the state felt represented Vietnamese national identity and culture.

state indicates its endorsement of the practice of ancestor worship."[35] Whereas in the revolutionary period, rituals commemorating local and national heroes were avoided lest they be interpreted superstitiously, today these rituals are publicly participated in and promoted by government leaders.[36] Even among Hmong minority, mentioned above, Reginald Reimer reports a reversal in state posture towards traditional religious forms: "They began promoting the 'good and beautiful' ancient traditions and beliefs of the Hmong, including ancestor worship, as an antidote to rapidly growing Christianity."[37]

Conclusion

Due to previous and ongoing influence of the state on religious activities, it would be wrong to call today's religious resurgence a return to or even a revitalization of the old ways. While the state might not have achieved complete eradication of "superstitious activities," it did transform the meanings and practices of Vietnamese religious life. There is no return to pre-revolutionary forms and meanings, but instead only a reconstruction of ritual life that negotiates competing traditions, needs, and interests. This negotiation is not a new problem in Vietnam but is rather an inherent feature of Vietnamese religiosity as it has assimilated various forces and traditions over its long and tumultuous history.[38] "Openness to combine different forms in accordance with contemporary moral, spiritual, and material needs" will continue to characterize

[35] Jellema, "Returning Home," 66.

[36] For example, see Quỳnh Phương Phạm, *Hero and Deity: Tran Hung Dao and the Resurgence of Popular Religion in Vietnam* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Mekong, 2009).

[37] Reg Reimer, *Vietnam's Christians*, 84.

[38] Kimson Nguyen has identified a dual force in the history of Vietnamese religious life: one that resists wholesale adoption of an outside religious influence, and one that assimilates parts of that influence into a syncretistic spirituality. Nguyen, *Cultural Integration and the Gospel*, 85–119.

the way Vietnamese navigate the constantly shifting relationship between ritual practice and political power in the coming decades.[39]

Transacting with the Dead: Economic Meanings of Ancestral Rites

Introduction

Recent anthropologists have shown increasing interest in the ways ancestral rites are related to the production, distribution, and exchange of goods and services. On the one hand, the last few decades have brought on a surge of spending on ritual performances, which has in turn necessitated the creation of new and surprising ritual forms and markets. This marketization of ritual is impossible to miss when visiting any religious site in the country, where hawkers stand ready to sell visitors all varieties of ritual paraphernalia, from traditional joss sticks to modern votive paper luxury vehicles. On the other hand, scholars have also emphasized the ways economic transactions among the living reflect and reinforce cosmic transactions between the living and the dead. Therefore, this section will not only point out the marketization of ritual but most also explain the "ritualization of the market"[40] that creates a cosmo-economic interdependence between this life and the afterlife.

Hickey's Findings

Beyond recognizing the ubiquity of the ancestral altar in the primary room of the home (the very room where guests are entertained), Hickey observed that this spatial priority of the ancestral altar is also an economic priority that guides the design and maintenance of a

[39] Michael Dickhardt, "The Social Placing of Religion and Spirituality in Vietnam in the Context of Asian Modernity," in Gottowik, *Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia*, 57.

[40] This phrase is borrowed from Guido Springer, "Where the Dead Go to Market: Market and Ritual as Social Systems in Upland Southeast Asia," in Gottowik, *Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia*, 75–90.

residential home: "money and effort are concentrated on the main part of the structure because that is where the altars are housed and the rituals associated with the Cult of the Ancestors performed."[41] Even in families without sufficient income, he observed that ancestral practices would never be discarded but rather would be simplified according to the situation.[42] The largess or modesty with which one observes ancestral practices is an indicator of economic status.[43] These economic meanings have become a ripe area for anthropological research.

Revolutionary Thrift, *Đổi Mới*, and the Nebulous Market

The *Đổi Mới* reforms were implemented by the state but were primarily economic in their scope. Agriculture was de-collectivized, property was privatized, and foreign investment was permitted, creating domestic markets that could effectively participate in global markets. These reforms ushered in a remarkable period of sustained growth in wealth and decrease in poverty. The World Bank notes, "Vietnam's shift from a centrally planned to a market economy has transformed the country from one of the poorest in the world into a lower middle-income country."[44] Along with a more tolerant stance from the state authorities, Vietnam's economic revival has contributed to a religious revival as more resources create opportunities for renewed and innovative ritual activity on a scale that was unthinkable before *Đổi Mới*. Relatively huge amounts of money are spent on death anniversaries of ancestors. For example, in 2005 Nir Avieli

[41] Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 37.

[42] Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 90.

[43] Ancestral altars—their size and elaborateness—are a factor in Hickey's descriptions of village classes. Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 233–47.

[44] "Vietnam," *World Bank*, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/vietnam.

regularly observed death anniversary rituals in Hội An costing 3USD per person,[45] during a time in which the annual per capita income was a mere 693USD.[46]

This largess begs the question: what of the "revolutionary thrift" that dominated policies towards religious rituals during the revolutionary period? After the state's protracted attempt to eschew ritual expenditures deemed wasteful, the ostentatious ritual displays of *Đổi Mới* are an astounding contrast. As Markus Schlecker observes, the early years of the *Đổi Mới* transition were not without tension.[47] For example, he reports how northern urbanites, with their newfound wealth, spent huge amounts of money rebuilding ancestral houses, temples, and pagodas, as well as financing local festivals in their hometowns. But for the state, these "wasteful practices represented a destruction of socialism's achievements and a return to feudalistic customs," asserts Schlecker.[48] Nonetheless, as the economy continued to grow and wealth increased, a generational gap appeared between older Vietnamese who remembered times of want and the young who only knew plenty. Schlecker observes that this gap is revealed in generational differences in perceptions of thrift.

> The older generation, the parents and grandparents in the families, had come to know the leadership's stress on austerity within the context of hardship and constant shortage … [However,] the children … often found that the insistence on thrift by the leadership had become obsolete in the current phase of an emerging market economy.[49]

Schlecker goes on to describe the way Vietnamese are reconciling these tensions. He argues that

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[45] Nir Avieli, "Feasting with the Living and the Dead: Food and Eating in Ancestor Worship Rituals in Hội An," in Taylor, *Modernity and Re-Enchantment*, 156.

[46] World Bank, "GDP per Capita (Current US$) - Viet Nam," *World Bank Open Data*, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=VN.

[47] Markus Schlecker, "Going Back a Long Way: 'Home Place', Thrift and Temporal Orientations in Northern Vietnam," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11, no. 3 (2005): 509–26.

[48] Schlecker, "Going Back a Long Way," 513.

[49] Schlecker, "Going Back a Long Way," 514.

state notions of thrift have not been jettisoned but rather have been combined with longstanding pre-revolutionary ideals. For example, state-endorsed austerity should be practiced in the profane spending of day-to-day life, but on sacred ritual or festive occasions thrift is suspended. Because it is the ancestors who are being venerated by this pre-revolutionary suspension of thrift, "ritual and festive moments are demarcated temporal spaces where it is the past that is celebrated and honoured."[50] For Schlecker, this celebration of the past is not only a reaction against revolutionary notions of collectivized society but also a longing for belonging and relatedness that is connected specifically to ancestral homeplace.

Whereas Schlecker locates the motivation for ancestral engagement in the longing for different forms of society, Oscar Salemink locates it in an effort to assert control in the midst of economic insecurity. While *Đổi Mới* has unarguably brought Vietnam significant economic gains, the reforms have also subjected the Vietnamese people to destabilizing influences. Though the situation is changing rapidly with urbanization and professionalization, a large proportion of Vietnamese continue to rely on agriculture for their livelihood. Whereas previously their efforts contributed to a state-run collective economy that (at least in theory) guaranteed their well-being, now their products are subjected to the whims of the market, an abstract, powerful force that fluctuates unpredictably. This creates a profound sense of insecurity for Vietnamese in the post-*Đổi Mới* era. In the words of Salemink,

> A natural disaster, an illness in the household, official corruption, too few or too many children, broken machinery and many other eventualities could make a household lose its land or other assets and push it below the poverty line. But what really contributes to a profound sense of vulnerability and insecurity is that volatile

[50] Schlecker, "Going Back a Long Way," 520.

> market forces or inextricably wrong business decisions can have the same effect, but without comprehension or predictability.[51]

Such constant volatility and insecurity create a sense of powerlessness over the family's welfare.

To where can those caught in the vagaries of the market turn to assert some measure of control over their fortunes? "People have turned for assistance," writes Philip Taylor, "to a cast of powerful spirits that concretize and give familiar form to that which is ineffable and apparently uncontrollable."[52] While Salemink agrees that appealing to personal local spirits in concrete visible forms gives people a measure of power in the face of remote, invisible, and impersonal market forces, he argues that this explanation alone does not emphasize enough the requirement that ritual engagement with the spirits be efficacious. He explains, "the efficacy of the ritual lies in the effects in response to the wishes—whether they be well-being, health, or wealth."[53] Real hopes and desires for material and physical prosperity are hung on these practices. More than simply seeking spiritual solace in the face of insecurity, these practices are a proactive way to find material security amidst the nebulous market.

The Marketization of Ritual Life and the Ritualization of Market Life

Other scholars have drawn attention to the way market economics have fundamentally altered ritual practices, specifically noting the commodification of ritual forms. The re-emerging materiality of Vietnamese ritual practices, including ancestral veneration, creates new economic markets. For example, though votive offerings to the dead have been an enduring element of

[51] Oscar Salemink, "Spirits of Consumption and the Capitalist Ethic in Vietnam," in *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 154, https://www.academia.edu/6247652/Salemink_2007_Spirits_of_consumption_and_the_capitalist_ethic_in_Vietnam.

[52] Philip Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 87.

[53] Salemink, "Spirits of Consumption," 156.

ancestral veneration, in post-*Đổi Mới* Vietnam newfound wealth has birthed an explosion of votive paper forms to meet an increasing variety of interests and incomes. Gertrud Hülwelmeier observes the plethora of luxury items available in votive paper form, including cars, designer purses, entire villas, passports, and consumer electronics such as phones, TVs, watches, computers, and tablets.[54] It seems that votive offerings to the dead reflect the aspirations of the living. As Hülwelmeier explains, "producing replicas of commodities and burning these items for the dead as well as spending money for luxury goods made from paper may be interpreted as an expression of desire of the living who strive to participate in the global consumer society while simultaneously sharing these desires with the dead."[55] As this global consumer society introduces new media and new mediums, so votive paper forms are constantly evolving. Growing numbers of suppliers are using new technologies to meet the soaring demand for ever-changing ritual needs. In this environment, the material and the immaterial, the economic and the religious, are intertwined.

This entwinement sometimes poses difficult moral questions for sellers and practitioners. For example, is the desire for profit appropriate for those selling media for ritual use?[56] Kirsten Endres recounts a seller of ritual items in northern Vietnam who refused to overcharge her customers (a common practice among market sellers keen to maximize profits) lest such selfish ambition at others' expense disrupt cosmic equilibrium and jeopardize her family's good fortune. Other sellers, she notes, were less concerned about such moral questions, justifying their shrewd

[54] Gertrud Hüwelmeier, "Cell Phones for the Spirits: Ancestor Worship and Ritual Economies in Vietnam and Its Diasporas," *Material Religion* 12, no. 3 (2016): 294–321.

[55] Hüwelmeier, "Cell Phones for the Spirits," 301.

[56] On this question, see also Lê Hồng Lý, "Praying for Profit: The Cult of the Lady of the Treasury (Bà Chúa Kho)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2007): 493–513.

business practices by a "predestined affinity" for trade.[57] These divergent explanations point to an open ambiguity in the interplay between spiritual/religious and material/economic aspirations. This ambiguity is also seen in Lauren Kendall, Vũ Thị Thanh Tâm, and Nguyễn Thị Thu Hương's work on production methods of ritual media. With mass production techniques available to meet increasing demand for ritual items, a new question arises: are items produced cheaply sacred in the same way or to the same extent as items that are made by cherished traditional methods according to artisanal standards? The authors report that, speaking about statues used in temple rituals, most producers and practitioners agreed that "statues made according to traditional methods were more *linh*—sacred, numinous efficacious—than statures mass produced for the market."[58] But when it came to the connection between the item's beauty and its sanctity, the authors report "this was an area of ambiguity."[59] Nonetheless, they go on to describe artisanal producers who went to great lengths to follow ritual protocols throughout the production process to ensure that the item produced would be "clean" for ritual use.

The Economic Interests of the Dead Meet Those of the Living

Undergirding new markets brimming with items for ritual use is the fundamental belief that the dead have economic interests that must be met by the living. This is captured by the Vietnamese phrase *trần sao, âm vậy* (literally "as the yang, so the yin," but it can be better rendered "as in this life, so in the afterlife").[60] Just as the living have material and emotional

[57] Kirsten W. Endres, "'Lộc Bestowed by Heaven': Fate, Fortune, and Morality in the Vietnamese Marketplace," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (May 27, 2015): 235.

[58] Laurel Kendall, Vũ Thị Thanh Tâm, and Nguyễn Thị Thu Hương, "Beautiful and Efficacious Statues: Magic, Commodities, Agency and the Production of Sacred Objects in Popular Religion in Vietnam," *Material Religion* 6, no. 1 (March 2010): 77.

[59] Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn, "Beautiful and Efficacious Statues," 79.

[60] This phrase is sometimes rendered *dương sao, âm vậy*.

needs, so also the dead have similar needs. However, since production is impossible in the afterlife, the dead are dependent on the living to supply their material needs. Votive offerings and food offerings are placed on the ancestral altar by the living to transfer those goods to the dead. Nir Avieli confirms, "From the perspective of the dead, the ritual is clearly intended to supply their various needs in the afterworld."[61] In this way, the altar is a sacred connection point between this life and the afterlife, at which a cosmological economic transfer is made. In the case of a votive offering, it is burned "to transform it from one economic order to another."[62]

But this sending of goods is only one side of what is meant to be a two-way ritual interaction. The living supply the dead in the expectation that the dead will provide for the living. "From the perspective of the living," Avieli notes, "they worship their ancestors in order to win their favour so as to ensure their own good luck and material success."[63] The ancestors are not merely passive receivers of goods sent to them by the living but are active influencers over the fortunes of the living. Those ancestors whose descendants have cared for them appropriately are expected in turn to provide protection from harm and success in diverse pursuits. Whether it is high school students desperate for passing grades on exams or adults seeking success in business ventures, the ancestors are a resource for spiritual power, to be tapped into to secure *lộc*, that is, "the material assets and benefits which she or he has been endowed by heaven."[64] Meanwhile, those ancestors whose descendants have neglected their care might become a "hungry ghost," that is, a malevolent spirit bringing bad luck or even causing harm. Of particular concern are those hungry ghosts who met an untimely or violent death, who died far from home, or whose

[61] Avieli, "Feasting with the Living and the Dead," 129.

[62] Heonik Kwon, "The Dollarization of Vietnamese Ghost Money," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 1 (2007): 73.

[63] Avieli, "Feasting with the Living and the Dead," 129.

[64] Endres, "'Lộc Bestowed by Heaven,'" 230.

corpse is missing or incomplete. Given Vietnam's history of war, this represents a significant number of spirits that might harm the living. These angry ghosts are seen as the cause of the living's misfortune. Mai Lan Gustafsson, speaking about the northern Vietnamese' fear of the war dead, notes, "When the living suffer chronic sickness or streaks of bad luck or manifest any lasting behavior deemed 'strange,' people start talking about ghosts and possession and seek to identify *who* is hurting them."[65] Equilibrium is restored by proper care of the offended ancestor or spirit via offerings and prayers, ensuring the dead's tardy passage into a peaceful afterlife and their ongoing benevolence towards the living.

The ancestral altar, then, is not merely a site of transfer but a site of cosmo-economic transaction, a phenomenon widely acknowledged and critical to this study. Endres calls the relationship between the living and the dead a "transactional relationship of efficacious reciprocity," explaining that "through ritual acts of worship, the most basic of which are burning incense, sacrificial offerings, and muttering prayers, people transact with the spirit world for 'divine favours' (*lộc*) and this-worldly benefits."[66] So closely does this mirror everyday exchanges that Salemink asserts that "the market becomes a direct metaphor to articulate the transactional relationship between human beings and deities in the other world."[67] Philip Taylor makes a similar comment when discussing the worship of a particular goddess in northern Vietnam: "transacting with [the spirits] has become one of the key means by which the path to success and avoidance of disaster have been imagined."[68] This phenomenon is not uniquely Vietnamese but has been noted all cross Asia. Writing about the same phenomenon in the

[65] Mai Lan Gustafsson, "Hungry Spirits," *Anthropology Now* 5, no. 1 (2013): 48.

[66] Kirsten W. Endres, "Engaging the Spirits of the Dead: Soul-Calling Rituals and the Performative Construction of Efficacy," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. 4 (2008): 757.

[67] Salemink, "Spirits of Consumption," 70.

[68] Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise*, 87.

Japanese context, J.-M. Berentsen calls the relationship a "circle of independence" in which both sides depend on the other.[69] Each party of the transaction has prescribed roles and responsibilities, and the flow of goods and favors between them is in constant motion.

Conclusion

Two consequences of the transactional character of interactions between the living and the dead are important for this study. First, day-to-day life for the Vietnamese occurs in an enchanted world, that is, a world suffused with spiritual realities which permeate every aspect of life. The altar might be the locus of that spiritual reality, but as seen above, not only is the use of goods in ritual performance at the altar a consecrated activity, but also their production and sale at seemingly neutral sites is a ritualized devotional act. The whole economic process is imbued with a sacred character. Guido Sprenger, in his research on markets and ritual in Southeast Asia, is right, then, to resist speaking only of the commodification of ritual, and instead emphasize the ritualization of the market. He writes, "the market here is not merely defined by economic transactions. There are also more qualitative and cosmological values and ideas at work."[70] Second, this enchanted cosmo-economic market has an ever-present conditionality. Prosperity and virtue for the living are conditioned on the right care for the dead, while the peace and comfort of the dead are conditioned on the right ritual performance of the living.

[69] J.-M. Berentsen, *Grave and Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 70–87.

[70] Springer, "Where the Dead Go to Market," 89–90.

Ritual Reinforcing (Enforcing?) Roles: Social Meanings of Ancestral Rites

Introduction

Veneration shown to the dead is enmeshed in social relationships among the living. In fact, the close connection between the social and the religious is widely noted in Vietnam, seen even at the level of language. For example, the word for festival, *lễ hội*, is made from two components. By itself, *lễ* might be translated ceremony or rite.[71] Moreover, it can also be used to refer to a kowtow. In this way, it has a sacred dimension. *Hội*, on the other hand, represents the social dimension.[72] By itself, it can be translated club or association. Joining them together as *lễ hội*, then, brings the sacred and the social together.[73] This section will highlight this connection by showing how ancestors participate in everyday social life, specifically situating ancestral veneration in the context of the Vietnamese family with its attendant roles and obligations.

Hickey's Findings

Decades ago, Gerald Hickey showed ways ancestral practices permeate social relations. During the engagement ceremony, he observed how the girl's family decorated the altar in anticipation of the boy's family's visit. When the boy arrived, he "proceeds directly to the altar of the ancestors where he kowtows—the act of presenting himself to the girl's forebearers."[74] On the day of the wedding itself, only after "offerings of fruit, rice alcohol, and tea have been placed on the altar of ancestors" can the procession of the groom's family to the bride's house begin.[75]

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[71] Thus, any kind of ceremony or ritual would be preceded with *lễ* acting as a particle to identify it as such. For example, a Christian worship service is called a *lễ thờ phượng*, a "service/rite of worship."

[72] The Vietnamese word for society is *xã hội*.

[73] This connection is also noted by Salemink, "Spirits of Consumption," 149.

[74] Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 101.

[75] Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, 103.

In this way, the ancestors are intentionally and repeatedly included in the joining of two families. Harmony with those who are dead leads to and flows from social harmony among those who are living.

The Vietnamese Family

To truly grasp why ancestors are enmeshed in social relations, one must first understand the Vietnamese family, since it remains the fundamental and chief social unit in Vietnam. Pham Van Bich's outstanding work on changes in the Vietnamese family over the revolutionary period identifies three features of the traditional Vietnamese family that are helpful for our purposes.

First, unlike most Western countries, Vietnamese society is collectively oriented. A person's primary identity is not as an individual, but as a member of a group. While there are many groups one can be a part of in Vietnamese society, the family is the most fundamental and preeminent. Speaking of the traditional Vietnamese family, Pham asserts, "there was no individual in the Western sense, and certainly no free individual. Every facet of life was bound up with the family to which a person owed complete allegiance."[76] A person's individual needs and desires are subordinate to their duty to the family. This is seen in a variety of ways, from use of money to child rearing. Even today, for many families, especially in rural areas where agriculture is the primary source of income, a person's money is never strictly their own but will be shared with the family, no matter the inconvenience caused to the person who shares.[77] Even

[76] Pham Van Bich, *Vietnamese Family in Change*, 18. As an illustration, Vietnamese introduce themselves and sign their name always by their family name first, followed by their given name(s).

[77] This author observed this phenomenon repeatedly during his time living in Hanoi. For example, a close friend working in the city would send a significant portion of his monthly salary back to his parents in a rural province to help them replace their thatched roof home with one made of concrete. It should be noted, however, that this sharing is not limited to material resources. Emotions, too, can be shared. For example, when someone dies, the customary consolation spoken to surviving family members is *xin chia buồn*, which translates literally as, "Please divide [i.e., share] your sadness."

among urban Vietnamese, a woman's child is not her own but is co-reared by other family members, especially her mother-in-law, despite the mother's grumbling.[78] Both of these points make even more sense when one considers that many Vietnamese households are multigenerational—it is common for the eldest son's family to live with his parents (or vice versa). Depending on circumstances, other siblings might also live under the same roof. Though urban migration and economic development are changing these dynamics, the underlying principle of collective identity remains unchallenged.

Second, Vietnamese conceive of the family as a collective entity that persists over time. As Bich explains:

> The communitarian character of the family found expression not only in the relationships between living members, but also in those between dead, living, and unborn ones; between generations along the temporal axis. The family was understood as a human community stemming from ancestors often going back four or five generations, or as long as Vietnamese families could remember and worship.[79]

The family is not a synchronic entity, i.e., it is not limited to the nuclear family or even the extended family that is living at any given period. Rather, the family is a diachronic entity that includes generations past and future and introduces corresponding duties and obligations. There is a thread that joins past family members to the present and even to future family members. In the mind of Vietnamese, then, there is heightened awareness that one's life is connected to those who came before. Indeed, any individual is understood as the product of those in the past. They are inheritors of the family's name and prestige—gifts that have been passed down. Indeed, "everything that an individual enjoyed in his life was not the result of his individual efforts, but

[78] This author observed both the positives and negatives of this dynamic. On the one hand, family members are always available to help with children. As a result, the western concept of a "babysitter," i.e., hiring a non-family member to watch one's children for a set period of time, is unheard of. On the other hand, this author recalls a female friend whose mother-in-law was very particular about child-rearing and constantly chastised this mother's methods, causing conflict between both parent and child and also between husband and wife.

[79] Pham Van Bich, *Vietnamese Family in Change*, 19.

an inheritance from, and blessing of his ancestors."[80] These gifts are to be safeguarded, extended, and then passed on to the next generation.

This recognition of the contributions of generations past leads to a third feature of Vietnamese families: hierarchy. Because all that families possess in the present depends on the actions of those in the past, Vietnamese honor and respect senior citizens, and by extension, ancestors. Practically, this means obedience to the elderly in their life and reverence and appropriate ritual action in their death. But this hierarchy is not only reflected in dutifulness to the elderly, but also extends to all social relations. "Everyone occupied a certain position in the order of precedence based on generation, age, and gender," Bich explains.[81] Knowing one's position is crucial to understanding one's duties towards others. This hierarchy is seen even in terms of address. For example, Westerners are often taken aback when Vietnamese are quick to ask their age. But in Vietnamese language, terms of address are dictated by age. For example, in the English phrase, "I like you," the terms for the subject and object are the same no matter who one is talking to. In Vietnamese, however, both the term for *I* and the term for *you* will change depending on the age and relationship of those interacting.[82] In our original example of a Vietnamese asking a Westerner's age, then, what is perceived by the hearer as a rude question is actually meant by the speaker as a sincere request for information needed lest the speaker

[80] Pham Van Bich, *Vietnamese Family in Change*, 19.

[81] Pham Van Bich, *Vietnamese Family in Change*, 22.

[82] It is also noteworthy that terms of address are based on kinship. For example, when addressing someone who is older than oneself but younger than one's father, the term *anh* or *chị* ("big brother" or "big sister") should be used to refer to the person, and *em* ("little brother/sister") to refer to oneself. But if the person is roughly one's father's age, the term to address the person would change to either *chú* for males or *cô* for females (if slightly younger than one's father) or *bác* (if slightly older), all of which mean "uncle" or "aunt," while the term to address oneself would change to *cháu* ("nephew/niece"). For ancestors, the term of address used is the same one used for living and very elderly people: *cụ*.

address the hearer rudely. Everyday language reflects and reinforces hierarchy, creating a constant need for a person to be aware of their position relative to others.

This hierarchy is also expressed and reinforced in nonverbal ways, many of which are best seen in the context of a communal meal. As this author experienced repeatedly, gathering at a table in Vietnam is a highly ritualized social interaction. At a large meal, guests sit at rectangular tables of 6-10 people. Many mistakes were made before this author learned that where one sits at a table communicates age and rank—those of higher age and rank are seated towards the center. Each table receives a tray (*mâm*) of prepared dishes that are eaten communally. Who serves rice and/or rice wine, and in what order, is also prescribed. Usually, the youngest adult female will scoop rice from the pot into individuals' bowls, starting with the most senior person (whether by age or rank). When consuming rice wine, even the position of one's cup when clinking glasses communicates hierarchy—younger or lower ranked participants should touch the top of their glass to the lower part of a senior or higher ranked participant's glass; to do otherwise is to communicate disrespect. These highly prescribed social rituals take on an even heightened importance in the context of ancestral gatherings. Nir Avieli describes "social competition" that erupts at death anniversary (*ngày giỗ*) gatherings.[83] She relates the story of Cu, whose uncle was experiencing tension with Cu's nuclear family when they held a death anniversary ceremony. By arriving late, dressed in casual clothing, and without his wife, the uncle "demonstrated scorn and contempt towards his hosts and disrespect towards his dead younger brother."[84] Further, he ate

[83] Death anniversaries are annual ceremonies held on or near the anniversary of the deceased's death, in which the extended family gathers at the family's ancestral altar, where offerings and prayers are made before enjoying a large feast together. These ceremonies are common throughout Vietnam to this day, though they vary considerably in size. Avieli describes these as "life-cycle events … most reminiscent of a Western style birthday celebration: the deceased is seated at the head of the table, adorned with flowers and gifts, surrounded by relatives and friends that join him for a feast … that marks his own special day." Avieli, "Feasting with the Living and the Dead," 125–6.

[84] Avieli, "Feasting with the Living and the Dead," 150.

little and left early. That these nonverbal breaches of etiquette would meet such disapproval by others points to the centrality of hierarchy in Vietnamese families. Further, that these violations are offenses not just to the living but primarily to the dead points to the preeminent position of ancestors in that hierarchy.[85] To offend the ancestors is to offend the living, and vice versa.

Filial Piety and Social Roles

Within the context of a communal, diachronic, and hierarchical family, the cardinal Vietnamese virtue of filial piety (*hiếu thảo*) finds its home. Filial piety became prominent in Vietnam through Confucianism, which entered Vietnam during the millennium of Chinese domination (ending in 938AD).[86] Neil Jamieson explains the contours of filial piety's traditional pre-revolutionary form:

> First and foremost, children were taught filial piety, to obey and respect and honor their parents. Children were made to feel keenly that they owed their parents a moral debt so immense as to be unpayable. A child was supposed to try and please his or her parents all the time and in every way, to increase their comfort, to accede to all their wishes, to fulfill their aspirations, to lighten their burden of work and of worry, and to comply with their wishes in all matters, great and small.[87]

This notion of unpayable moral debt (*ơn*) owed to parents and ancestors is meant to motivate this all-encompassing filial piety in children.[88] Jamieson acknowledges that while expectations regarding filial piety have shifted in the post-revolutionary period, the virtue itself is still chief in

[85] Bich agrees with this assessment: "It was the duty of every family member to keep in mind the dates of the death anniversaries to gather together with other relatives and worship their common ancestors. Forgetting those dates or being a willful absence on such occasions showed a lack of piety to dead ancestors and an arrogance to living relatives." Pham Van Bich, *Vietnamese Family in Change*, 24.

[86] Nguyen Ngoc Huy, "The Confucian Incursion into Vietnam," in *Confucianism and the Family*, ed. Walter H. Slote and George A. Devos (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 91–117.

[87] Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 16.

[88] Malarney writes, "As soon as a child is born it has a 'moral debt' to its parents for bringing it into the world. This debt continues to accumulate as the parents devote more time and resources to raising the child." Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution*, 112.

Vietnamese morality.[89] All other virtues are subordinate to, and find their fullest expression in, filial piety. More than just the perfunctory performance of obligations, true filial piety demands that those obligations are done willingly and joyfully, out of gratefulness[90] for all that parents have done for the child.[91] Crucially, the obligations of filial piety do not end with the death of the parent, but rather take on new form as the child cares for the deceased through proper burial at death, and regular ritual remembrance and offering after death.[92] In this way, filial piety is the thread that holds collectivity, diachronicity, and hierarchy together across generations.

Driven by filial piety as a supreme Vietnamese value, ancestral veneration engenders and reinforces certain social roles and obligations, particularly with regards to the husband/wife and parent/child relationships. As Hickey observed decades ago, recent anthropologists also note the presence and role of the ancestors at both engagement ceremonies and weddings. This author, when participating in a two-day wedding event across two provinces in northern Vietnam in 2009, observed the bride and groom lighting incense, praying, and making offerings at the altars of both families as a key ceremonial component of the festivities. Bich explains that marriages and weddings, and other life-cycle events:

> are the occasions for interaction between dead parents and living family members: in those ceremonies the head of a family reports to his ancestors about the event, and prays for their blessing. It is here that we can discover the function of the rites of

[89] For example, in pre-revolutionary Vietnam, most marriages were arranged by the parents, sometimes without consent from the bride and groom. Today, while parents still exert significant influence in the choice of a mate, children have much more say in the matter. Today's parents are more willing to compromise for the sake of avoiding conflict.

[90] Interestingly, the Vietnamese verb for "to be grateful" (*biết ơn*) literally means "to know your debt."

[91] Herbert Fingarette, in explains the Confucian notion of ritual, identifies two ways a ritual can be misperformed: "the ceremony may be awkwardly performed for lack of learning and skill; or the ceremony may have a surface slickness but yet be dull, mechanical for lack of serious purpose or commitment." Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1972), 8.

[92] For example, see the section "Filial Piety in Mourning for Parents" in James Legge, "Xiao Jing".

> passage: to summon the ancestors' blessing, to alleviate the anxiety, and to share the joys in the life-cycle transitions of daily existence.[93]

In this way, the ancestors are honored guests whose presence at and blessing of the marriage is a required component, crucial for the two families to join together properly. But their influence is not limited to the engagement and wedding; it extends into the daily life of married couples. In marriage, women are brought into their husband's family (often living with the husband's parents in their home) and so are obligated to adopt their husband's family as their own, thus showing proper filial piety to the husband's parents and lineage. But more than any ritual performance the woman performs herself, the ultimate expression of her filial piety will be to produce a son. Upholding patrilineal descent, the eldest living son bears the role of the head of the lineage (*trưởng họ*), who is responsible for the proper ritual performance of the family.[94] So important was this responsibility in traditional families, that Bich notes, "The first and foremost aim of marriage was to produce offspring, particularly male ones, to secure the continued worship of ancestors."[95] This is not only true for families in ages past; Bich goes on to report a strong desire for sons among contemporary Vietnamese, primarily because only sons can fulfill filial duties to ancestors.[96] Failure to produce a son can create significant problems in the nuclear and the extended family.[97]

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[93] Pham Van Bich, *Vietnamese Family in Change*, 56.

[94] Pham Van Bich summarizes the responsibilities of the eldest son. Pham Van Bich, *Vietnamese Family in Change*, 219–21.

[95] Pham Van Bich, *Vietnamese Family in Change*, 112.

[96] Pham Van Bich, *Vietnamese Family in Change*, 219. This comports with published statistics from the United Nations Population Fund, which in 2018 reported an average sex ratio at birth in Vietnam of 112 boys for every 100 girls. Some provinces are much higher. See United Nations Population Fund, *The Imbalanced Sex Ration at Birth in Vietnam: New Insights and Policy Recommendations*, 2018, https://vietnam.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Policy%20brief%20GBSS_FINAL_EN.pdf.

[97] This author recalls one married female friend who had trouble getting pregnant for the first few years of marriage. At one point, her in-laws counseled her husband to leave her. Fortunately, soon thereafter she gave birth to a son.

Conclusion

As the source of one's identity as an individual and social being, the givers of all one has, those of highest honor at life-cycle events, those to whom one owes ongoing filial piety, and the reinforcers of social roles, the ancestors are an ever-present and active part of the everyday social life of the Vietnamese. They are the living dead.

Critique of the Literature

As even this partial survey has shown, the burgeoning of ethnographic research in Vietnam has benefitted studies of ancestral veneration immeasurably, firstly by highlighting the importance of the practice in Vietnamese culture, but chiefly by revealing the plurality of its meanings across diverse domains of life—political, economic, and social. As one introduction to traditional Vietnamese rites puts it, "Belief[98] in the veneration[99] of ancestors has become a characteristic cultural feature of the Vietnamese people. In its formation and development, it has contributed to the creation of exalted traditional moral values such as filial piety, compassion, civic-mindedness, industriousness, creativity, eagerness to learn, and deep love of country."[100] It is a part of the fabric of life.

Are the Rites Religious?

After surveying the plurality of meanings associated with ancestral practices, what can be said of their religious character? Given the variety of meanings in so-called non-religious sectors,

[98] Vietnamese: *tín ngưỡng*. In this context, this word connotes belief of a sacred character. It is often paired with *tôn giáo* to refer to formal religion.

[99] Vietnamese: *thờ cúng*. This is a difficult word to render in English without biasing interpretation. *Thờ* can be rendered *worship*, but is also more emotive, connoting love, esteem, respect, and reverence. *Cúng* refers to the act of making an offering. It is rendered here as *veneration* to retain its sacred character while avoiding loading it with the theological baggage that *worship* brings.

[100] Nguyễn Quốc Thái and Thượng Tọa Thích Quảng Đại, eds., *Nghi Lễ Thờ Cúng Cổ Truyền Việt Nam [Traditional Rituals of Veneration in Vietnam]* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hồng Đức, 2016), 11.

a minority of scholars have downplayed the religious character of ancestral rites. They note that it is difficult to characterize ancestral veneration as a religion in any formal sense of the word since it lacks a codified body of beliefs, a sacred text, or an any formal institutions. Phan Van Bich asserts that "ancestor worship has a different meaning to Vietnamese people from that of a religion," instead suggesting that "ancestor worship is culture understood in the sense that it makes us human."[101] Michael Singleton comes to a similar but slightly less vague conclusion after researching ancestral veneration in Asia and Africa. He suggests that framing ancestral rites in terms of religion is an ethnocentric Western imposition and takes specific aim at Christianity, noting the "anthropological abyss opening up between the ethnographic evidence and missiological lucubrations."[102] While this chapter has shown that the Vietnamese, like the Africans Singleton observed, "only saw and spoke of a purely formal difference of degree and not of an onto-theological divide" between respect to the elderly and veneration to the ancestors, Singleton goes too far when he concludes that "ancestor worship is simply a symbolization of seniority."[103] With this statement he seems to extricate religious meanings from ancestral veneration entirely. But as this chapter has endeavored to show, regardless of the lack of indicators that ancestral veneration is a "formal religion," the practice has clear metaphysical and cosmological characteristics that suggest a religious character. Those religious connotations of ancestral veneration are a part of the plurality of meanings these practices contain, and further, are integrated into other meanings. The political *is* religious. The religious *is* economic.

[101] Pham Van Bich, *Vietnamese Family in Change*, 224.

[102] Singleton, "Worshipping Ancestors to Respecting Seniors," 241.

[103] Singleton, "Worshipping Ancestors to Respecting Seniors," 250–51.

Ancestral Rites as a Form of Folk Religion

Given this interconnected plurality of meanings, it would be more helpful to understand ancestral veneration as a form of popular or folk religion. Anthropologist and missiologist Paul Hiebert distinguishes folk religions from formal religions, showing how the former do not typically have the obvious indicators of the latter (like codified beliefs and sacred texts), and identifies four questions that folk religions typically address.[104] The first is the need to understand the meaning of life and the problem of death. The social analysis above showed how ancestral veneration helps the living find their identity, roles, and responsibilities while also giving the deceased the same, though in new forms suitable for their new status. The second question folk religion asks is how to achieve prosperity and avoid calamity. Economic analysis showed how ancestral veneration is a way to transact with the dead, providing for them in return for their material blessing and physical protection. Hiebert's third question posed by folk religion relates to the need for guidance in the face of the unknown. The analysis above did not show ancestral veneration dealing with this issue directly, however, the Vietnamese have other forms of popular religion to address this need, including fortune-telling, astrology, and spirit mediumship.[105] The final question folk religion addresses regards morality and evil, i.e., understanding what is right and wrong and acting accordingly. Here, too, the social analysis above showed how the ongoing presence of the ancestors and the filial piety they are owed contribute significantly to the moral compass of Vietnamese people. Meanwhile, the political analysis above showed how state actors

[104] Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 77–79.

[105] In a collection of essays, Fjelstad and Hien highlight how spirit mediumship has resurged in surprising ways in a variety of communities in post-*Đổi Mới* Vietnam. Fjelstad and Hien Karen Fjelstad and Nguyen Thi Hien, eds., *Possessed by the Spirits: Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities*, Southeast Asia Program 23 (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2006). Also see Endres, "Engaging the Spirits of the Dead."

used or discarded ancestral practices, and its attendant values, for the purpose of answering all these questions according to revolutionary aims.

In sum, to deny ancestral veneration's religious character goes against not just the anthropological evidence in Vietnam, but also what has been observed in popular religions globally. Affirming political, economic, and social meanings of ancestral rites need not require us to deny its religious meanings. Indeed, the thesis of this study is that these practices hold a plurality of meanings, of which religious connotations are a significant part. The goal of this study is not to deny religious meanings, but rather to understand how they relate to the wider matrix of meanings. This point is significant for this study since the religious nature of the rites is precisely what has been and continues to be the most significant criteria by which Christians respond to them.

Summary

In the last 30 years, political and economic reforms have opened space for anthropological research in Vietnam, a boon to those seeking to understand ancestral rites. Anthropologists have shown how the ancestors affect and are affected by the many actors who engage them, whether skeptical party cadres, industrious market vendors, or angry uncles. The state's attitudes towards ancestral veneration shifted significantly over the revolutionary period, moving from amicable participation to hostility towards these "superstitious" practices. Nonetheless, ancestral veneration survived, albeit in limited and altered forms. In the post-revolutionary period, however, especially since the *Đổi Mới* reforms, the state has relaxed its attitudes, leading to a resurgence of traditional, modified, and new forms of ancestral engagement. In the country's move to a market economy, many aspects of ancestral veneration have been marketized, even giving birth to new markets (e.g., the proliferation of votive papers) which themselves become

ritualized. This reflects the transactional essence of interactions with the ancestors, who covet the ritual offerings of the living even as the living seek the blessing and protection of the ancestors. Social relations, too, are infused with the influence of the ancestors, who are the benefactors of the family and its properties. Their benefaction creates a debt that must be perpetually paid by pious acts performed from a filial heart. This system both upholds and emanates from the collective, diachronic, and hierarchical family, and engenders clear roles and responsibilities that contribute to the core identity of individuals and groups alike.

In observing their political, economic, and social meanings, it is clear that ancestral rites are not relegated to a separate sacred sphere, but permeate all apsects of everyday life. As Confucian scholar Fingarette explains, the "explicitly sacred rite can be seen as an emphatic, intensified, and sharply elaborated extension of everyday civilized discourse."[106] In Vietnam, the line between natural and supernatural, physical and spiritual, material and immiterial, sacred and secular, is blurry, if it is there at all. The world is enchanted; "the spiritual is public."[107] As will be shown below, it is precisely this understanding that eluded, and continues to elude, Christian responses to ancestral rites. In that gap, this study finds its purpose.

[106] Fingarette, *Confucius*, 11.

[107] Fingarette, *Confucius*, 46.

CHAPTER THREE

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES

Introduction

The problem of Christian responses to ancestral rites in Vietnam began outside of Vietnam. When the first Jesuit missionaries arrived in China in the latter half of the 16th century, the cults of the ancestors and Confucius were firmly established.[1] These missionaries were confronted by ceremonies and gestures of reverence (e.g. the "kowtow," a bow in which the forehead touches the floor) before wooden tablets, understood as the "seat of the spirit" of ancestors, placed on altars. Moreover, on festivals and other occasions, offerings of food and drink were made to the ancestors, with incense, paper money, and other items burned on these altars. They were also confronted with similar rites to Confucius that permeated all layers of society, being intimately tied to state machinery.[2] Because the cult of Confucius possessed no organizational structure, a "Ministry of Rites" worked out its rituals, often with its own goals in view. In this way, the cults of the ancestors and Confucius presented a perplexing challenge to these Western missionaries; they had no formal pantheon of gods, no established creed or systematic doctrine, and yet they were diffused through all levels of society.

Early Jesuits were faced with evaluating the appropriateness of the rites for Chinese converts. Could Christians engage in the rites, or should they refrain? The Jesuits took a permissive approach to the rites, igniting one of the most famous and longstanding controversies in cross-cultural mission. The question of the rites raged *for centuries* through a flurry of open and secret communications that crisscrossed the globe, including informal and formal letters by

[1] For an excellent introduction to Jesuit missions to China, see Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

[2] See Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 8–9.

individual missionaries, official decisions by the Holy See in Rome, and even opinions from top political leaders in Asia. Still in a defensive mood in the wake of the Counter-Reformation,[3] ecclesial authorities ended the initial phase of the controversy with *Ex quo singulari* in 1742, which unequivocally and categorically rejected the rites.[4] But the controversy erupted again nearly 200 years later in Japan as Catholic university students refused to bow before the war dead at a local shrine. The final Roman encyclical, *Plane compertum est*, issued in 1939, radically reversed the position of the Church and ended the formal controversy.[5]

At the heart of the controversy on rites was the meaning of the rites themselves. As the controversy took shape, one question came to the fore as crucial for understanding the meaning of the rites: were they religious in character, and thus idolatrous, or were they civil, merely showing devotion and honor to the dead? On this question the whole controversy turned. But on what criteria could one decide? And further, who should decide? This chapter will explore these questions.

Orientation to the Chapter

As recent scholarship in literary theory and linguistics has shown, establishing meaning is complicated at best. The bulk of this chapter will take a macro-view of the Chinese Rites Controversy, engaging in a diachronic hermeneutical analysis of its key phases and documents. The goal is not to establish what the rites meant, but rather to elucidate *how* they were perceived

[3] Brockey writes, "Whereas the zealous dynamism of the Catholic Reformation period created the centrifugal spiritual energy that impelled the Jesuits to travel from Europe to Asia, the centripetal forces of the ecclesiastical hierarchy generated in response to the Protestant challenge also acted as a decisive brake on the China mission." Brockey, *Journey to the East*, 10.

[4] For an English translation of the full text, see Ray Robert Noll, ed., *100 Roman Documents Relating to the Chinese Rites Controversy*, trans. Donald F. St. Sure, SJ, Studies in Chinese-Western Cultural History 1 (San Francisco: Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History, 1992), 46–61.

[5] For an English translation of the full text, see Noll, *100 Roman Documents*, 87–88.

to mean many things to diverse actors. Specifically, the chapter will explore the ways missionaries at different times located the meaning of the rites in their origins, in their practice, and according to the authorities. Each of these approaches had benefits and liabilities. The chapter will then evaluate *Plane compertum est* in light of the preceding discussion. The discussion will then move to Vietnam, noting the historical development of current views on ancestral veneration by both Catholics and Protestants. Ultimately, this chapter will argue that the meaning of the rites is essentially fluid and plural, and what was lacking in Protestant and Catholic responses alike was local Christian voices and leadership in establishing the meaning of the rites and making judgments over and creating responses to them.

In making judgments about historical mission efforts, a study of this kind will inevitably fall prey to a certain amount of anachronism. George Minamiki, who has written a comprehensive account of the controversy, is surely correct that "the stand taken by the Church has to be judged according to the historical background of the times."[6] While his advice is duly acknowledged, a study of this kind is justified because of the enduring relevance of the question of rites for today's Christians. As shown in Chapter One, it is still a "live" issue in Vietnam and large parts of Asia. Thus, any judgments this chapter makes are not intended to give a verdict on the past according to the standards of the present, but rather to draw lessons from the events of the historical controversy that might aid the church as it lives in the tension of theology and culture today.

[6] Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 222.

The Meaning *Behind* the Rites: Looking to the Past

Historical Context

Matteo Ricci, who arrived in Peking in 1601, was the most famous of the Jesuit missionaries and the one who most embodied the Jesuits' position toward the rites. Ricci saw in the rites nothing inherently idolatrous, but rather mere civil piety. It was his views (endorsed by his Visitor, the influential Roman missionary Alessandro Valignano) that would shape Jesuit policy on the rites.[7] Ricci was not unaware that in practice the rites were mingled with superstition, but his sympathetic and patient approach acknowledged that "where there was not clear suggestion of superstition, he was for tolerance; but at the same time he tried to bring the ceremony gradually into conformity with Christian practice."[8] Thus, the Jesuits took a tolerant stance that allowed converts to continue participation in both ancestral rites and rites to Confucius.

But it is important to consider the basis for Ricci's assessment. He came with pedigree in Chinese language and the classics of Chinese Confucian thought. Ricci's linguistic and cultural prowess characterized later Jesuit missionaries as well. Their training program for recruits was impressive for its time and is considered one of the first examples of a program of Chinese studies.[9] As Brockey notes, "The study of native traditions, [the Jesuits] knew, was essential for making their religious message fit into the Chinese cultural register."[10] Famously, the Jesuits dressed like members of the gentry class as a part of their mission strategy. But it was their positive relationships with Chinese *literati* that confirmed for Ricci and others that the rites were

[7] Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 17.

[8] Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 19.

[9] Brockey provides an extensive discussion of the training program of the Jesuits. Brockey, *Journey to the East*, 243–86.

[10] Brockey, *Journey to the East*, 8.

less for the dead and more for the living. Based on his discussions with them, Ricci concluded that no divine status was ascribed to ancestors. The explanation of the *literati* came from careful study of the early Chinese classics that shed light on the initial meaning of the rites, and thus formed the basis from which Ricci and the Jesuits could answer the question of the rites' appropriateness among Christian converts in their own time.

Understanding the Jesuits' Approach

The Jesuits' diachronic approach peels back the layers of time to understand the original creation of the rites as taught by Confucius and his early followers, beginning some 1,700 years earlier. For Ricci and the Jesuits, meaning is rooted in the first intention of the rites, which provides information by which to understand their present use. This information was applied in three important ways. First, the original meaning might help explain the source of the present-day rites. Second, and following from the first, the historical creation of the rites could be used to define the "real" meaning of the rites. Third, and following from the second, rooting meaning in the original intention provides grounds for evaluating present practices according to a normative standard.

Each of these applications assumes that the present-day rites do not exist in a vacuum. In other words, they all honor the reality of a connection between the rites then and the rites now. But they differ as to the degree of that connection and its power to constrain the meaning of the rites. In the first application, the original intention of the rights is acknowledged as having defined the starting point for how they have progressed over the succeeding centuries up until the present. The historical meaning of the rites holds *explanatory force* only. But in the second and third applications the connection between past and present is stronger, with the assumption of a necessary correlation between the original meaning and the present-day meaning. In the second

case, the historical meaning of the rights holds a *definitive force*. In other words, the original meaning of the rites continues unchanged through time, thus defining their meaning for all times. This leads naturally to the third application, in which the historical meaning has an *evaluative force*. If the meaning of the rites is rooted in prior intention, then some superstitious present-day practices can be judged as "deviations" or "perversions."[11]

Evaluating the Jesuits' Approach

The first of these brings the past forward to shed light on the present. The historical connection is acknowledged but the present-day meanings still have their autonomy. Thus, it can be affirmed as a healthy appeal to the past. In the second and third applications, however, the present-day rites are beholden to a "pure" historical meaning. The past is meant to shed light on the present, but the present ends up being shackled to the past. This betrays a classicist view of culture which "freezes a culture in a time period and encourages romanticized or fossilized views of a people's way of living in the past."[12] Minamiki argues that locating the meaning of the rites in a romanticized past "closed the eyes of the missionaries to that wide area of the rites as they were actually practiced and understood by the great masses of people."[13] As will be shown, this was precisely the complaint of the Dominicans.

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[11] The diachronic approach of the Jesuits described here, with their *literati* informants, might be understood as an early example of historical criticism, i.e., the study of the origin of texts to understand their meaning. These methods would become extremely popular in biblical exegesis in the 19th century. Terrance Keegan writes, "Diachronic analysis involves viewing things as having been constituted by or as deriving their meaning from an historical progression, i.e., viewing them through time." For a brief summary of historical critical methods related to the interpretation of Scripture, see Terence J. Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist, 1985), 20–31.

[12] Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 2.

[13] Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 207.

The Meaning *in* the Rites: Looking at the Ritualized Present

Historical Context

After the Jesuits had been in China for a half century and cemented their view on the rites, the Dominicans (among others) arrived and were confronted by those same rites. Though the Dominicans benefitted from the Jesuits' relationships with prestigious *literati*, their own strategy was focused on male commoners, and later women and children.[14] Being much closer to everyday people, the Dominicans were shocked not only by the rites themselves, but even more by the permissive posture of the Jesuits towards practices that the Dominicans saw as clearly idolatrous. In his seventeen propositions to Propaganda Fide (established in 1622),[15] Dominican Juan Baptista Morales sent his concerns to the Holy See, arguing against the rites not on the basis of their origins but rather he "placed the focus of the problem on the significance of the rites as practiced in seventeenth century China."[16] In other words, for Morales and the Dominicans it is in their enactment that the rites have meaning.

Two aspects of Morales' propositions are noteworthy for this study's purposes, exemplified in his description of rites for the dead in the 12th proposition:

> When someone dies in China, whether he is a Christian or a pagan, the religiously observed custom is to prepare an altar in the home of the deceased, and put on it an image of the deceased, or a tablet as described above, decorating it with incense, flowers, and candles, and laying the corpse behind it in a coffin. All who enter those homes to mourn genuflect three or four times before the decorated altar and the image of the deceased. They lie flat, their heads touching the floor. They carry candles and incense to burn on the decorated altar before the image of the deceased.[17]

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[14] Eugenio Menegon provides a fascinating account of the Dominican missions to China. See Eugenio Menegon, *Ancestors, Virgins, & Friars: Christianity As a Local Religion in Late Imperial China*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 69 (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2010).

[15] These propositions outlined a variety of questionable practices by the Jesuit mission, only some of which had to do with rites.

[16] Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 28.

[17] Noll, *100 Roman Documents*, 3.

First, with his intricate descriptions of the rites, one senses that Morales has observed them attentively and repeatedly. His firsthand experience makes him keenly aware of the ways the various objects and actions of the rites carry meaning. Thus, when Morales seeks advice from Propaganda Fide, he is not asking for broad guidelines on responding to the rites in general, but for specific guidance about the minutia of the rites themselves. This kind of discourse would come to characterize the entire controversy. Second, Morales was, as far as the evidence shows, the first to introduce the category of "civil and political" rites as distinct from religious rites. Propaganda Fide responded to the question of whether Christians could participate in the rite described in proposition 12 in these very terms: "The decision: This can be tolerated as long as the table is an ordinary piece of furniture and not a true altar, and if the actions performed are within the bounds of *civil and political* compliance" (italics mine).[18] The distinction between civil and religious will be returned to later, since these two categories would come to dominate the discussion until the conclusion of the Chinese Rites Controversy in the 20th century. But first, this chapter must elaborate how Morales' approach to the rites relates to their meaning.

Understanding the Dominicans' Approach

Morales' focus is not on the rites as they originated but rather as they are performed. One cannot simply look at the meaning intended in the past but rather the meaning occurring in the present. For Morales, and subsequently for the Holy See, to make an appropriate judgment about the rites, present meaning must be primary over original meaning. In this case, that present meaning is located in the performance of the rites themselves.[19] Morales' approach assumes that the rites carry meaning that acts upon their performers and participants as objects.

[18] Noll, *100 Roman Documents*, 4.

[19] In linguistic terms, this is akin to text-based analysis in which the text is the locus of the hermeneutical

If this is true, to evaluate the rites' appropriateness one must establish and judge what meaning is acting on the participants. This is no small task given the rites' complexity and diversity. It is easy to see, then, why the minutia of the rites is so important for Morales; he comments on the rites' occasion, location, equipment, participants, posture, and more. A bow is not just a bow. A table is not just a table. Each of these aspects carries certain meanings that might be judged good or bad and thus require a pronouncement.[20] Indeed, this is precisely the direction that the controversy took after Morales' propositions laid out the terms and focus of the discussion.

Ritual Minutia

The various pronouncements in Pope Clement XI's bull *Ex illa die*, issued in 1715, illustrate the issue. This bull was the precursor to *Ex quo singulari*, the 1742 bull that ended the first phase of the controversy. In both cases, the appropriateness of the rites for Christian converts was rejected, with certain concessions granted begrudgingly. As to occasion, *Ex illa die* prohibits Christians from being "present at the solemn sacrifices or oblations which Chinese customarily make to Confucius and to deceased ancestors at the Spring and Autumnal Equinox every year."[21] As to location, Christians were to avoid rites that "take place in shrines of Confucius which are called by the Chinese name Miao."[22] As to equipment, the focus was

process. Voelz writes, "the actual text is the entrée to the entire process of communication." That is, without a text to read, there is no interpretation. In the same way, without the rites themselves, there is no problem of ancestral rites to address. Voelz, *What Does This Mean*, 19.

[20] For example, in the quote from Propaganda Fide above, note how they make a distinction between a table and a "true altar," allowing for the former but forbidding the latter. But what distinguishes a table from an altar? Design? Materials? Size? Placement? Occasion? Use? Perception? These distinctions are culturally informed, and thus parsing them out became controversial and time-consuming.

[21] Noll, *100 Roman Documents*, 50.

[22] Noll, *100 Roman Documents*, 50.

usually on the wooden "spirit tablets" with inscriptions of the deceased names, which were believed to hold the very spirit of the ancestors. *Ex illa die* directs that "Christians must not be permitted to keep tablets of deceased ancestors in their own homes," although the Holy See does concede that "their use can be tolerated so long as in making them everything smacking of superstition is left out."[23] The concession meant that "corrected" tablets would only have the name of the deceased inscribed, and a statement of the Christian belief on death displayed immediately beside them. As to participants, a distinction was made between participation and "material presence" as a way to acknowledge that in situations where it "may sometimes be necessary for Christians to be present at superstitious actions," they can do so as "a by-stander, giving no approval inwardly or outwardly of what is being done, taking no active part."[24] As to posture, most genuflections are disallowed, but *Ex quo singulari* permits that "genuflections and prostrations are allowed before a corrected tablet, and also before the coffin and the deceased person."[25]

Evaluating the Dominicans' Approach

On the positive side, recognizing meaning in the rites as performed acknowledged the power of ritual in the life of the community. The acclaimed anthropologist Clifford Geertz has written how elaborate and public rituals "shape the spiritual consciousness of a people."[26] More recently, James K.A. Smith has attempted to explain how this works, arguing that non-conscious, pre-theoretical influences act on us and thus drive our own action in the world. In his view, these

[23] Noll, *100 Roman Documents*, 51.

[24] Noll, *100 Roman Documents*, 50. This distinction would also become crucial in the later stages of the controversy.

[25] Noll, *100 Roman Documents*, 56.

[26] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic, 1973), 121.

influences are not found in the mind or in intellectual knowledge but rather arise from embodied habits and rituals.[27] Thus, more than 200 years before either of these scholars wrote, Propaganda Fide was sensitive to their sentiments, recognizing the real danger of embodied ancestral rituals to negatively impact the faith of Christians. Its pronouncements aimed to protect them against this harm.

On the other hand, this posture failed to appreciate that ritual forms do not have inherent meaning; rather their meanings are culturally constructed.[28] This failure opened a Pandora's box of questions about the minutia of the rites. Indeed, in the two centuries after *Ex quo singulari* and the conclusion of the formal controversy in the 20th-century, new questions arose about Christian participation in marriage ceremonies, in meals with food indirectly offered to idols, in governmentally mandated offerings for temple construction, in the use of bows in certain contexts, in the use of candles and incense, in the disposal of equipment related to rites (e.g., should it be burned or could it be returned to other members of the family so as not to cause offense?), and much more. Judgment on these issues required a host of distinctions: between appropriate and inappropriate occasions and locations, "corrected" and original equipment, active participation and passive material presence, acceptable and unacceptable postures, direct and indirect offerings, believing and unbelieving participants, the heart of the believer and the perception of the unbelievers, etc. As an example of how onerous these questions could become, in 1769, the Vicar Apostolate of Tonkin asked Propaganda Fide, "Are the Christians of Tonkin allowed to prostrate themselves before an image of the crucifix at the side of the bier, or on top

[27] James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

[28] From a linguistics perspective, James Voelz writes, "The relationship between words and meanings is a product of convention and is not intrinsic." Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 91.

of the bier, or placed in the hands of the deceased, if every appearance of superstition is removed?"[29] As this inquiry shows, questions kept coming as ever-finer degrees of minutia created fresh problems to solve.

Further Issues

While this study commends the recognition of the power of ritual to shape its performers and participants, the extent of that very power was inadequately appreciated. As the questions kept coming, a rigid line of rejection was impossible; the issues were simply too complex. In order to make necessary concessions Propaganda Fide employed an implicit distinction between form and content. Instead of equating a ritual form with a particular meaning, as they had done before, now the form of the rite was a "container" for its meaning. Inappropriate content or meaning in a rite could simply be swapped out for better content or meaning. In some of the onerous questions that were outlined above, the Holy See advocated making changes to the content of a particular rite while retaining its basic form.[30]

The clearest example is in the Catholic Church's answer to questions about the use of candles. In 1777, the Vicar Apostolic of Sichuan inquired of Propaganda Fide:

> Would it be proper to prohibit the use of incense and candles in the funerals of deceased persons, and prayers said kneeling at the graves of the dead? Such rites do resemble pagan ceremonies. Christians who are not yet solid in their faith easily return to their former errors. The pagans are scandalized, thinking that Christians offer the deceased the same worship as they.[31]

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[29] Noll, *100 Roman Documents*, 64. The answer in this case was an unqualified negative.

[30] For example, in the case of tablets a concession was made for the correction of the tablets by way of an abbreviated inscription and an accompanying statement on the Christian beliefs about death. This was the foundation on which genuflections and prostrations could be made to the tablets, indicating another form/content distinction.

[31] Noll, *100 Roman Documents*, 65.

The Vicar Apostolate recognized that the form of candles and incense is tied to certain meaning associations by the local population, and that this is cause for concern. In its response, however, Propaganda Fide emphasized the value of this "very ancient and very religious" practice of candles in the Church, then asserted that "use of the same thing, if the way it is used is different, is no reason for thinking it has the same meaning."[32] It is doubtless that there is truth in this argument; certainly candles do not mean the same thing for all times and all places. But one need not fall into the trap of equating form and meaning universally to see that there is a certain amount of overlap locally. In employing a form/content distinction too liberally, the Church risked betraying the very insight it gained into the power of ritual forms to act on their participants while also increasing the barrage of questions that were coming their way.

The countless questions that arose as the Church considered the meaning in the rites themselves only revealed the inadequacy of such an approach. There would always be new questions as new situations and practices arose, requiring new distinctions, and distinctions within distinctions, creating an endless cycle. Where could finality and stability come from?

The Meaning *Made* of the Rites: Who Gets to Decide?

All of the judgments the Church made on the minutia of the rites turned on the aforementioned distinction between religious (and thus idolatrous) practices and those that were merely civil. But as the Church quickly discovered, this was hardly a clear-cut distinction. How is it determined which rites are religious in nature and which are civil? What are the criteria for such a determination? Who gets to decide? It is widely agreed among scholars that the local Chinese people had far too little say in these matters. This project agrees with that judgment but

[32] Noll, *100 Roman Documents*, 66.

will look specifically at two key exceptions when a local voice *was* heard, drawing out just why the exclusion of the local Chinese was problematic.

Historical Context

In the wake of Morales' propositions and the directives that followed from Rome, the Jesuits were preparing to retaliate by "developing a new type of evidence concerning the rites which they believed would be ultimate and decisive."[33] Instead of appealing to the past authority of the ancient classics of Confucian thought, they appealed to the present authority of the Chinese emperor himself! In 1700, four Jesuit fathers articulated what they saw as the "common understanding of the rites" in a petition that they presented to emperor K'ang Hsi. In it they included detailed descriptions of various features of the rites as they understood them. For example, about the spirit tablets they wrote, "The setting up of tablets of deceased ancestors does not mean that the souls of the ancestors are thought to be actually residing in this wood."[34] They asked the emperor's judgment on their interpretation of this and other aspects of the rites, to which he replied, "What is here written is very good, and is in harmony with the Great Way. To reverence Heaven, to serve ruler and parents, to be respectful towards teachers and elders—this is the code of all people of the empire. So this is correct, and there is no part that requires emendation."[35] But what the Jesuits intended as their decisive blow ended up blowing up in their faces, as Rome considered Hsi's rescript "an affront and an act of interference by a civil authority concerning a strictly ecclesiastical and theological issue."[36] Local voices were

[33] Antonio Sisto Rosso, *Apostolic Delegations to China* (South Pasadena: P.D. and Ione Perkins, 1948), 138–39, quoted in Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 40.

[34] Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 41.

[35] Rosso, *Apostolic Delegations*, 143, quoted in Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 41–42.

[36] Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 42.

unequivocally not welcome in the discussion because the civil and the theological were seen as separate realms.

The reaction of Rome to the rescript is made even more inexplicable given the conclusion of the controversy over 200 years later. When Catholic students at Sophia University in Japan refused to salute the war dead by bowing at a local shrine in 1932, it offended the local government and erupted the dormant Rites Controversy once again. After much back and forth over the next year, the Ministry of Education in Japan, responding to a request from the Archbishop of Tokyo, clarified the nature of the rite in question (and similar rites) in an official reply. The Ministry stated, "the bow that is required of the group of students of the higher schools and the students of the middle and primary schools has no other purpose than that of manifesting the sentiments of patriotism and loyalty."[37] Unlike the previous case with emperor K'ang Hsi, in this case the Church accepted the official reply of the Japanese government, and their response formed the basis for pronouncements that would completely change the church's posture on the entire issue of rites, culminating in the instruction *Plane compertum est* in 1939 (to be discussed below).[38]

Understanding and Evaluating the Change

Regardless of their different outcomes, both incidents indicate that locating meaning either in the original intention of the rites in the past or in their present ritualized performance was inadequate. Some sort of firm basis was needed for discovering how local people understood the rites. Implicit in seeking out an "official interpretation," whether from the Chinese emperor in

[37] Quoted in Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 145.

[38] It should be noted that a similar response with regards to the religious nature of the rites was given by the Ministry of Education in the Japanese territory of Manchukuo in 1935. This, too, was instrumental in changing the Church's opinion. Moreover, there were government proclamations coming from China in the early 20th century.

1700 or the Japanese government in the 1930s, is a recognition that meaning is to some extent formed in the mind of the local people. The meaning of rites cannot be considered apart from the meaning appropriated by those who perform and participate in them.[39] This is a significant admission and represents a real change from the events of 1700. That some in the Catholic Church sought out the interpretations of locals should, in the view of this study, be applauded. That the Church itself listened to the interpretation in the Japanese case is to be celebrated.

Unfortunately, however, the celebration can only be qualified. While official government proclamations certainly reveal something important, to what extent can they speak for the entirety of the local population? Indeed, they *cannot* speak so universally. Government leaders speak from positions of privilege and wealth far removed from the realities of the general population. Moreover, their decisions are inseparable from national interest. Indeed, Minamiki emphasizes the wartime context of the 1930s' interactions in Japan. In this environment, the pressure to resolve the issue peacefully would have been enormous on both sides. Minamiki details "backroom" negotiations that took place to secure the government's responses. Moreover, on the part of the Church, he stresses the pressure to "disprove the widespread opinion that there was an inherent conflict between the Catholic religion and the Japanese way of life."[40] Theological questions were not the only stimulating factor in the discussions; political expediency was also a powerful motivator. Thus, while we can affirm that the government

[39] Here again, the controversy anticipates changes in linguistics, namely the rise of reader-oriented methods that emphasize the necessary role of the reader in constructing the meaning of a text. A text or artifact has meaning because it means something to someone. James Voelz writes, "The readers' beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, ideas, experiences, etc., become a part of the matrix for textual interpretation, so that nothing is interpreted in a text, unless it is part of a matrix with what the interpreters are as persons." Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 208. Reader-oriented interpretive methods were popularized by Stanley Fish. See Stanley Eugene Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Stanley Eugene Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

[40] Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 154.

responses might give us a general inclination of local meaning, or a rough idea of the mind of the people, it can never give us a complete picture and thus is an inadequate basis for a stable definition of meaning.

We must also take issue with the very question that the government leaders were requested to answer, namely, to confirm that the rites were merely civil in character. Speaking of ritual in general, Geertz concedes that, "All cultural performances are not religious performances," but goes on to say that "the line between those that are [religious] and artistic, or even political, ones is often not so easy to draw in practice."[41] Mark Luttio has written persuasively about the inherent problem with casting the question on rites in religious versus civil terms. In doing so, the Church was approaching an Eastern problem "from a Western perspective, resulting, of course, in a Western analysis." A Western, neo-plantonic dualistic worldview misunderstood "the Eastern understanding of the relationship between culture and religion."[42] Writing specifically about the Hmong in Vietnam, Tâm T.T. Ngô writes, "Religion and culture for many Hmong are intimately intertwined. In fact, this entanglemnt is still common in many non-western societies."[43] A clear example of this is the aforementioned petition sent to K'ang Hsi in 1700. It was the Jesuits who wrote the petition, putting the issue into their own terms and categories, simply asking the emperor to confirm or deny. But as Luttio argues, and as Chapter Two exemplifies, in many countries in Asia there is no sharp distinction between religious and civil realms. Instead, "the religious and secular worlds collapse into one—coalescing together in the world of sacred corporate ritual."[44] One wonders, then, what answer emperor Hsi would have

[41] Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 122.

[42] Luttio, "Chinese Rites Controversy," 291.

[43] Tâm T.T. Ngô, *New Way*, 71.

[44] Luttio, "Chinese Rites Controversy," 309.

given if the missionaries had simply asked him to explain the meaning of the rites *in his own words* rather than confirming a prewritten statement.

In sum, the rare inclusion of local people in the controversy was woefully narrow, prone to the changing winds of political expediency, and little more than a rubber-stamp on interpretations that were put in foreign categories. This is hardly a firm basis for making judgments on the meaning of the rites. If meaning is to some extent located in the mind of the person participating in the rite, then meaning is to some extent dependent on that person and it can be said that in some way they "construct" that meaning.[45] Following from this, there is an inherent plurality in the meaning of the rites, as different people of different times at different places with different cultures make different meanings of them. Therefore, the judgment of one emperor or one government official, while certainly convenient, can never suffice. The meaning given to the rites and imposed on subjects by their rulers is not necessarily the meaning that is individually appropriated.[46] Many wonder if the entire controversy might have been averted if K'ang Hsi's rescript in 1700 was accepted by the Church like the Japanese government's responses were in the 1930s.[47] Any answer is conjecture. But if the inability of one person to define meaning for all is true, then while the Church's acceptance of Hsi's rescript might have spared the Church from much time and spilled ink, and the locals from the regretful lurches in

[45] From a linguistic perspective, and focused on the interpretation of Scripture, Robert Fowler writes, "No longer can meaning be understood to be a stable, determinate content that lies buried within the text, awaiting excavation. Rather, meaning becomes a dynamic event in which we ourselves participate." Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 3.

[46] This was quite clear in Chapter Two's discussion of the political dimension of the rites. Revolutionary efforts to change the rites' meaning was partially successful at best, with local people retaining traditional meanings and also appropriating political meanings in their own way.

[47] For example, see Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 219.

church policy and practice, it would have left unresolved the underlying problem of meaning in the rites.

Plane compertum est: Resolution or Confusion?

The events in Japan in the 1930s laid the groundwork for the final official declarations concerning rites. By the time Pius XII's encyclical *Plane compertum est* was issued in 1939, it only officialized what was already taking place as bishops in Asia had instructed their missionaries in more permissive postures towards the rites according to instructions from the Holy See. Before making any conclusions, it is necessary to highlight the distinctives of *Plane compertum est* and analyze them against the preceding conversation.

Content and Form

Several features of the encyclical stand out. First, one is struck by how short in length the encyclical is compared to *Ex quo singulari*, which closed the first phase of the controversy in 1742. *Plane compertum est* eschews the detailed recounting of the controversy's history as well as answering questions related to the intricacies of the rites themselves, opting instead for general statements. As a result, the encyclical is about 5–10% the length of *Ex quo singulari*. It contains only four instructions. First, it gives permission for the participation of Catholics in rites in honor of Confucius. Second, it permits Catholic schools to set up images of Confucius. Third, passive attendance at superstitious events is permitted. Finally, it permits bowing in civil honor before deceased persons and even before their "corrected" tablets. Perhaps more important than any specific instructions is the rationale given for the radical about-face in policy on the rites. The encyclical leads with the following: regarding rites, "customs and minds have changed with the flow of the centuries," with rites now serving to "merely preserve civil expression of

devotion toward ancestors, or of patriotism, or of respect for fellow countrymen."[48] It is also important to highlight that the basis on which this recognition of change was made is also explicitly stated:

> The Chinese government has said … it is not the government's intention to issue laws or commands about religious matters. Therefore, the ceremonies which the public authorities either stage or prescribe in honor of Confucius are not carried out with the intention of rendering religious worship, but only for this purpose: to cultivate and display suitable honor for a very illustrious man, and the respect due the traditions of ancestors.[49]

The official input from governments is the sole source listed as forming the basis for the change in attitudes on the rites, a fact not without irony given the cold reception emperor K'ang Hsi's 1700 rescript received.

Evaluation

Plane compertum est represents an incredible shift in the attitudes and practices of the Church with regards to rites. *Ex quo singulari* forbade most of the ancestral rites and the rites related to Confucius, with concessions to limited practices that could be "tolerated." In other words, *Ex quo singulari* was founded on a position of firm rejection, only adding a few concessions. In contrast, *Plane compertum est* was founded on a position of acceptance, only adding a few guidelines. It permitted most rites, even calling the bowing of a head before a corrected tablet "proper." Moreover, in *Plane compertum est* the Church explicitly recognized that meaning changes over time. It is not locked in the classics of the past, nor is it static in the enactment of the rites. Moreover, the basis of that determination was not solely the careful deliberation of the powers in Rome, but also the explicit input of local governments.

[48] Noll, *100 Roman Documents*, 87.

[49] Noll, *100 Roman Documents*, 87–88.

But while *Plane compertum est* recognized that meaning is fluid, it failed to recognize that it is plural. It perpetuated the illusion that a simple government definition of meaning can determine the individually appropriated meaning of ordinary people who perform and participate in rites. Further, it persisted in doing this on the basis of a Western distinction between the religious and the civil. Thus, while it was certainly a welcome change in posture, it was an inadequate resolution to the issue. As a result, questions about rites continued to arise in the post-Vatican II era of Roman Catholicism. The Controversy might have concluded, but the controversy continues.

Christian Responses in Vietnam: More of the Same

In Vietnam, attitudes towards ancestral altars have followed the same trajectory as the above discussion. This section will trace the contours of Christian responses among Catholics and Protestants in Vietnam. Just like the missionaries in China, responses in Vietnam have been made with little input from local Christians and based on a simplified and western distinction between the rites' religious and civil meanings.

Catholic Responses in Vietnam

Attitudes among Catholics towards ancestral rites in Vietnam largely mirrored the events of the Chinese Rites Controversy. Portuguese Dominican and Spanish Franciscan missionaries had already arrived in Vietnam during the first half of the 16th century, but it was the famous Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes who is credited with making the first significant strides with missions in Cochinchina (today's southern Vietnam) and later in Tonkin (today's northern Vietnam) in the first half of the 17th century. His ministry in Vietnam overlapped with many of the early events of the Chinese Rites Controversy. A gifted linguist committed to understanding local culture, de Rhodes' ministry in Vietnam was interrupted numerous times by political

tensions between local leaders, colonial powers, and missionaries. For example, his first stay in Cochinchina (1624–1626) was cut short when he and other missionaries were expelled by the local Lord, who accused the missionaries of abandoning the ancestors.[50] The same charge was leveled against him during his second sojourn in Cochinchina (1640–1645) some 20 years later. Though de Rhodes, like many Jesuits in China, was sympathetic to local customs and rites, he saw ancestral rites in Vietnam as largely superstitious. However, "rather than simply ridiculing these superstitious customs, he was solicitous to replace them with practices acceptable to the Christian faith, lest the Christians be accused of failing in the most sacred duty of filial piety."[51] These alternatives included prayers for the dead, votive masses, Christianized rituals for the Lunar New Year, and more.

While early Catholic missionaries in Vietnam like de Rhodes were more tolerant of ancestral practices, later missionaries who worked in the wake of *Ex illa die* (1715) and *Ex quo singulari* (1742) were far less permissive. Ancestral rites and other cultural and religious practices were monitored and/or banned.[52] This did not sit well with Vietnamese authorities, who often used it as an excuse to attack Christians and Christianity. The tensions only heightened when authorities later associated Catholicism with French colonialism.[53] The late-19th and early-20th centuries were a difficult time for Catholics in Vietnam, who were caught between growing discontent with colonial powers and the growing revolutionary movement. Some were martyred, and many more were persecuted. This resulted in the great migration of Catholics after the

[50] Peter Phan explains that there were international trade dynamics that lay behind de Rhodes' expulsion, but nonetheless it is instructive that opposition to ancestral rites was used as the pretense. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 47–48.

[51] Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 95.

[52] Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 82.

[53] Charles Keith shows how authorities made these associations. Keith, *Catholic Vietnam*.

Geneva Conference of 1954, in which hundreds of thousands of Catholics fled to the south to escape persecution at the hands of the atheistic socialist movement that had formally taken hold of the north.

At roughly the same time as socialism was establishing itself in northern Vietnam, the events in Japan (described above) prompted a change in attitude about ancestral rites in Rome, culminating in *Plane compertum est* in 1939. Twenty-five years later, the Vietnamese bishops applied to ecclesial authorities to implement the instruction in Vietnam.[54] In June 1964, the ecclesial authorities in Vietnam issued instructions for the introduction of the veneration of ancestors, heroes, and war dead. These were expanded upon in 1974 and again in 2019, with the latter document giving concrete guidance on ancestral veneration in a wide variety of liturgical contexts, including regular masses, weddings, and funerals.[55] In this author's experience, this tolerance has been popularized, with most Catholic homes today retaining an altar, upon which Jesus, Mary, and other saints share space with the ancestors.

Protestant Responses in Vietnam

Though the issue of ancestral veneration has a long history in Roman Catholicism, it did not become significant for Protestantism until the late 19th century, when the China Inland Mission (CIM) first sent missionaries to Asia. Ancestral veneration was highlighted as a key issue at the First (1877) and Second (1890) Conference of Protestant Missionaries in China, which included missionary representatives from CIM and other Protestant organizations, though

[54] Phan, "Culture and Liturgy," 421–22.

[55] For the full text of these instructions, see Hội đồng Giám mục Việt Nam, Ủy Ban Văn Hóa [Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, Committee on Culture], "Hương Dẫn Việc Tôn Kính Tổ Tiên [Guidelines for the Veneration of Ancestors]" (Nhà Xuất Bản Tôn Giáo, 2019).

not even a single Chinese representative.[56] David Lim describes how some initially argued for tolerance,[57] but their opinions were countered by influential missionaries like Hudson Taylor of CIM, who vehemently argued for the idolatrous nature of the rites.[58] "The conference ended with the overwhelming victory of those who opposed 'ancestor worship.'"[59] Though the issue has re-emerged for discussion over the years,[60] a rejectionist posture is still pervasive among most Protestant groups. While ancestral veneration has, among Roman Catholics, sparked prolific amount of writing over long distances in a dispute that spans centuries among Roman Catholics, the debate has been comparatively muted and short-lived among Protestants.

Unsurprisingly, then, when the Christian and Missionary Alliance began mission work in Vietnam in 1911, the missionaries took a rigid iconoclastic stance against ancestral rites. The missionary periodical of the time, *The Call of French Indochina and East Siam*, provides a rich resource to illustrate. In a 1930 issue, D.I. Jeffrey writes about the mission in Huế,

> Our hearts are saddened as we see how bound they are to their heathenish customs. Only the mighty power of God can break them loose. Practically every family has a private altar both outside and inside their home. Here the incense is kept burning, and here we have often seen the Buddhist priest kneeling as he chants out prayers to the spirits of the departed ancestors from that family.[61]

Her sentiments presume that the "heathenish" customs are incompatible with Christian faith. On this basis, ancestral altars were removed from homes upon conversion. Another issue reports the

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[56] Lim, "Ancestor Veneration and Family Conversion," 190.

[57] This included missionaries from Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and other Protestant traditions. Lim, "Contextualizing Ancestor Veneration," 112.

[58] This organization was founded by Hudson Taylor (1832–1905) and today is known as OMF International.

[59] Lim, "Contextualizing Ancestor Veneration," 112.

[60] Most notable was the consultation on the issue which took place in 1983. For a record of its papers, and the resulting working document which largely retains a rejectionist stance (though admittedly softer than early 20th-century approaches), see Bong Rin Ro, ed., *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices* (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1985).

[61] D.I. Jeffrey, "Huế - The Capital of Annam," *The Call of French Indochina and East Siam*, 1930, 6, https://cdn.cmalliance.org/archives/downloads/indo-china/indo-china-1930-07.pdf.

story of the conversion of the last member of the Vu family in Kien An province. Upon conversion, "the altar which had hitherto held the place of honor in the home was taken down and destroyed, and later on the words of the doxology given the prominent place." Directly after this quote, the writer then associates the taking down of the altar with evidence of faith. "Having ample proof of the genuineness of Mr. and Mrs. Vu's conversion, at their request they were baptized a few months later, and their children dedicated to the Lord."[62] There is a black and white dualism explicit in the early missionaries' approach, that sees ancestral altars as tools of Satan. For example, in an article entitled "Satan Defeated—Gospel Triumphs!," after recounting the removal of the ancestral altar from one converted family's home, one missionary writes, "This family had recently stepped out on the Lord's side and wished to clear out everything belonging to the evil one."[63] This stark dualism sees no positive value in ancestor veneration. There is no middle ground, nor any nuanced discussion about the ancestral rites and their meanings. Reginald Reimer summarizes well the results of these early missionaries' posture: "Early Protestantism in Vietnam came sometimes to bear the epithet *dao bo ong bo ba* [*đạo bỏ ông bỏ bà*], or 'the religion that discards the ancestors.'"[64]

So central was the issue of ancestor veneration, and so entrenched was a rejectionist stance, that it was treated in the Constitution of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam of 1936. In a section listing the qualifications for church membership, the Constitution stipulated that a member "must not take part in ancestor worship, spirit worship, and various superstitions."[65] Le Phu Hoang

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[62] H. Curwen Smith, "Doxology Replaces Ancestral Altar!," *The Call of French Indochina and East Siam*, 1931, 15, https://cdn.cmalliance.org/archives/downloads/indo-china/indo-china-1931-07.pdf.

[63] J.J. Van Hine, "Satan Defeated - Gospel Triumphs!," *The Call of French Indochina and East Siam*, 1933, 10, https://cdn.cmalliance.org/archives/downloads/indo-china/indo-china-1932-10.pdf.

[64] Reimer, *Vietnam's Christians*, 32.

[65] This is the English text of the revised 1958 re-printing. Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam, *Điều Lệ Của Hội*

notes that this initial constitution was largely drafted by foreign missionaries with only a perfunctory inclusion of a local committee that was afforded little opportunity to give substantial input.[66] Just as the early Vietnamese Roman Catholic approaches were shaped by foreign missionaries, Quynh-Hoa Le Nguyen argues that "conversion stories dated in the early days of evangelical Vietnamese Christianity point to the role of the first [Christian & Missionary] Alliance missionaries in institutionalizing the Vietnamese Christian view on ancestor worship."[67] The broad rejection of ancestral rites by the first Protestant missionaries has had significant consequences on the later approaches of Vietnamese Protestants themselves.

Though a century has passed, recent research shows the situation has hardly changed. Documented responses (e.g., church constitutions, doctrinal statements, curriculums, published treatises, etc.) are very rare, likely due to the cultural and political sensitivity of the issue. Instead, most teaching on the issue happens orally. Fortunately, a few recent studies have focused on Protestant Christians, showing the persistence of a rejectionist stance to ancestor veneration among Protestants in Vietnam. Quynh-Hoa Le Nguyen's study included interviews of forty-two lay evangelical Christians in southern Vietnam, all of whom rejected ancestor veneration. Through interviews of Christians across different ages, Nguyen observes how the rejection of ancestral veneration has been institutionalized over decades, becoming a key feature

Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam [Constitution of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam], rev. ed., 1958, 6–7. Interestingly, the Vietnamese text of the same re-printing does not directly reference the ancestors. It reads, "[A member] should not participate in activities like incense, offerings, and superstitions." Though Vietnamese readers would have understood this as referring to ancestors, the discrepancy between the English and Vietnamese versions of the text probably reflects two realities. First, the English text reflects the way the young Vietnamese church was beholden to missionary influence. Second, the Vietnamese text reflects the awareness of ancestors as a sensitive issue culturally. Today's Constitution of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North), meanwhile, does not address the issue at all, probably due to cultural sensitivity. See Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam (Miền Bắc), "Hiến Chương Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam (Miền Bắc) [The Constitution of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North)]," 2013.

[66] Le, "Short History" 179.

[67] Nguyen, "Tin Lành," 172.

of evangelical identity: "Evangelical Vietnamese Christians define and separate themselves from other Vietnamese by refusing to participate in ancestor worship.[68] She details how Vietnamese Christians ground their refusal of ancestor veneration on biblical principles, noting the First Commandment as a key source. Nonetheless, these Christians do attempt to construct a Christian version of filial piety based on the Fourth Commandment. "For evangelical Vietnamese Christians, filial piety exists in the form of purely moral conduct within the family."[69] Unfortunately, these attempts have not been successful in changing the public image of Vietnamese evangelicals. Despite their efforts, "refusal to participate in ancestor worship appears not only anti-cultural but also anti-social."[70] As a result, this longstanding and dogged refusal "marginalizes them and makes their morality suspicious to non-Christians in Vietnamese society."[71]

More recently still, Joan M. Wise's thorough ethnographic study, including interviews of Vietnamese evangelicals and Vietnamese non-Christians, totaling over 80 interviews, confirms the predominance of a rejectionist stance. Of particular concern is the Vietnamese evangelical refusal to eat food offered to ancestors, which puts Christians in a "terrible quandary, not only in terms of social courtesies dictated by Vietnamese society, but also seen as lacking in filial piety (*bất hiếu*), and a serious deficit of moral duty to one's ancestors."[72] Nonetheless, Wise quotes one Vietnamese evangelical who insists that "those who continue to worship and eat the offerings, don't seem to be real Christians."[73] This indicates that refusal of ancestor veneration is

[68] Nguyen, "Tin Lành," 171.

[69] Nguyen, "Tin Lành," 181.

[70] Nguyen, "Tin Lành," 194.

[71] Nguyen, "Tin Lành," 194.

[72] Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 104.

[73] Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 106.

not only a defining feature of Vietnamese evangelicalism, but also a dividing line between those who practice Christianity authentically and those who do not. Persecution because of a refusal to participate in ancestral veneration "demonstrates to the Christian community that the new believer has a genuine faith."[74] Nonetheless, Wise does describe how many evangelicals find creative ways, through avoidance tactics, negotiated behavior, or small accommodations, to temper the social dislocation that they experience.[75]

Most fascinating is Wise's observation of Vietnamese evangelicals who reject ancestral veneration based on assumed meanings and beliefs that do not always reflect reality. For example, "most [Vietnamese evangelicals] simply assumed that all members of non-Christian families believed in the presence of ancestors," when in fact, "non-[Vietnamese evangelical] contributors differed on ancestral presence" during ancestral veneration.[76] She discusses a senior pastor, who mentioned that common people believe that refusal to participate in ancestral rites will bring misfortune, necessitating clear teaching from the church. But in reality, "no non-[Vietnamese evangelical] contributors in this study mentioned this issue at all."[77] These stories indicate that even Vietnamese evangelicals lack a nuanced understanding of the meanings of ancestor veneration among non-Christian Vietnamese. Wise also notes how "rational empiricism gives psychological weight to [Vietnamese evangelicals'] case that [ancestral] rites must be avoided at all costs."[78] One wonders if the lack of nuanced understanding, and the overtly rational basis of their argumentation, indicates a vestige of the foreign missionary influence that

[74] Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 120. Wise also discusses some outliers who do not follow a rejectionist stance but who either do so secretly or are seen as disingenuous in their faith by others. See pp. 120–23.

[75] Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 116–17; 124–26.

[76] Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 110.

[77] Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 112.

[78] Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 113.

has been noted above as contributing significantly to original Protestant responses to ancestral veneration.

Though it focuses on an ethnic minority group, which is outside this study's purview, Tâm T.T. Ngô's study of Protestantism among the Hmong ethnic group is still illustrative of current Protestant responses to ancestor veneration, for the Hmong are the most evangelized minority group in all of Vietnam. Her study's discussion of this issue has many parallels with Protestantism among the *Kinh* ethnic majority. The study begins with the story of Mr. Gi.[79] After spending a decade as a Christian, Mr. Gi returned to his ancestral practices, causing persistent conflict in his nuclear family, all of whom are Christian.[80] Originally, Protestantism was introduced to the Hmong through radio broadcasts of the US-based Far East Broadcasting Company. As networks were established to get Hmong language materials into the country, these materials, along with the broadcasts themselves, instructed listeners on "how to conduct rituals to burn ancestral altars."[81] Mr. Gi's story of returning to the ancestors exemplifies the tensions between the "old" traditions of ancestral veneration and the "new way" of Christian faith. For the Hmong, conversion is not merely a change of religion but has implications for relationships with the state, with kin, and with the ancestors themselves. These stories of deconversion "are rooted in a belief in the indissoluble bond with ancestors among the non-converts and deconverted alike."[82]

In the academy, some Protestant scholars are arguing for approaches to ancestral veneration that move beyond a rejectionist stance. Most common is the call to create functional

[79] According to Ngo, one-third of the Hmong in Vietnam have become Christian since the introduction of Protestantism in 1980 through radio broadcasts. Tâm T.T. Ngô, *New Way*, 4.

[80] Mr. Gi's story recurs throughout the book, but for the main contours, see Tâm T.T. Ngô, *New Way*, 3–5.

[81] Tâm T.T. Ngô, *The New Way*, 51.

[82] Tâm T.T. Ngô, *The New Way*, 13.

substitutes or Christian alternatives to ancestral rites.[83] Henry Phan developed functional substitutes for various elements of ancestor veneration for the sake of a Vietnamese congregation in the United States.[84] For example, he suggested alternatives to an altar, including inscribing the family genealogy on a Bible and displaying pictures of deceased ancestors, along with Scripture references, in prominent places in the home. Regarding the death anniversary, he suggests helping financially with the upkeep of the family grave, placing memorial flowers at church, and the use of an annual memorial ceremony. He argues, "if Vietnamese Christians establish a culturally sensitive, outward display of respect and provide the proper biblical honor to deceased ancestors, behavioral change will take effect in family members who practice ancestor worship."[85]

Joan M. Wise labels this approach "replacement theology" and finds it unsuitable for use in Vietnam because it is based on a rejectionist framework that assumes idolatrous meanings in ancestor veneration. Instead, Wise argues for a "fulfillment theology" which "demands that one see God working in the hearts and minds of Vietnamese people through the ages."[86] In other words, the fulfillment model recognizes cultural values or forms that are fulfilled by God's special revelation in Jesus Christ. Wise identifies filial piety as the supreme Vietnamese virtue through which God has been working through the centuries in Vietnam, which finds its truest fulfillment when it is expressed to God as the ultimate source of all things. She also recognizes Vietnamese evangelicals' practice of the Lord's Supper as a performance of filiality. "The form

[83] Henry H. Phan, "The Development of a Model for Training Vietnamese Christians to Respond to Family Members Who Are Involved in Ancestor Worship Practices" (DMin diss., Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, 1996), 99–101; Reimer, "Religious Dimension," 155; Bong Rin Ro, *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices*.

[84] Phan, "Model for Training Vietnamese Christians," 113–19.

[85] Phan, "Model for Training Vietnamese Christians," 32.

[86] Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 237.

of the enactment of the [Lord's Supper] ritual as an act of worship is also a powerful expression of filiality … as a response to Jesus' command: 'Do this in remembrance of me.'"[87] In sum, whereas those who propose functional substitutes remain skeptical about the inherent value of local cultural forms, the fulfillment model sees them as a valid starting point for theologizing.

For a few scholars, however, even a fulfillment theology does not go far enough. While Wise recognizes the Lord's Supper as an example of fulfilment theology, Kimson Nguyen recognizes its limits. "Ontologically, the Vietnamese cannot understand why Vietnamese evangelicals celebrate the death of Jesus (as in the Lord's Supper) in their regular worship, but do not do so with their own ancestors."[88] He argues for a more accommodative posture that sees ancestor veneration as a "beautiful tradition that God has given us," one which "does point to God's commandments," and therefore should "become a culturally, theologically, and biblically appropriate practice for Vietnamese evangelicals."[89] Henry Smith, who researched ancestor veneration in Hong Kong, also argues for an accommodative approach that "affirms ancestral rites as valid expressions of human needs and social relationships."[90]

Vince Le has also observed evangelical scholars who are more critical of early missionaries and more appreciative of Vietnamese traditional culture, but he is skeptical of these attempts at the "Vietnamization of the faith." Le is quick to point out these scholars have "emerged from within the theological academy in the United States" rather than being home-grown thinkers.[91] Meanwhile, non-Christian political actors have, as discussed in Chapter Two, endeavored to

[87] Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 196.

[88] Nguyen, *Cultural Integration and the Gospel*, 229.

[89] Nguyen, *Cultural Integration and the Gospel*, 229.

[90] Smith, "Typology of Christian Responses," 646.

[91] Le, *Vietnamese Evangelicals and Pentecostalism*, 19.

counter Christianity's rise by promoting cultural adaptation in the church, specifically with regards to ancestral veneration. In Le's view, however, these seemingly harmless encouragements mask a true intent to "channel evangelical energy into an activity that will not upset the *status quo* or challenge the privilege of the powerful."[92] In reality, however, neither evangelical scholars' nor political actors' attempts to Vietnamize the faith have taken root in the lives of ordinary evangelicals, because, according to Le, their notions of conversion do not reflect the grassroots experience of conversion, which is focused more on "miraculous divine deliverance or divine comfort in the midst of personal crisis or suffering."[93]

Conclusion: Meaning as Fluid and Plural

At the center of the Chinese Rites Controversy, and by extension the Christian responses to ancestral veneration in Vietnam, is the question of the meaning of the rites themselves. The discussion above has attempted to show how difficult it is to pinpoint meaning in practice. At various points in history, the meaning of the rites was found either *behind* the rites in the intentions of their authors or *in* the rites themselves as practiced. In the case of the former, rites were helpfully connected to their origins but sometimes at the expense of the reality of the rites as practiced. The latter acknowledged the power of the rites to shape the religious consciousness of the people but only at a shallow level that led to onerous questions and endless distinctions.

[92] Le, *Vietnamese Evangelicals and Pentecostalism*, 65. Tâm T.T. Ngô notes a similar phenomenon among the Hmong. Whereas previously the state aimed to eradicate "backwards" religious practices like ancestral veneration, state cadres today are "encouraging and promoting the revival of what they see as traditional Hmong religion to turn it into a bulwark against Protestantism." Tâm T.T. Ngô, *New Way*, 135.

[93] Le, *Vietnamese Evangelicals and Pentecostalism*, 67. Simon Chan argues a similar point from a broad Chinese perspective in Simon Chan, "Asian Christian Spirituality in Primal Religious Contexts," in *Walking with God: Christian Spirituality in the Asian Context*, ed. Charles R. Ringma and Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest (Manila: OMF Literature; Asia Theological Seminary, 2014), 32–52. See also Truong Van Thien Tu, "Menh Troi: Toward a Vietnamese Theology of Mission" (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2009), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

While there was a laudable effort among 20th-century Catholics to understand the meaning *made* of the rites by authorities, there was never adequate input from the everyday Christians who made meaning of the rites. Protestant responses have only repeated this mistake and have been based on an all-or-nothing designation of the rites' idolatrous nature.

A complete discussion of the meaning of the rites will not consider one of these locations of meaning but *all* of them. Minamiki asserts, "Only from this total complex viewpoint can the diverse meanings fit into the picture of the whole and aid us in the true understanding of the rites."[94] Even as this study agrees with Minamiki's exhortation to include local voices, it also affirms that a "true" understanding of the rites will always be illusive because meaning is fluid and plural. Recognizing this only highlights the need for careful deliberation *that is led by Asian Christians themselves*. Minamiki agrees, lamenting that "the native Catholics—for whom the decisions on the rites were made—were not directly involved in the making of the decisions."[95] Luttio pushes further, calling rites "an issue for Chinese Christians themselves to grapple with and determine if in any way the rites pose a problem/threat to their Chinese Christian identity."[96] The same could be said of the Vietnamese. Putting local Vietnamese at the center of the conversation protects against a discussion in foreign categories and ensures that "an ongoing dialogue is taking place between text and context" that results in the creation of a truly local theology.[97] It is this gap that inspires this study's method.

[94] Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 211.

[95] Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 253.

[96] Luttio, "Chinese Rites Controversy," 311–12.

[97] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniv. ed., American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 437.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Introduction

What do ancestral rites mean to those who practice them? This is not an easy question to answer, as Chapters Two and Three have shown. This study will not arrive at a single answer; rather, recognizing the plurality and fluidity of the meanings of ancestral rites in the minds of the practitioners, this study aims to describe the matrix of meanings that contemporary Vietnamese make of these practices. This author is not the only one to recognize the need for such research. In a chapter on continuing struggles with the issue of ancestral veneration in Christian mission, Alex G. Smith exhorts, "Serious socio-anthropological, theological and missiological investigations provide data on the current beliefs about ancestor worship."[1] Because beliefs about ancestors are not static but rather in constant motion, fresh data and thoughtful analysis is beneficial for the church's ongoing response.

To achieve its goal, this study does not resort to classic writings about or ancient descriptions of the rites (ala the Jesuits) nor to a detailed study of the minutia of the performance of the rites (ala the Dominicans). Nor does it consult a political or ecclesial official who can offer an authoritative interpretation (ala the Roman Catholic Church in the 20th century). Instead, the study engages precisely those who have been left out of the discussions: Vietnamese themselves. The data should come from those closest to the issue itself: practitioners of ancestral veneration. For this reason, Smith goes on to urge, "Interview unchurched folks especially."[2] While recent

[1] Alex G. Smith, "The Struggle of Asian Ancestor Veneration," in *Family and Faith in Asia: The Missional Impact of Social Networks*, SEANET (Pasadena, 2010), 181.

[2] Smith, "Struggle of Asian Ancestor Veneration," 182.

studies have begun to describe the attitudes towards and practices of ancestor veneration among Protestants,[3] this study seeks to understand ancestral rites from the perspective of those who have not yet converted to Christianity. Data from non-Christian practitioners provides a more accurate view of the complex of meanings of ancestral veneration among the wider population and thus occasions a more appropriate Christian response. The core of this study, then, is in-person interviews with non-Christian practitioners of ancestral rites.

This qualitative study proceeded through three broad phases. The first phase included an initial survey (completed online) to provide preliminary indications of ancestral rites' meanings, gather basic demographic data, determine eligibility for an in-person interview, and thus recruit a pool of potential interviewees. From this initial survey, phase two selected a random sample of 10 respondents for an in-person interview with the researcher and an assistant. These interviews probed the meanings ancestral rites hold for interviewees by asking about their practices, motivations, beliefs, hopes, and values. Finally, in phase three the interviewees' responses were transcribed, coded, and analyzed so that patterns and trends could be identified, with the aim of suggesting a complex of meanings for ancestral rites. The following sections will describe these phases and their procedures in more detail.

Population Sampling

Recruitment

Recruitment for the overall study began with a short initial survey completed online. Participants for this survey were recruited largely by convenience, utilizing the researcher's established networks in Vietnam. Via a shareable link, the researcher invited the participation of

[3] See Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation"; Nguyen, "Tin Lành."

those with whom he had a relationship and who he thought would have valuable input. Further, he asked them to forward it to others in their networks (e.g., siblings, parents, colleagues, friends, etc.). It began with a required consent form (see Appendix One) that was agreed to by all respondents before they could move forward in the survey.

Interviews

For the interview phase of the study, a random sample of about 10 participants was selected from the pool of respondents to the online survey. There were five non-negotiable criteria for being interviewed. First, participants must have completed the initial survey, in which they indicated their willingness to be interviewed. Second, they must be ethnic majority Vietnamese (*Kinh*) and reside in Vietnam.[4] While the ancestral practices of ethnic minorities or the Vietnamese diaspora spread throughout the world would be ripe groups for research, the influences of different cultures and environment on these groups would skew the data in this project. Therefore, this study focused on ancestral veneration as practiced in Vietnam by the ethnic majority. Third, participants must be 18 years old. Though a study of children's views regarding ancestral veneration would be interesting, this study's use of interviews was better suited to adult participants who could more easily articulate their views on concrete practices and abstract concepts. Fourth, the participant must have an ancestral altar at their home. The term "home" was used broadly to refer either to where they reside or to an extended family member's residence where the family's ancestral altar is housed. Finally, interviewees were limited to those who interact with the altar at least monthly.[5] As Creswell and Poth have written, "It is essential

[4] Vietnam recognizes more than 50 distinct ethnic minorities. As of 2019, the ethnic majority makes up 85.3% of the population. General Statistics Office, *Completed Results of the 2019 Viet Nam Population and Housing Census* (Hanoi: Statistical, 2020), 43–45.

[5] An "interaction" is defined broadly. It might include any one of the following: arranging the altar, cleaning

that all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied."[6] The study desired to speak with those who interact with the ancestral altar as a regular part of their lives, since they have more experience to draw from when describing the meanings the rites have for them.

Selected interviewees were contacted by the researcher via email (see Appendix Two) to inform them of their selection. The letter also informed them that a research assistant would contact them on the phone to arrange a time and venue for the interview. The interviews began with a review and signing of the informed consent form (see Appendix Three).

Data Collection Procedures

Initial Survey

The initial survey (see Appendix Four) asked basic questions about the participant: gender, age, location, education, income, and religious affiliation. These demographic questions provided critical information that aided in understanding the interviewees relative to the Vietnamese population, as well as suggesting some initial data that can be distinguished according to various demographic factors.[7] The survey then asked about the respondents' engagement with ancestral veneration. First, it established that they have an ancestral altar in their home. It then asked their frequency of interaction with the ancestral altar.[8] The survey also asked them to identify some broad reasons for their engagement with the ancestral altar. For this question, the respondent was able to choose from a pre-written list of options, along with a choice for "other" that they could fill in themselves. The pre-written choices reflected the

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the altar, bowing at the altar, making food or other offerings at the altar, praying at the altar, or gathering purposefully at the altar.

[6] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 255.

[7] See Chapter Five for a discussion of these results.

[8] See note 5 above for a definition of "interacting" at the altar.

findings of a broad spectrum of anthropological research (outlined in Chapter Two) specifically related to ancestral veneration. The purpose of this question was to provide baseline indications about the motivations people hold for engaging the ancestors. These initial indications helped refine the content of the interview protocol. Finally, the initial survey asked respondents if they were willing to be interviewed about their activities and beliefs related to ancestral practice. If they were willing, contact information was collected.

Interviews

For those randomly selected by the researcher according to the sampling procedures outlined above, the research assistant worked with the interviewee to find a suitable time and location.[9] The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese by the researcher, along with the presence of a Vietnamese research assistant for language support. The interviews were audio recorded, using the phone of the researcher, after consent was received for both the interview and the audio recording. Interviews then proceeded according to the pre-established semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix Five). The interviews included 5 core questions:

1. Tell me about your regular activities at the family altar.
2. What are some reasons you interact with the family altar?
3. In what ways do ancestral rites benefit the ancestor?
4. In what ways do ancestral rites benefit you?
5. To what extent do you want your children to participate, and why?

Within each of these five core questions are several probes, which the researcher utilized when interviewees had trouble articulating their thoughts, when the core questions did not yield helpful

[9] Because the researcher wants the interviewees to feel free to speak, letting them choose a comfortable and familiar location was wise. However, when scheduling, the research assistant noted the importance of locations that are quiet enough for easy recording.

answers, or when there was extra time. The questions were meant to be broad and open-ended, giving participants a canvas on which to describe their practices and beliefs.[10]

Confidentiality, Privacy, and Security

The researcher is committed to safeguarding the private information of participants. Any personally identifiable information participants provided in the initial survey or in the interview, such as name and contact information, was kept strictly confidential. After the survey and interviews, all data was anonymized, i.e., personally identifiable information was disassociated from participants' responses. Further, in this dissertation, and in any other written reports or publications, names are not used in order to protect identities. The researcher utilized a transcription service for the purpose of data analysis. GoTranscript follows industry-standard security practices to safeguard personal information.[11] Moreover, the researcher has kept these data, including survey responses and interview recordings, in a password protected (with two-factor authentication) cloud service in Microsoft OneDrive that only the researcher and research supervisor have access to. The researcher will only use these data for the purposes expressly outlined in the consent form. They will not be used for any other reason without the participants' express permission obtained through another consent form. These data will be kept for seven years, after which time they will be destroyed.

Responsibilities of the Researcher

This study included several procedures to ensure that the researcher was adequately aware of his responsibilities to the project and its participants, and was prepared to fulfill them. The

[10] "The more open-ended the questioning, the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life setting." Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 58.

[11] GoTranscript, "Security & Trust at GoTranscript," https://gotranscript.com/security.

researcher was trained in qualitative research methods via required coursework at Concordia Seminary and Covenant Seminary. Further, he received certification for human subject research by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative group. Moreover, the researcher went through an intensive review process through Concordia Seminary's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that the study meets the highest ethical and legal standards. The IRB reviewed the study's purpose and methods, including a detailed review of consent forms, surveys, protocols, and safeguards. No contact of any kind with participants was permitted until the IRB granted approval.

Methodological Approach

The question of ancestral rites and their meaning is an example of the difficulties of contextualization in Christian mission. A recent term for an age-old concept, missiologist A. Scott Moreau defines contextualization as, "the process whereby Christians adapt the forms, content, and praxis of the Christian faith so as to communicate it to the minds and hearts of people with other cultural backgrounds."[12] Contextualization, then, takes seriously both the universality of the Christian message and the particularity of the local context in which that message is proclaimed and lived out. While contextualization recognizes that "all cultural forms that distinguish and define human life and experience are *in principle* worthy of bearing the truth of Christianity" (italics mine),[13] tension occurs when the demands of the gospel seem to conflict with cultural norms and values. Which cultural norms are compatible with the gospel? Which

[12] Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, 36. For a basic introduction to the concept, see pp. 32–36.

[13] Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed., American Society of Missiology Series 42 (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009), 74.

will be discarded? Negotiating that tension is the heart of contextualization and is precisely what is at stake in the discussion of ancestral rites.

In his influential work, Roman Catholic theologian Stephen B. Bevans mapped six (non-exclusive) models for contextualization.[14] In some ways this study fits into his "anthropological" model because, in prioritizing local voices through the use of interviews, "the starting point … is … present human experience, with a particular focus on human culture, secular or religious."[15] Indeed, in its insistence on probing the meanings that Vietnamese construct for themselves about ancestral rites, this study agrees that "the experience of the ordinary cultural subject, the ordinary person, is where one must look."[16] Nonetheless, even while embracing local culture as a valid starting point for theology, this study remains committed to a supracultural Christian message that also acts on human culture. Even when human experience is the starting point for local theology, Scripture, and by extension the *regula fidei*, provide the normative or "grounding point" for the process of contextualization.[17] This "tethered" approach protects against a contextualization in which Christianity loses its internal integrity. By maintaining commitments both to the priority of particular context and universal *kerygma*, this study is ultimately most aligned with Bevans' synthetic model, which is "a synthesis of all the other models … it tries to preserve the importance of the gospel message and the heritage of traditional doctrinal

[14] Bevans' models are: the *translation* model, which starts with divine revelation and seeks to contextually plant it in a locality. The *anthropological* model, by contrast, starts with the local context to find hints of God's activity and revelation, and then relates that to Scripture. The *praxis* model focuses on the lived practice of the faith, with particular regard for the gospel's call to social change. The *synthetic* model, incorporates elements of each of the above for a balanced whole. The *transcendental* model prioritizes the subjective experience of individuals in appropriating the Christian message. Finally, the *counter-cultural* model emphasizes the ways the gospel judges and upends all contexts it encounters. See Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. and exp. ed., Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002).

[15] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 57.

[16] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 58.

[17] A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualizing the Faith: A Holistic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 205.

formulations while at the same time acknowledging the vital role that context has played and can play in theology, even to the setting of the theological agenda."[18]

This study's approach also fits within anthropologist/missiologist Paul Hiebert's model of critical contextualization.[19] For Hiebert, the process of contextualization necessarily begins not with the exegesis of Scripture or doctrinal formulations, but rather with an emic exegesis of culture.[20] Only after local practices have been understood in their own context are they evaluated in light of Scripture. Hiebert also emphasizes the priority of local voices throughout the process, especially when it comes to critically evaluating cultural practices and developing contextualized responses. But he also finds important roles for missionaries and other etic influences, particularly in helping local believers understand their own cultures phenomenologically and connecting those learnings to Scripture.[21] In this way locals and foreigners alike form an "international hermeneutical community" that serves as an important protection against both cultural bias and syncretism.[22] This study, then, contributes to the international hermeneutical community that is engaging this process of critical contextualization with regards to ancestral rites in Vietnam.

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[18] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 89.

[19] In the wake of colonial noncontextualization and postcolonial uncritical contextualization, Hiebert proposes critical contextualization, comprising four steps: (1) exegesis of the culture, (2) exegesis of Scripture, (3) critical response, and (4) new contextualized practices. See Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 75–92.

[20] This missiological procedure is gaining prominence even among those who write from and for the American church in a secularizing society. For example, see William A. Dyrness, *How Does America Hear the Gospel?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). More recently, see Paul M. Gould, *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).

[21] Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 88–89.

[22] Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 91.

Research Methodology

Qualitative methods are appropriate for this study precisely because they focus on "the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study."[23] This approach is critical to the study's goal to engage local voices that, as Chapter Three showed, were repeatedly left out of the discussion of Christian responses to ancestral veneration. Interviews are a key feature of this study because they allow participants to describe their experiences, values, and beliefs in their own words and ways. Instead of the researcher fitting responses into pre-determined categories, the responses themselves are the raw data from which categories are constructed. The flow is from the particular to the general, from the individual to the group. This "ground-up" approach to research values the unique perspectives of each participant even as it seeks to find patterns and trends in aggregate. As Matthew Engelking writes, "Anthropology has always worked at the intersection of nature and culture, the universal and the particular, patterns and diversity, similarities and differences."[24]

Using Creswell and Poth's five approaches to qualitative research, this study has most in common with the phenomenological approach, which "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experience of a concept or a phenomenon."[25] This form of inquiry usually involves interviews with those who experience the phenomenon under question in order to discover a common essential meaning to the phenomenon that all interviewees share. In this case, the phenomenon under question is ancestral veneration. However, this study does not seek to arrive at a single universal essence of its meaning but rather to describe its plurality of meanings. This goal fits within Creswell's grounded-theory approach, in which "the inquirer

[23] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 44.

[24] Matthew Engelke, *How to Think Like an Anthropologist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 3.

[25] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 134.

generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants."[26] This approach also uses interviews as its main data source. Of course, this study's small sample size cannot yield a fully developed theory, but nonetheless it can suggest a general map of how participants describe the meanings they make of ancestral rites. As Howard Becker writes, the goal "is not to prove, beyond doubt, the existence of particular relationships so much as it is to *describe* a system of relationships, to show how things hang together in a web of mutual influence or support or interdependence."[27]

Data Analysis

Data Analysis During Data Collection

Initial data analysis was conducted even as interviews proceeded. The researcher wrote in his journal during interviews, noting key or repeated phrases, trends or patterns, etc. Notes from the first interviews were analyzed by the researcher to get an initial sense of the data being generated. These initial indications suggested to the researcher interview questions that needed to be discarded or refined to better yield relevant information. In this way, the interview protocol changed slightly during the interview process. Moreover, even from the first interviews, the researcher looked for patterns and trends that could form the categories of meaning made of ancestral rites. Creswell and Poth describe the researcher "constantly comparing data gleaned from participants with ideas about the emerging theory. The process consists of going back and forth between the participants, gathering new interviews, and then returning to the evolving theory."[28] In this approach, interviews typically cease when discovered categories become

[26] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 144.

[27] Howard S. Becker, "The Epistemology of Qualitative Research," in *Contemporary Field Methods: Perspectives and Formulations*, ed. Robert Emerson, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2001), 319.

[28] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 146.

"saturated," i.e., no new information is being revealed. In this case, after looking at the data from 10 interviews, the researcher felt that saturation had been achieved.

Coding

After interviews were completed and transcribed, coding was the central method for aggregating and making sense of the data. Responses were combed through to identify major units of meaning, along with sub-units that emerged. Those units were then related to each other in whatever ways the data permitted. In other words, coding revealed the broad categories of meaning that respondents make of ancestral rites. It also revealed how those categories relate to each other qualitatively. For example, some meanings came to the fore as primary while others faded to the background, e.g., respondents spoke much more about the role of family in ancestral veneration than about metaphysical beliefs. Some meanings were situational, e.g., some respondents indicated that they participated in ancestor veneration before an exam or a business venture. In other cases, meanings were important for some interviewees but not others, e.g., some interviewees did not focus at all on securing benefits for themselves or the ancestors. These categories and their interrelations are the basis on which broad themes of meanings for ancestral rites are traced in Chapter Five.

Assumptions, Limitations and Role of Researcher

The preface to Robert Emerson's book, *Contemporary Field Research*, highlights "the reflexive turn in ethnography—the recognition that fieldwork itself is a social phenomenon, inescapably part of the very social worlds it seeks to discover, describe, and analyze."[29] The myth of objectivity has been busted, and researchers themselves are now recognized as inextricably

[29] Emerson, *Contemporary Field Research*, vii.

tied up in the studies they design and implement. This realization should not only be acknowledged but also accounted for in the design of the research itself. As practitioners of qualitative research that utilizes ethnographic methods, it is wholly appropriate that researchers reflect critically and forthrightly on their own role in the research process. In what specific ways and at what points does the experience, values, viewpoints, and assumptions of the researcher influence the study itself? Answering this question has become a necessary feature of responsible qualitative research. This section, then, will address this study's assumptions and limitations, as well as the role of this researcher.

Assumptions

No study is without assumptions that the researcher and the methodology bring to the task. Perhaps the most fundamental assumption of this study, being grounded in qualitative methods, is that the lived experience of people with regards to ancestral veneration is a valid source for understanding its meanings. In other words, ancestral veneration does not have an inherent meaning that the researcher can discover finally. Rather, its meanings are, through the lived experience of its practitioners, constructed by them. Further, this study assumes that individual Vietnamese are capable of understanding and articulating why they engage in ancestral veneration. They are not mere automatons who act according to a set of pre-determined instructions but are conscious, active agents in these practices. Naturally, the study also assumes that interviewees will speak truthfully with the researcher when explaining their practices and beliefs about ancestral veneration. This honesty was fostered in many ways: allowing interviewees to select the interview location, using open-ended questions, refraining from making any judgments, etc.

Limitations

Any research study must limit itself by necessity. No study can do everything. Though placing limits on a study restricts its findings, without appropriate limits its focus might be so broad and its methods so unwieldy that findings will be meaningless or illegitimate. This study has limited itself in several ways.

First, it has restricted its purview to Vietnam. In truth, a complete study of ancestral veneration would need to cover large parts of Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The researcher would need to know dozens of languages and account for thousands of different forms. This is too much for a lifetime of research by an entire team, let alone a single doctoral student! Even in Asia alone, ancestral veneration has long posed a challenge for Christian mission in many countries.[30] Vietnam has been chosen chiefly because of the researcher's familiarity with the country and its language. Indeed, Vietnam is where the researcher's interest in the topic was born. Further commending Vietnam for this study is the pervasiveness of ancestral veneration among the Vietnamese, its foundation in animism, the deep influence of Confucianism, and the

[30] On Taiwan, see Daniel Chi-Sung Chen, "A Christian Response to Chinese Ancestor Practices in Taiwan: An Exercise in Contextualization" (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 1998); David C. E. Liao, *The Unresponsive: Resistant or Neglected? The Hakka Chinese in Taiwan Illustrate a Common Missions Problem*, Moody Church Growth Series (Chicago: Moody, 1972); Thomas Chi-ping Yu, "Confucian and Biblical Concepts of Filial Piety: Implications for Pastoral Care in the Chinese Church in Taiwan" (ThD diss., Boston University School of Theology, 1984). On Japan, see Berentsen, *Grave and Gospel*; Robert Enns, "'Making All Things New'? Remembering the Ancestors in a Japanese Protestant Family," *Japanese Religions* 26, no. 1 (January 2001): 55–84; Christopher D.H. Hill, "A Missiological Investigation of Christian Responses to Japanese Ancestor Practices," *Point Series* 40 (2016): 271–98; Mark D. Luttio, "The Passage of Death In The Japanese Context: In Pursuit Of An Inculturated Lutheran Funeral Rite," *The Japan Christian Review*, no. 62 (1996): 18–29; Mark R Mullins, "What About the Ancestors? Some Japanese Christian Responses to Protestant Individualism," *Studies in World Christianity* 4, no. 1 (1998): 41–64; Noboru Yamaguchi, "What Does the New Testament Say About Ancestor Practices?" in *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices*, ed. Bong Rin Ro (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1985), 43–54. On Hong Kong, see Henry Newton Smith, "Ancestor Practices in Contemporary Hong Kong: Religious Ritual or Social Custom?," *The Asia Journal of Theology* 3, no. 1 (April 1989): 31–45; Henry Newton Smith, "Christianity and Ancestor Practices in Hong Kong: Toward a Contextual Strategy," *Missiology* 17, no. 1 (January 1989): 27–38; Mariske Westendorp, "Individual Expressions of Familial Rituals: Buddhist and Anglican Ways of Paying Respect to Ancestors in Contemporary Hong Kong," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 32, no. 2 (2018): 43–53. On Korea, see Jung Young Lee, ed., *Ancestor Worship and Christianity in Korea*, Studies in Asian Thought and Religion Vol. 8 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1988).

openness of the Vietnamese people to speak about their customs and traditions. In fact, recent research has shown that ancestral practices are more entrenched in Vietnam than in many other East Asian countries.[31] Nonetheless, because of the commonalities between Vietnamese ancestral veneration and forms found in other Southeast and East Asian countries (especially those heavily influenced by China), the data from this study will have a certain degree of cross-applicability.

Second, the study has limited its focus to a particular feature of Vietnamese life: the ancestral altar. In truth, ancestral veneration is one of a myriad of practices that engage spirits of all kinds in Vietnam, from kitchen gods to mediumship to Catholic saints to pilgrimage.[32] A fuller study of Vietnamese spirituality should account for all of these and relate them to each other. However, focusing solely on ancestral veneration at the altar is justified because, as has been demonstrated already, it is the by far the most pervasive of all these aspects in terms of the ancestral altar's ubiquity, the frequency of interactions at the altar, and its centrality to social life. It is observed by nearly all Vietnamese to varying extents. Moreover, and because of this, it is the practice that has caused the most difficulty for Christian outreach and discipleship. As discussed in Chapter Three, early missionary accounts commonly focused on the ancestral altar at home as a key barrier to conversion.

Finally, this study is limited by its small sample size. This limitation is due to constraints on the time and resources of the researcher himself. A larger sample size in studying this topic would allow for deep differentiation in the data based on a variety of factors, for example the

[31] A recent Pew Research Center study compares religious practices among Vietnam, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Vietnam was found to have the highest prevalence of ancestral veneration by far. 97% of those surveyed in Vietnam reported burning incense to the ancestors within the past 12 months. The next highest country was Japan with 74%. By every metric regarding ancestors, Vietnam topped the other countries. Pew Research Center, *Religion and Spirituality in East Asian Societies*, 83–86.

[32] Taylor provides a broad overview these and other spirit practices in contemporary Vietnam. See Taylor, *Modernity and Re-Enchantment*.

differences between rural and urban Vietnamese, between northern and southern Vietnamese, between multiple education or income levels, or between different age groups. With only 10 interviews, this study can identify some patterns and trends, but they are only preliminary.

Role of the Researcher

Any researcher is an active participant in the research process. Qualitative research "does not minimize the role of the researcher in the process. The researcher makes decisions about the categories throughout the process, brings questions to the data, and advances personal values, experiences, and priorities."[33] As such it is important to acknowledge ways in which the researcher's own experiences, priorities, and values might influence the study. The following are various ways in which this researcher's life intersects with the purpose and design of the study.

Faith Commitment of the Researcher

First, the researcher for this study is a confessional Lutheran pastor. As a confessional Lutheran, the researcher holds an exclusivist view of Christian salvation, i.e., that salvation is the free gift of God for all people, given exclusively through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world. As Jesus himself said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Further, this researcher upholds the command of God, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). This confessional commitment has implications for the way the researcher interprets the meanings of ancestral rites and responds to them. As a pastor, the researcher has a concern for the care and discipleship of Christians. Indeed, it is this pastoral concern that fuels the researcher's interest in this topic. However, for the sake of this study, the researcher must practice a methodological relativism, "a

[33] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 155.

critical self-awareness that your own terms of analysis, understanding, and judgment are not universal and thus cannot be taken for granted."[34] Specifically, in this study the researcher has endeavored to approach his interview subjects without prejudice or judgment, allowing them every opportunity to speak freely, in their own terms and categories, regardless of the researcher's pre-conceived notions or private opinions about what they say.

Experience of the Researcher

Second, the researcher spent ten years working in Hanoi, Vietnam (2007–2017), in areas of community development and Christian discipleship. In those ten years, the researcher learned the Vietnamese language and developed networks of colleagues and friends across all regions of the country, both inside and outside the Vietnamese Christian community. These skills and networks will be an asset to the study's implementation, for example in recruiting participants and conducting interviews in the local language. The researcher feels a deep love for Vietnam, its people in general, and its Christians in particular. It is in this love for Vietnamese culture and for Vietnamese Christians that the initial interest in the topic of ancestral rites was formed. The researcher observed countless numbers of rural and urban Vietnamese engaging in ancestral rites that had, in his view, a unique dignity and beauty of their own. On the other hand, the researcher had many Vietnamese Christian friends and colleagues who confided their struggles over ancestral rites. Friends would ask him if they could participate in them. Pastors would ask him what they should teach their people. Precisely because the issue was so pressing, and because the researcher felt wholly inadequate to provide guidance, this study found its genesis.

[34] Engelke, *How to Think Like an Anthropologist*, 14.

The Researcher as Outsider

Despite his ten years in Vietnam, as a white American male who grew up in the United States, the researcher will always be a foreigner. He can no more extricate himself from his native culture than a fish can extricate himself from the ocean. His education, experiences, values, and viewpoints differ considerably from those of his subjects. He has been and always will be a guest in someone else's culture. What right does the researcher have to interpret or make judgments about ancestral rites, especially given Vietnam's colonial past in which foreigners (including missionaries!) too often equated culture with western civilization, and so sought to impose their own agenda and way of thinking upon others? This is an important question that demands an answer.

This study's goal is not to solve the problem of ancestral rites, let alone to impose any single approach to them. Ultimately, this study agrees with Luttio, writing about the Chinese, that "it is an issue which the Chinese themselves, both those within and outside the Church, must come to terms with."[35] Indeed, this study's goal is consistent with Luttio's final exhortation: "there is great need … to understand the issues, not simply from one's own perspective, but from within the cultural matrix and perspective of the other."[36] In his process of critical contextualization, Hiebert also emphasizes the priority (chronologically and qualitatively) of local Christians. Nonetheless, he does not remove foreign influence out of the process entirely. Missionaries, along with local believers, can "lead the congregation in *uncritically* gathering and analyzing the traditional beliefs and customs."[37] This is precisely the desire of this study; that it

[35] Luttio, "Chinese Rites Controversy," 312.

[36] Luttio, "Chinese Rites Controversy," 313.

[37] Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 88.

would aid Vietnamese Christians in understanding and evaluating ancestral rites, so that *they* might make wise decisions about how to respond.

CHAPTER FIVE

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Description of the Sampling Participants

Introduction

Qualitative research attempts to understand a particular issue from the perspective of the interviewee. "In the entire qualitative research process, the researchers keep a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research."[1] With this broad goal, the interview is one of the most helpful tools of the qualitative researcher. This chapter aims to unfold the meanings of ancestor veneration as described by participants in interviews conducted in August 2024. It will begin with a description of the participants in the interviews and an account of procedures used to recruit them. It will then describe the results of the data collection, both the initial demographic survey and, more importantly, the interviews themselves. The results of the interviews will be presented in terms of key themes identified for each interviewee, but also a description of four broad themes capable of grouping interview-specific themes across all interviews. This chapter will quote interviewees carefully and extensively, hoping to capture each distinct voice and yet also a collective voice that can aid in understanding how contemporary practitioners describe the meanings of ancestral veneration.

The data collection began with an online demographic survey (see Appendix Four), conducted via SurveyMonkey, the link to which was shared through the personal social media networks of the researcher. This initial survey garnered 80 respondents, 75 of which completed the entire survey. Of those who completed the survey, 29 respondents indicated that they were

[1] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 89.

willing to sit for an in-person interview. One of those indicated that they engage the ancestral altar less than once per year and so was removed from the pool (according to the eligibility requirements outlined in Chapter Four). A random sample of 10 respondents was chosen as interviewees. Several opted out due to scheduling conflicts or disinterest, resulting in new random selections being made as needed. The final sample was 10 interviewees. Below is a summary of relevant demographic data for each interviewee, listed in the order of their interviews.

Description of the Participants

The first interviewee is a male living in Hanoi. At 29 years old, he is the youngest of those interviewed. Nonetheless, he is one of the best educated and highest earning, having completed a master's degree or better and reporting a monthly income of more than 2,000USD.[2] He indicates no religious affiliation, but participates in rituals at the ancestral altar about once per month.

Interviewee Two is a female business owner, 45 years old, residing in Hanoi. She has completed a bachelor's degree and reports a high income of more than 2,000USD per month. She affiliates with no religious tradition but engages the ancestral altar about monthly.

The third interviewee is female, 46 years old, and lives in Hanoi. She is highly educated, having completed a master's degree or better. Her monthly income is also relatively high, between 1,000 and 2,000USD per month. She indicates no religious affiliation and reports interacting with the ancestral altar at her home weekly. It should be noted that Interviewee Three is the wife of Interviewee Seven, though they were interviewed separately, on different days and in different locations.

[2] Amounts in USD are approximate and reflect exchange rates in August 2024.

Interviewee Four is a 45-year-old male residing in Hanoi. He is well educated, having earned a master's degree or better, and has a high income of more than 2,000USD per month. He has no religious affiliation but participates in ancestral veneration at the altar in his home about monthly. Because she was at home, where the interview took place, and was curious, Interviewee Four's wife also participated, providing limited input during the interview.

The fifth interviewee, a female living in Hanoi, is relatively young at 32 years old. She has achieved a master's degree or better and works for a not-for-profit organization. She earns 1,000-2,000USD per month. Though she indicates no religious affiliation, she does engage the ancestral altar about monthly.

Interviewee Six is the oldest interviewee, a 51-year-old female residing in Hanoi. She is highly educated, with a master's degree or better. She earns between 600 and 1,000USD per month. She holds no religious affiliation but indicates that she interacts with her ancestral altar twice per month.

The seventh interviewee, a male, is 48 years old and lives in Hanoi. He has earned a master's degree or better and earns 1,000-2,000USD per month. He does not affiliate with any religious tradition, though he engages the ancestral altar in his home about once per month. Interviewee Seven is the husband of Interviewee Three, though they were interviewed separately, at different times and in different locations.

Interviewee Eight is a female, 31 years old, and lives in Hanoi. She has completed a bachelor's degree. With an income of less than 600USD per month, she is among the lowest earners in the sample. She is also the only interviewee to hold any religious affiliation, indicating herself as a Buddhist. Her engagement with the ancestral altar happens monthly.

The ninth interviewee is a 33-year-old male, living in Hanoi. He has earned a bachelor's degree. His monthly income is less than most respondents, at less than 600USD. He has no religious affiliation but interacts with his ancestral altar weekly.

Interviewee 10 is 48 years old, a female, who resides in Hanoi. She has achieved a master's degree or better, and earns between 1,000 and 2,000USD each month. She has no religious affiliation but engages with the ancestral altar twice per month.

Overall Trends

A simple table will aid in comparing the interviewees.

Interviewee #	Gender	Age	Residence	Education	Income (USD)	Religious Affiliation	Frequency of Engagement
1	Male	29	Hanoi	Master's or better	>2,000	None	Monthly
2	Female	45	Hanoi	Bachelor's	>2,000	None	Monthly
3	Female	46	Hanoi	Master's or better	1,000-2,000	None	Weekly
4	Male	45	Hanoi	Master's or better	>2,000	None	Monthly
5	Female	32	Hanoi	Master's or better	1,000-2,000	None	Monthly
6	Female	51	Hanoi	Master's or better	600-1,000	None	Twice per month

7	Male	48	Hanoi	Master's or better	1,000-2,000	None	Monthly
8	Female	31	Hanoi	Bachelor's	<600	Buddhist	Monthly
9	Male	33	Hanoi	Bachelor's	<600	None	Weekly
10	Female	48	Hanoi	Master's or better	1,000-2,000	None	Twice per month

As the table shows, the interviewees are 60% female and 40% male.[3] The average age is 40.8 years old, with a median age of 45 years old.[4] All interviewees live in Vietnam's capitol city, Hanoi. It is the second most populated city in the country, and is its political and ideological hub. The interviewees are, relative to Vietnam as a whole, highly educated, with all of them having completed college education or better. They are also, on the whole, high earners, with most of them well above Vietnam's annual per capita gross domestic product of 4,346.80USD.[5] Aside from one interviewee who identified as a Buddhist, the remaining interviewees do not maintain formal religious affiliation.[6] Nonetheless, 100% of the interviewees engage the ancestral altar at least monthly.

[3] The entire population is 50.2% female and 49.8% male. See General Statistics Office, *Statistical Summary Book of Viet Nam* (Hanoi: Statistical, 2020), 57.

[4] As of 2019, 68% of Vietnam's population is between 15 and 64 years of age. As for the age groups represented by the interviewees (from 29 to 51 years old), they account for about 44% of Vietnam's entire population. See General Statistics Office, *Viet Nam Population and Housing Census*, 23.

[5] World Bank, "Vietnam," *World Bank Open Data*, https://data.worldbank.org/country/viet-nam?view=chart.

[6] It is true that most of the Vietnamese population does not maintain a formal religious affiliation, though that is not to say they have no religious life. Indeed, as research shows (see Chapter Three above) and as the interviews will reveal, Vietnamese maintain an active engagement with practices associated with folk (i.e., non-formalized) religion.

Research Methodology Applied to the Data

Each selected interviewee was contacted via the telephone number they provided in the online survey. To minimize inconvenience and to encourage feeling at ease, participants were given the freedom to suggest locations for the interview but were encouraged to select locations that were suitably quiet. Three interviews took place at the homes of the participants, three at their offices, two at cafés, and two at the researcher's residence. Interviews were audio-recorded using the mobile phone of the researcher. Including setup and pleasantries, interviews lasted no longer than 90 minutes. Actual interview times varied between 50 and 75 minutes. Each interview included the interviewee, the researcher, and an assistant. The presence of the research assistant, a female, also helped put female interviewees at ease meeting privately with a male researcher. Save for Interviewee Five, who asked to be interviewed in English, interviews were conducted in Vietnamese by the researcher, with the occasional help of a research assistant when the researcher encountered words or phrases he did not understand.

Interviews were conducted according to the established interview protocol (see Appendix Five), which included five core questions and corresponding probes, along with two extra questions. In most interviews, there was adequate time for probes and extra questions. However, as the interviews progressed, some changes were made to the interview protocol. First, after the first few interviews it was clear that the probes under question five proved much more valuable than the core question itself. As a result, there were later instances when those probes were asked instead of the core question. Further, core question seven proved to be the least helpful question. Almost every respondent took issue with the wording of the question, insisting that ancestor veneration was not a formal religion (*tôn giáo*) but rather a belief (*tín ngưỡng*). Even after adjusting the wording, the question rarely yielded useful reflections. Even the first probe, asking

about ancestor veneration's relationship to Vietnamese identity, proved too abstract for most interviewees. The second probe was only marginally more helpful.

After the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed by a third-party service. The researcher initially tried artificial intelligence transcription with Sonix but found the results so inaccurate as to be inadequate for practical use. After researching alternatives, the researcher chose GoTranscript due to its excellent human transcription accuracy for Vietnamese and its industry-leading security and privacy policies.[7]

Once transcription was complete, the researcher began the data analysis through a process of coding, which "involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information."[8] This process was engaged via multiple longhand reviews of the printed interview transcripts. First, all ten interviews were slowly read to get a sense of the whole. Notes were written in the left-hand margins to capture key points of the data or key reactions of the researcher. Next, the interviews were carefully read again, this time identifying codes, i.e., individual units of information, and writing them in the right-hand margins. These codes were grouped into larger categories of meaning. The researcher used an eclectic approach to coding, sometimes using an *in vivo* method which sought to preserve the precise wording of the interviewee. More often, the researcher used a descriptive method which codes according to the concept or issue being addressed. On limited occasions, a literature method was employed, in which codes conform to concepts from the anthropological literature review (see Chapter Two). Based on these codes and categories of meaning, the researcher then identified 3-5 themes for each interview. Looking at these interview specific themes as a whole, the researcher then

[7] GoTranscript, "Security & Trust at GoTranscript."

[8] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 302.

delineated 3-5 broad themes to capture all ten interviews. The interviews were read for a final time to identify key passages in support of each broad theme. The interview specific themes grouped under the broad themes will provide the structure for this chapter's analysis of the interview data.

Presentation of Data and Results of Analysis

The presentation and analysis of the data will proceed in three stages. First, the results of the initial online survey will be discussed as a baseline assessment for motivations that undergird engagement with the ancestral altar. Second, each interview's main themes will be discussed. Finally, and most importantly, the overall themes for all interviews will be identified and considered.

Initial Online Survey Results

Apart from demographic questions, the initial online survey also asked respondents about their motivations for participating in ancestral veneration. Respondents were shown a list of eleven prewritten reasons for engaging the ancestral altar which were based on research described in the literature review (see Appendix Four). They were asked to check all the reasons that applied to them but were also given an option to check a twelfth box labeled "other," in which they could write their own reason(s). Out of 75 respondents who completed these questions,[9] only 6 respondents chose the "other" box, and some of those responses were not relevant to the question.[10] These results are presented for completeness, but caution should be

[9] Though there were 80 total respondents, a minority did not complete the entire survey.

[10] For example, one respondent used that space to clarify their routines related to ancestor veneration. Another respondent used the space to clarify the kinds of altars they have at their residence versus their hometown.

used in making conclusions based on this data alone, due to its etic nature, the simplicity of the questions, and the small sample size for a quantitative tool.

Overall Results

Overall, the responses yielded 14 total reasons people engage the ancestral altar. Below is a ranking of those reasons according to the number of respondents who chose that reason.

Reason	# of Respondents
Desire to give honor and express gratitude to the ancestors	60
Cultural custom	57
Hope that ancestors will bring prosperity	43
Filial duty	42
Family obligation	41
Express/promote family harmony	41
Psychological comfort	14
Helping the ancestor in the afterlife	9
National solidarity	4
Fear that an angry ancestor can harm the family	2
Social status	1
Remembrance*	1
To feel peace*	1
Connection with a lost loved one*	1

* = a reason written by a respondent in the “other” box

One is immediately struck by the dominance of the top six reasons, all of which were selected by more than half of the respondents.[11] While most of these top six reasons are geared towards sociocultural realities among the living, hope for the ancestors to bring prosperity is a more economic reality (according to the terms of the discussion in Chapter Two[12]) and remains a major motivating factor for ancestral engagement. Interestingly, the converse of this, namely fear of ancestor's harming the family, was barely selected. However, as will be seen in the discussion of the interviews, fear did play slightly more of a role than the online survey indicates. Nonetheless, these results suggest that desire for benefits is more motivating than fear of harm. Social status was only selected by one respondent, though the researcher suspects that this is due to people not wanting to appear self-serving. It was difficult to word this reason without sounding negative.[13] Nonetheless, interviews will show that the perception of others is more of a motivating factor than this survey suggests. It should be noted that the bottom three reasons were written in by respondents. The researcher suspects these reasons would have had a more dominant role had they been prewritten choices for all respondents. This suspicion is based on the pervasive presence of these three reasons in many of the interviews.

Next, participants were then asked to rank their selected reasons in order of importance. This is a particularly useful exercise, because it forces the respondent to make decisions about which factors are more influential than others, allowing the researcher to weigh the importance of reasons relative to other reasons across all respondents. This informs interview protocol

[11] It is important to note that the order of choices was automatically randomized for each respondent. This removes the possibility that these six reasons predominated because they were the first selections.

[12] In Chapter Two, economic meanings of ancestor veneration were those that focused on transactions between the living and the dead, i.e., the use of veneration to secure benefits from or for the ancestors.

[13] The wording in Vietnamese: "*Để được coi là người có địa vị*."

designs. Below is a list of reasons ordered according to weighted rank in terms of importance across all respondents.

Rank	Reason
1	Desire to give honor and express gratitude to the ancestors
2	Filial duty
3	Family obligation
4	Express/promote family harmony
5	Cultural custom
6	Hope that ancestors will bring prosperity
7	Psychological comfort
8	Helping the ancestor in the afterlife
9	National solidarity
10	Fear that an angry ancestor can harm the family
11	Remembrance*
12	To feel peace*
13	Connection with a lost loved one*
14	Social status

* = a reason written by a respondent in the "other" box

The list is largely the same as the prior one, though with some changes of note. While all top six reasons remain the same, when weighted for importance the family-related reasons come to the top while hope for ancestors to bring blessings decreases slightly in importance, reinforcing the preeminence of family relationships in ritual life. Cultural custom also goes down slightly in rank, a surprising result given its predominance in the interviews (see below). The

only other significant change is that social status moves to the bottom of the list, though this is a dubious metric for reasons shared above.

Results Based on Gender

Adjusting the results for various criteria produces some changes. This information is of limited value with the small scale of this study but nonetheless might suggest that meanings of ancestor veneration change across different demographic factors. Such an insight might lead Christians to take different approaches in evangelism and discipleship efforts according to those factors. For example, see the table below for results based on gender.

Rank	**Male** **(24 Responses)**	**Female** **(55 Responses)**
1	Desire to give honor and express gratitude to the ancestors	Desire to give honor and express gratitude to the ancestors
2	Filial duty	Filial duty
3	Family obligation	Express/promote family harmony
4	Cultural custom	Family obligation
5	Express/promote family harmony	Cultural custom
6	Hope that ancestors will bring prosperity	Hope that ancestors will bring prosperity

The differences between males and females were small, reflected only in the order of the top six reasons. Family harmony seems to play a more prominent role in the thinking of females.

Results Based on Age

Comparing answers relative to age is very revealing.

Rank	Age – 49 years old or less (68 Responses)	Age – 50 years old or more (11 Responses)
1	Desire to give honor and express gratitude to the ancestors	Filial duty
2	Filial duty	Desire to give honor and express gratitude to the ancestors
3	Family obligation	Family obligation
4	Express/promote family harmony	Cultural custom
5	Cultural custom	Express/promote family harmony
6	Hope that ancestors will bring prosperity	Psychological comfort

Dividing respondents between those who are under and over 50 years of age, the order of the top six reasons changes considerably, with only family obligation retaining its rank in both groups. Meanwhile, hope that the ancestors will bring prosperity falls out of the top six (to 8th) for older respondents, who are motivated more by psychological comfort. This suggests that youth cannot be equated with a reduction in beliefs about the ancestors' ability to influence the world of the living. This was true for interviews, too. While most young interviewees showed less belief in the supernatural power of ancestors, the youngest interviewee showed the most belief in that power.

Results Based on Income

Comparing answers to relative income provides surprising results.

Rank	Monthly income less then 600USD per month (17 responses)	Monthly income more than 600USD per month (60 responses)
1	Filial duty	Desire to give honor and express gratitude to the ancestors
2	Desire to give honor and express gratitude to the ancestors	Filial duty
3	Express/promote family harmony	Family obligation
4	Family obligation	Cultural custom
5	Cultural custom	Express/promote family harmony
6	Psychological comfort	Hope that ancestors will bring prosperity

The top 6 weighted reasons changed considerably in their order. Of considerable note is that, for those with less income the hope for the ancestors to bring prosperity falls out of the top 6, falling to the 8th position, and is replaced by psychological comfort. Counterintuitively, this suggests that wealth increases the desire for the ancestors to bring further prosperity.

Results Based on Education

Though the respondents were an amazingly educated bunch (100% of them reported completion of university or better), adjusting for education level also produces interesting results.

Rank	Bachelor's degree (40 responses)	Master's degree or better (39 responses)
1	Desire to give honor and express gratitude to the ancestors	Desire to give honor and express gratitude to the ancestors
2	Filial duty	Filial duty
3	Express/promote family harmony	Family obligation
4	Cultural custom	Cultural custom
5	Family obligation	Express/promote family harmony
6	Psychological comfort	Hope that ancestors will bring prosperity

The difference in order is slighter for this criterion. However, the hope that ancestors bring prosperity drops out of the top six (to 7th) for those who obtained only a bachelor's degree, who instead are motivated by psychological comfort. Surprisingly, it comes back into the top six for those who received further degrees. This suggests that further education does not lead to an abandonment of, but rather an increase in, belief in the ancestors' ability to affect this world.[14]

Conclusion

Although the researcher took considerable care to design a survey grounded in substantial research, the results of this online survey should be interpreted with caution. First, no matter how carefully the prewritten reasons were worded, simply by being written by the researcher they are an etic representation reflecting his interpretations and biases. Second, even though prewritten reasons endeavored to be comprehensive, no survey of this sort could ever capture the breadth

[14] This phenomenon was also observed in a recent Pew Research Center study that included Vietnam. Pew Research Center, *Religion and Spirituality in East Asian Societies*, 77.

Vietnamese motivations for ancestor veneration, precisely because, as seen in Chapter Two, they are radically plural. The selection of the "other" box by several respondents only highlights this shortcoming. Third, in this online survey respondents answered questions rapidly. Indeed, the average time spent completing the survey was only 4 minutes and 36 seconds. The speed of answer does not invalidate the results, but it does mean that the respondents did not take time to ruminate over their answers. Fourth, and resulting from all the above, respondents had limited opportunity to write in their own words in their own time. Thus, the results of this survey lack the emic nuance required for a more thorough analysis. Nonetheless, the results did provide an initial baseline set of data which revealed some trends that could be listened for and expanded on during the interviews. This was also helpful for the researcher in finalizing questions, their wording, and their order for the interview protocol (see Appendix Five).

Description of Individual Interview Themes

The goal of each interview was to ask questions that encouraged interviewees to speak about their practices, motivations, and beliefs related to ancestor veneration, to listen attentively to how they describe the meanings that it holds for them. To this end, core questions were open-ended, allowing participants to answer spontaneously and freely. Many interviewees shared how they rarely talk about the values, beliefs, and motivations behind these activities, and thus many of them had difficulty putting to words their deep-seated ideas and feelings. There was no expectation that interviewees' answers would be consistent. Indeed, at times interviewees themselves acknowledged their own contradictions. The researcher allowed interviewees time to pause for reflection, tell stories, elaborate on or correct themselves, or even veer off on tangents (even if it was not always apparent how useful those tangents would prove!). This emic approach seeks to honor the unique voice of each interviewee. It intends not to miss the trees for the forest.

As such, below is a description of each interview's key themes. It should be kept in mind that in most cases, content that constitutes a key theme in one interview was also present in other interviews, though not to the same extent or degree. Themes in each interview are indicated with underlined italics.

Interviewee One

Interviewee One (I-1) was the youngest, but also the most articulate of the interviewees. During the interview at his office, it was clear that he had thought deeply about ancestor veneration. I-1 describes ancestor veneration almost exclusively in terms of family. This is natural given that he is the only son (*con trai duy nhất*) in his family, an important role in Vietnamese society. As I-1 himself explains, "the son is the one who carries out the work of veneration."[15] This theme is captured with a word that I-1 himself used repeatedly: *responsibility*. The oldest son has the responsibility to carry on the family line, which includes the family's ancestral practice. For example, when speaking of inheriting his family land, where the ancestral altar for the family's entire lineage is located, he says, "There is no law prohibiting me from traveling far or requiring me to return [to my family's ancestral land]. But I am bound morally, and according to my responsibility to the ancestors. I am an only son, and so I have a responsibility to that land. I have to stay connected to these traditions." He expands on the object of this responsibility via the term *familyship*, another key theme.[16] Using this term, I-1 defines family as an entity that persists over time, with a "connecting thread formed between myself and

[15] Interview with Interviewee One, August 7, 2024. Author's translation. All future quotations of Interviewee One are from the same interview and translated by the author.

[16] Though this is not formally an English word, Interviewee One used this exact term in English. Because he explained it well, it is used here to preserve his unique voice.

the ancestors," a thread that links past generations to present and even future generations. For I-1, the ancestral practices are an integral part of that thread.

Another central theme of I-1's interview was ***contradiction***. That is, he is fully aware that his beliefs and practices are seemingly contradictory, and even draws attention to it, but lets the tension remain. This was seen even in his notions of familyship. For example, I-1 was one of the most upfront that he does not believe in an afterlife or any other metaphysical beliefs that usually undergird ancestral practices. So adamant was he in his disbelief that he easily declared, "If my children don't worship me, that is totally OK. I would be happy about that."[17] However, he went on to say that he still wants his children to worship the ancestors, because "if my kids don't worship others in our family who have died, then I will feel I am the one who broke the thread of tradition of hundreds of years of our family." In this one example, the themes of responsibility, familyship, and contradiction all come together.

Finally, I-1 emphasized the role of ancestral practices, particularly the annual death anniversary (*ngày giỗ*) of a deceased family member, in ***gathering*** the living members together. "[Ancestor veneration] does not only help me; it helps the family, those who are still living, to have a better connection." As evidence to support this claim, I-1 posits (with admitted hyperbole), "About 99% of time spent at a death anniversary is used to connect; the living use that time to interact with each other, to prepare the meal, to eat, to drink alcohol …" For I-1, these communal aspects of ancestral practices fulfill an important function within the family.

[17] The word worship is used here because the interviewee himself used that specific word in English, inserting this one English word into his answer, the rest of which was given in Vietnamese.

Interviewee Two

During the interview at her office, Interviewee Two (I-2), a female in her early forties, focused on family when describing what ancestor veneration means for her, displaying a keen awareness of the *family roles* which she fulfills. She explains, "If I am in my husband's family's household or my parents' home, I am only a helper. I am not the main person."[18] Nonetheless, she takes a more dominant role in her own home: "But regarding my own family here in Hanoi, sometimes my husband [will help]. But my husband is sometimes not very careful and tidy as me, so he only does it when I can't do it."[19] For I-2, her ritual roles are defined by her marriage. The same will be true for her kids—at present they don't participate in ancestor veneration but will start "when they get married."

When asked why she venerates the ancestors, she first identifies *parental modeling* as a key reason: "I saw my parents doing these things, and so now I do them." Similarly, I-2 wants to pass these practices down to her children as well: "When my family and my kids see me do these things, they will study and practice it, too." From her parents she learned not only what to do but to what extent to do it: "My parent's and my husband's parents are like me; they don't believe strongly, and so this is probably the reason that I only do [ancestral veneration] to a limited extent."

This points towards another key theme for I-2: *simplicity*. The word appears 12 times in her interview, often to note the limited extent or simplified nature of her ritual practice. For example, her prayers (*cầu khấn*) are very basic and brief—she even uses her phone to search online for short, suggested prayers. She emphasized simplicity especially when asked about her children's

[18] Interview with Interviewee Two, August 8, 2024. Author's translation. All future quotations of Interviewee Two are from the same interview and translated by the author.

[19] I-2's husband is not the oldest son in his family and so has less responsibility with the family's ritual life.

future practice. She explains, "When they have their own home, their own altar, then they will be obligated to know how to light incense. … Actually, regarding veneration, I want them to do it as minimally as possible, as simply as possible."

I-2's concept of simplicity is connected to her *perception of others*. When noting her simplicity about ancestral practices, she often did it in contrast to others: "I don't do it as much as other households," "If the level of belief of others is a 10, I am only a 2-3," "I think probably everyone else's perspective is different than mine." When speaking about food she prepares for the altar, she only mentions her own practice after comparing it to "other households who make a whole tray, a high-class feast. I only prepare very simple [food] on my small, small altar." However, her simplicity compared to other families is not a source of shame for I-2; but rather something she feels proud of. "I think that if I do [ancestor veneration] with my heart … then it still has meaning. But when it is done in a complicated way with too many procedures, I think it loses its meaning."

Interviewee Three

The researcher met Interviewee Three (I-3), a professional in her mid-40s at her office. Her profession demands advanced education and a strong analytical capacity, both of which were clearly demonstrated throughout the interview. First, I-3 emphasizes the great *flexibility* available to practitioners of ancestral rites. For example, if busy on the 1st or 15th day of the lunar calendar,[20] it is "completely permissible to do it beforehand."[21] In the event one cannot do a routine ceremony at all for some emergency reason, it is "no big deal … or, it is perfectly

[20] In all the interviews, ritual interaction at the altar (usually cleaning, praying, lighting incense) on the 1st and/or 15th of the lunar month was the baseline level of routine interaction.

[21] Interview with Interviewee Three, August 9, 2024. Author's translation. All future quotations of Interviewee Three are from the same interview and translated by the author.

acceptable to have a person do it in your place." Even scheduling death anniversaries, some of the most important events in a family's ritual life, allows for flexibility according to practical realities. I-3 often uses the phrase, "it depends on the household," or something similar, when speaking about procedures related to ancestral practice. This highlights the great variety in practices.

This flexibility in practices makes sense given I-3's focus on *remembrance* as the core meaning of ancestor veneration. The word *remember* (*tưởng nhớ* or *nhớ*) appears 21 times in her interview. The first reason she gave for practicing ancestor veneration was to "orient herself back to her roots" (*hướng về cội nguồn*), going on to explain, "veneration is a chance to remember, a chance to show gratitude."[22] For I-3, what is most important is not the particular form, but rather the act of remembering. When speaking about whether she hopes her children will venerate her, I-3 notes, "In the future, ideas might change, and my children will remember me in different ways. It doesn't have to be veneration." When asked about Vietnamese who choose not to venerate for whatever reason, she opines, "There are some people who don't venerate but they still remember their ancestors."

I-3's flexibility regarding her children's participation opens another theme within I-3's interview, *the tension between obligation and non-obligation*. She struggled to define to what extent children are obligated to participate in ancestral rituals. On the one hand, in keeping with flexibility, I-3 resists saying that her kids' participation in the rituals is required. But in the end, she says exactly that. For example, after first asserting that their participation is not required, she goes on to say that without a good reason to be away, "if they are at home then they must

[22] *Hướng về cội nguồn*, or something similar, is a common Vietnamese way of talking about the ancestors that was used by many interviewees.

participate." She explains, "My children have been nurtured since infancy that it is better to do [ancestral veneration], but it is not obligatory. But because it is better to do it, then if they have time they must participate." The obligation becomes stronger as the kids get older. I-3 states, "When I can no longer do [these rituals], then my child is obligated to do it." But then later she softens that obligation once again. The tension is never resolved.

Regarding the benefits ancestors receive from veneration, I-3 was consistently noncommittal. But for her, whether ancestors receive benefit or not is less important than simply helping. I-3 was focused on doing what is right for someone in need. This *altruism* is made clear in an analogy she makes when speaking about helping the ancestors: "If I meet someone who needs help, even if they don't ask me directly, I will still help them even though they may receive it or not receive it." I-3 did not speak much about the ancestors benefitting her, but rather asserts, "I desire for everything to improve, for others in my sphere to get better." Throughout the interview, the direction of benefit was consistently from the practitioner to the ancestor, despite lacking a firm belief that the ancestors receive that benefit.

Interviewee Four

Interviewee Four (I-4) is a 45-year-old man who the researcher interviewed at his home. He is the oldest son in his family. I-4's wife unexpectedly joined the interview as well, though her input was much less than I-4's in frequency and duration. I-4 acknowledged different ancestral practices among different families, emphasizing the *variety* one sees. Using his own altar's multiple incense bowls as an example, I-4 emphasized the variety of spirits that are venerated, including ancestors, general deities, and ancient relatives, though he acknowledges, "I

do not understand very deeply about this."[23] When speaking about time and money spent on ancestral rituals, I-4 conceded that "the idea of each family about veneration is different." Indeed, this is true for the entire country, because "there is not a standard. Each part of the country, each city, even each family, will implement these customs differently." For I-4, this variety was acknowledged not to permit different practices among his family members, but rather to distinguish his own practice from others.

Nonetheless, his emphasis on variety meant that for I-4, the form of ancestral veneration is less important than the content. I-4 identified that content as *belief* (*niềm tin* or *tin*), a word used either as a verb or a noun 34 times throughout the interview. Sometimes he referred to beliefs that he had, e.g., "I believe that apart from the present world here that there is another spiritual world. I believe there is a second world." More often, however, the emphasis was less on what was believed and more on the power of belief itself. When discussing what benefits ancestors receive, I-4 said, "I only believe that when I send [offerings] or wishes the ancestors will receive them, but whether they receive or don't receive or whatever, I cannot verify. But I believe that they will receive it, and belief is enough." I-4 also noted the benefit that belief has for him in his practical life, using misbehaving children as an example. "When I have belief, that belief creates motivation to remember that the stage in which my child misbehaves is only temporary. When I believe that my child will be better behaved, I see that the bad behavior in the present is only temporary, and I see [that behavior] as not so bad. This is a great benefit."

The power of belief extends to the third theme in the interview, *benefits from the ancestors*. I-4 believes that the ancestors "have a heart that wants to support their descendants. That is why I

[23] Interview with Interviewee Four, August 10, 2024. Author's translation. All future quotations of Interviewee Four are from the same interview and translated by the author.

want to interact with those who have died." Undergirding these benefits, I-4 speaks of a spirit world that is based in cause and effect, in which "what goes around comes around."[24] And so I-4 speaks of trying to do good for the world so that benefits will return to him via the ancestors. This cause-and-effect cosmology animates his ritual life. Speaking of prayer, I-4 says, "I believe first that the ancestors will hear my desires, and when they hear them, they will bless me so that those wishes turn into reality." But I-4's wife was quick to point out that these benefits are not "physical things that you can count. For example, suppose I ask for 10 billion [Vietnamese dong]."[25] I-4 agreed with his wife, emphasizing that they ask for the ancestors' help in child-rearing, and with health, peace, and safety, rather than material wealth.

Interviewee Five

The appointment with Interviewee Five (I-5), a female in her early thirties, took place at a quiet café. For I-5, engagement with the ancestral altar is shaped almost entirely by *parental influence*.[26] When describing her routine ritual activities, she explains, "my husband and I do not intentionally watch out for the calendar. It's always my mom saying the day is approaching, and then she would buy something for us, and then we just bring it home."[27] Even during the Lunar New Year (*Tết Nguyên Đán*), one of the most important holidays for ancestral engagement, I-5

[24] In Vietnamese, *nhân sao thì sẽ ra những cái quả như vậy*. This is a difficult phrase to render literally into English, so I have translated it idiomatically. It is similar to the idea, "You reap what you sow," but translating it this way would load I-4's thoughts with foreign biblical allusions.

[25] Almost 400,000USD according to exchange rates in August,2024.

[26] This term should be distinguished from *parental modeling* (e.g., Interviewee Two). While both refer to the broad influence of parents in the kids' participation in ancestor veneration, *parental modeling* is used when interviewees speaking about parents who taught them or when they want to teach their kids, whether verbally or by example. *Parental influence* is used when interviewees note the dominance of parents in goading them to participate, to the point where they might feel pressure.

[27] Interview with Interviewee Five, August 10, 2024. All future quotations of Interviewee Five are from the same interview. Interviewee Five opted to be interviewed in English. Her words are quoted here with a bare minimum of editing for basic readability.

needs to be reminded by her mother and receives food for the altar from her mother. Regarding her ancestral practice as a whole, she confesses, "Most of the effort comes from my mom." When it comes to praying to the ancestors, I-5 calls it more of a short "monologue" that includes a few words of greeting and wishes that the ancestors are happy. Meanwhile, "my mom always tells me, 'You should ask for something, like ask to get promoted or something like that.'" Tellingly, when asked about reasons she engages the altar, she first said, "because it's important to my mom."

Even though the impetus comes largely from her mom, I-5 knows that she still has a choice, but concedes that she would feel "insecure if there's no altar in the house." I-5 describes this desire for ***security*** as motivated by fear: "if we're not going to do [ancestral veneration], we're going to get punishment." She notes how many people "associate so many of their life events with doing something wrong to your ancestors," and how there is a "perception from so many movies and media in the way they portray some of the ghosts, that they are waiting for their family offerings, and they might get hungry or get sad because they don't receive offerings." For I-5, then, engagement with the altar helps foster a sense of security in terms of her and her family's safety, even though she acknowledges that these perceptions are probably not real.

But for I-5, security is not only physical but also emotional, and into this space comes the theme of ***communication***. She ties these two concepts together explicitly when addressing the benefits she receives from ancestral veneration: "I think that it's more like security. For me it's like talking to my grandma. It's a way to relive the memories and to remind me of the life that I had with my grandma." When asked about whether ancestors receive any benefits from veneration, I-5 responds, "I think of it more like another channel of communication rather than

something that they would benefit from." She ties this explicitly to the altar itself: "the altar is like the space that can hold the way that we communicate with ancestors. If it's not there or we don't practice the related customs, that would be the way we lose the connections, we lose communication." Whenever she spoke of communication, it was almost always in the context of thinking of her grandmother, with whom she was close.

I-5 had surprisingly strong reactions to questions about ancestral veneration's relationship to her Vietnamese identity. This was due in part to the work she does for a non-governmental organization, which includes developing media on different ways of being Vietnamese. She immediately spoke about how Vietnamese identity has become a tool of *nationalism*, asserting, "I don't believe in that kind of Vietnamese identity. … It is more diverse, fluid." Regarding ancestral veneration as a distinguishing feature of Vietnamese identity, she said, "It's really not a thing. It's constructed as a way to be against the Chinese, against all of the colonial forces." She recalled how, as a university student, she used to give free tours to tourists as a way to practice English. In those tours, they would always mention ancestor worship as a defining feature of Vietnamese people, but "the way I talked and shared about it was not really authentic because I don't really practice it."

Interviewee Six

The researcher met Interviewee Six (I-6), a 51-year-old female, at her home. I-6 takes her ancestral engagement seriously, and this showed in her knowledge of and commitment to *procedure*. Whether it was explaining the different bowls of incense on the altar, detailing her activities to help the dead who have no one to venerate them, or expounding the routines of a death anniversary, I-6 had clear ideas about the way things should be performed. For example, speaking about eating food offered on the altar, I-6 was unequivocal that food should not be

eaten until after incense was lit and burned through, because "when the incense is burned through it means that [the ancestor] has finished enjoying the offering already."[28] Laughing, she joked how people today will only wait until the incense is burned two-thirds of the way through, or even buy shorter incense, so that they can take the food down sooner.

I-6 usually spoke of procedure in the same breath as received wisdom. That is, she cares deeply about what others say, think, or do, and this *societal influence* impacts the way she engages the ancestral altar. For example, to explain why people are impatient about eating food on the altar, I-6 offers the proof, "everyone says that food offered with incense spoils fast." The phrase, "everyone says," or something like it, appears frequently throughout the interview. When explaining her beliefs about the afterlife, or how the dead eat offered foods, or burning votive papers, she begins with, "People say …" I-6 wants to be in step with how others think about and practice ancestor veneration.

Perhaps the most significant theme in her interview is how ancestral veneration reinforces *family roles*. As a married woman, she primarily follows the ritual life of her husband's family. The morning of the interview, she had gone to the death anniversary of her husband's grandfather to, along with the other women, help cook the meal before the veneration. I-6 was not bothered by the gender role into which she fits, consoled by the fact that the preparations for death anniversaries are much lighter than in previous generations, when "women had to bear so much stress because they invited so many people [to the death anniversary]," resulting in an enormous cooking load. The theme of family roles was very clear when I-6 spoke about her children. She shared that in her husband's entire extended family, including her own family,

[28] Interview with Interviewee Six, August 10, 2024. Author's translation. All future quotations of Interviewee Six are from the same interview and translated by the author.

there are only two sons, the oldest of which had committed suicide. Because of this, I-6's own son is now next in line to take charge of the family's ritual life, to "be responsible for taking care of the ancestral altar." Though her son has not yet taken on the role (that will only happen when his uncle and father die), he is now included more in ritual life so that he can learn. Regarding her son's willingness, I-6 said, "He accepts this work because the family has given him that role." Collective decision-making rather than personal choice determines individual action. When asked how she would feel if I-6's son refused the role, she said she would feel "very sad because that would mean he did not fulfill the duty of a child to their ancestors" and would actively seek to persuade him (though she did concede that one cannot be forced).

Interviewee Seven

Interviewee Seven (I-7), a 48-year-old male, invited the researcher to his home. As a businessman, his interview brought out some unique themes. First, I-7 was forthright and eloquent about his desire for the ancestors to benefit him. That is, ***results*** are very important for I-7, particularly because of the risks associated with doing business. He shared, "I think there were many occasions when I performed [ancestral veneration] and I saw that work went better."[29] He shared about a time that he lost a bag with important work documents. He could not find it anywhere, and so his wife suggested they light incense and ask the ancestors for help. That night, a man called him to arrange for the return the bag, having found it in the apartment complex's motorbike parking area. I-7 remarked, "Maybe if I didn't light incense, it would have still happened, but how can I know?" I-7 was always quick to point out there are no guarantees about the ancestors' help. His approach could be summarized as an it-doesn't-hurt-to-try attitude. I-7

[29] Interview with Interviewee Seven, August 11, 2024. Author's translation. All future quotations of Interviewee Seven are from the same interview and translated by the author.

focused mostly on business when speaking on results, but also mentioned his children's health and safety as examples. In summary, he said, "Doing [ancestral veneration] makes me feel more at ease and I get a better result." Related to his focus on benefits he receives, I-7 was remarkably direct to share that, "I truly think that first and foremost I do ancestral veneration for me. … I don't only do it for the ancestors." It should be noted that at no time did I-7 come across as self-centered or greedy. He would always qualify his statements to warn against crass materialism. He was simply honest, bemoaning how "Everyone speaks in ways that over-sacralize [ancestral veneration] … but we must speak practically."

In speaking about the ways ancestors benefit him, there was in I-7's ideas an unresolved *tension between human effort and ancestor influence*. "Suppose something at work is not going well. Besides my own effort in implementation among my team, deep down I still want to add [ancestral veneration]." For I-7, ancestor assistance is not a replacement for human action but rather a supplement to it. He was adamant that he strives to do his best at work and at home, but wants from the ancestors "some additional support, support for myself." Even speaking of children's health, he and his wife do what they practically can to provide for them during sickness, e.g., seeing doctors and taking medicines. But if there is no improvement, "then at that time my wife and I will light incense and bow to pray [*khấn*] to the ancestors for their support." Though I-7 never knows whether the result is from his own effort or the ancestors' influence, "I believe that the ancestors will help, help in some way, even if I don't know if it is to a lesser or greater extent."

The two themes above seem to find their home in I-7's conception of ancestral veneration as a means of *communication*. He repeatedly used the phrase "send a message" or something similar. This communication is always spoken of in connection with incense. As seen above,

sometimes that message is one that communicates need and asks for assistance. I-7 explains, "When I have some need, or I want to present something, or some message, to the ancestors for their help, then I light an incense on the altar and send the message through that incense." He explains later in the interview, "My understanding is that the smoke of the incense carries my words to above." But the messages I-7 sends are not only focused on what he hopes to receive from the ancestors, but also what he wants to give to the ancestors. Offering food on the altar is about "sending a message of gratitude to the ancestors."

This desire to give something to the ancestors is also captured in another important theme: *filial piety*. Though he does not define the term clearly, in speaking about Vietnamese identity, I-7 noted filial piety as a supreme Vietnamese virtue and connected it explicitly to ancestral veneration: "the activities I do to venerate the ancestors help me to express my nature as a filial person." When asked about those who do not practice ancestral rites, I-7 responded, "If someone refuses [ancestral veneration], then that person is not an authentic Vietnamese." However, he was quick to qualify the statement above, adding, "If he chooses another way to express his filial piety then he is still a filial person. And if he is filial, then he is a Vietnamese." For I-7, then, filial piety is at the root of ancestral practice and Vietnamese identity.

Interviewee Eight

Interviewee Eight (I-8) was interviewed at the researcher's short-term apartment. As a younger, unmarried woman, I-8 feels the weight of her parents' influence in her ritual practice. There is a *tension between her personal desire and obligation to her family*. Apart from routine cleanings, I-8 noted that she also cleans "whenever her mom tells her she has to clean the altar." She rarely remembers the death anniversaries of family members and is reminded by her mother. I-8 distinguishes herself from her parents, saying, "Speaking for myself, I don't really believe

strongly about the ancestors. I think that my dad and mom are the two main people in the family who believe strongly."[30] At one point, she baldly states, "If my parents did not want me to do it, I wouldn't concern myself with it." But this tension between desire and obligation extends to her relationship with her future husband. One of her reasons for venerating the ancestors is to practice for her marriage. She explains, "When I have a husband, I will live with his parents and according to their ideas. I think they will have these kinds of veneration rituals, and maybe even more [rituals] that require even more [procedures]." She will be influenced by those around her, even if, as she says, "she doesn't really want to do it."

This obligation is played out within the context of I-8's relationships with family members according to distinct *family roles*. This is especially evident with her only brother, the oldest son. While her parents take ancestor veneration seriously, her brother does not. I-8 confesses that her brother "does not care about this issue and refuses to accept it or participate." This is a serious breach of responsibility since the oldest son has a duty to carry on the ritual life of the family. As her parents observed her brother's lack of enthusiasm over time, more and more of the ritual responsibilities have fallen on I-8. "When they gradually see [my brother] is not enthusiastic to perform [ancestral rites], they won't bother him anymore. With me, when I say I will do it, I will do it, so the next time my parents will ask me to do it." I-8 says, too, that she is ready to continue the practices even after her parents' deaths, because "there must be someone to take over the job," and at this time, her brother seems unlikely. But, she adds, "if my brother does it then I don't need to."

[30] Interview with Interviewee Eight, August 11, 2024. Author's translation. All future quotations of Interviewee Eight are from the same interview and translated by the author.

A strong motivator for I-8 is her propensity to worry. When asked why she participates in ancestor veneration, I-8 first mentioned the phrase, "Venerate and you will be blessed, fast and you will have good things" (*có thờ có thiêng, có kiêng có lành*).[31] But for her, the blessings and good things are less about material things, or even health or safety (although she does care about those things). Rather, for I-8, ancestor veneration helps her "prepare mentally." She explains, "I *worry* about everything and can be mentally unstable." As an example of this worry, she mentions applying for a new job. Though she might have written all the documents and prepared for the interview carefully, she still worries about the process. "So, on important occasions I will say a prayer." But later in the interview she qualifies this, explaining, "I don't believe that you just need to say a prayer and tomorrow you will have a new job. … I only do it to ease my worrying." Ancestor veneration provides a psychological or emotional benefit for I-8.

I-8 was one of the only ones to speak about the role of ancestor veneration in creating *conflict* in the family. She told a story about a death anniversary attended by the extended family. Some family members complained about the how the death anniversary was performed. "They have their own standard, and when they come to someone else's home, they evaluate, they apply an outside standard, like, 'Oh my god, why are you offering like this, and why is the meal like that? That's not right. It must be like this.'" They might judge just a small ritual element or procedure, "but it can turn into a verbal argument." What could be a chance for dispersed family members to gather in harmony becomes an occasion for bickering, leading to family fracture.

[31] This well-known proverb is difficult to translate. The idea is that you are rewarded for spiritual activities.

Interviewee Nine

Interviewee Nine (I-9), a 33-year-old male, met the researcher at his short-term apartment. Though he is not the oldest son, I-9 takes ancestral veneration seriously, even more so than his older brother. This was evident in the specificity with which he spoke about the *cleanliness* of the altar at his home. "One must ensure cleanliness regularly because the incense will be quite ashy and will cling to everything, so you have to clean it regularly."[32] As an example, if a dead cockroach is on the altar, "you must discover it and take it off immediately. You cannot leave it. The altar is a place that must be regularly cleaned." His insistence on cleanliness seems to be in part motivated by fear of retribution. He notes, "Vietnamese think that if you leave [the altar] dirty, the ancestors will punish you."

This focus specifically on cleanliness connects with a wider theme of *ritual form*. I-9 is very concerned about doing things properly. For example, he notes that "regarding food offerings, I must ask permission before I take it down; I cannot just take it immediately." The format for prayers is also very important, and should start with introductory statements (e.g., name of supplicant, date, name of ancestor, and reason for entreating them), followed by supplications (*cầu xin*), which should be accompanied by incense and offerings. I-9 detailed the different setups for incense bowls depending on the size and purpose of the altar. When asked about what he hopes for his own afterlife, I-9 reported that he would be unsatisfied if his children decided they would not perform veneration for him but only wanted to remember him. For I-9, "It is better to express [remembrance] in some way rather than just say it. … Our ancestors believed that it must be expressed by interacting with the altar."

[32] Interview with Interviewee Nine, August 11, 2024. Author's translation. All future quotations of Interviewee Nine are from the same interview and translated by the author.

Anytime I-9 mentioned cleanliness or other ritual forms, as seen in every quotation so far, it was accompanied by the word *must* (*phải*), indicating a certain level of *obligation*. Indeed, the word is used 74 times throughout the interview in a variety of contexts. For example, if he misses a ritual occasion, I-9 says, "the next day I will buy offerings, and when I pray I *must* clearly state that yesterday I was busy and forgot." When speaking about his family's practices for honoring death anniversaries, he explains, "According to the regulations in my house, we *must* venerate six generations." As to the core value that undergirds this obligation, I-9 was less clear. He spoke at times of fear of the ancestor's retribution, family roles, belief, and even filial piety. Whatever the case, I-9 exhibits a strong sense of obligation.

Interviewee Ten

Interviewee Ten (I-10), a 48-year-old woman, was interviewed at a café. For I-10, the primary value of ancestral veneration is as a *cultural custom*. Words like "custom," "tradition," and "preservation" were prominent throughout the interview. For example, when speaking of the value of ancestral veneration for her kids, I-10 says, "When I perform [ancestral veneration] my children will see it, witness it, and that is a way to preserve tradition. … If parents don't perform it then they won't know about these things."[33] Later in the interview, when speaking about Vietnamese identity, she elaborates further, "Regarding [our children] venerating us after we die, I don't require them to do it in some fussy or complicated way, but they still need to know about it. Knowledge is not only for performance, but also for sharing with everyone, … for learning from them, … for learning about things that we think are valuable." She went on to note how, though thinking might change over time, children of this generation and future generations

[33] Interview with Interviewee Ten, August 12, 2024. Author's translation. All future quotations of Interviewee Ten are from the same interview and translated by the author.

should understand and respect the thinking of past generations. She shared how these practices can be preserved in various medias—books, videos, documents, etc. At times, I-10's ideas seemed to treat ancestor veneration like an artifact in a museum. This analogy is not wholly the researcher's interpretation, for while talking about preservation, I-10 says, "I like the way of the English, who have many museums to preserve [cultural customs]."

We might place this emphasis on cultural custom in a wider theme in 1-10's interview: the *social good* of ancestral veneration that flows from any personal benefits. This is true even apart from any belief in the metaphysical aspects of the rites. She explains, "Even if we don't believe, I still think these practices bring positive benefits, and so we should do them." When asked what personal benefit she gets from the ancestral practices, she notes harmony in her marriage: "I don't believe so much, but my husband thinks that [ancestral practices] will have an influence, and so if I do these practices my husband and I will have harmony." She then connects this more personal benefit to her relationships with others, saying, "My kids will know more about these cultural traditions and perhaps preserve them. And later, I think the communal spirit will improve. Everyone else does [ancestral veneration] and I do it, and then I and others will have the same spirit." For I-10, there is a connection between a person's ancestral practice and their role in society. Ancestral veneration promotes social good by fostering responsible members of society. If children refuse to honor and remember their deceased parents and ancestors, then "they will not have responsibility with those presently close to then, and others in society." Ritual interactions with the dead influence interpersonal relationships among the living.

Ancestor rites are not only about material but also *emotional benefits*. "Regarding the benefit [of ancestral veneration], I think it is more about the spirit [*tinh thần*]."[34] I-10 did not

[34] *Tinh thần* is a difficult word to translate. It does not refer to spiritual or metaphysical realities, but rather to

mention any material benefits of ancestral veneration, and in fact said the opposite: "About material benefits, I've not seen anything." Indeed, she actually spends material wealth for the sake of ancestral practices. "Regarding material resources, I will lose rather than gain, right? In that way, I spend material resources and time in order to receive emotional benefits." Regarding the content of those emotional benefits, I-10 reported feeling solemnity, warmth, peace of mind, security, and peace.

Finally, I-10 also repeatedly emphasized ***remembrance*** as the core aspect of ancestral veneration. "Ancestral veneration is an expression of gratitude and a remembrance of one's roots [*nhớ về cội nguồn*],[35] for example, each time I light incense and bow and pray a short bit of time, I can remember those I have lost … that is a meaning of [ancestral veneration]." For I-10, the duration of that remembrance need not be long, but if they neglect to do anything, then it amounts to "a loss of origin, ungratefulness, and a lack of responsibility." When speaking about her hopes for the veneration that her kids will give to her on her death anniversary, she has told them to keep it simple, eschewing large gatherings and big meals. Instead, "they only need to buy some flowers to put on the altar, … a bouquet of purple flowers because I like purple. They can put those on the altar to express their remembrance of me. … What I really want is for them to remember me." She then mentioned seeing western movies in which family members place flowers at the gravesite of loved ones. She admires that practice, saying, "that would be enough" for her.

a person's interior life. It is usually translated "spirit," "mind," or sometimes even "morale."

[35] The phrase literally means, "remember the origin."

Overarching Themes for All Interviews

After attentively engaging with each interview through multiple readings and a systematic coding process, the researcher was positioned to identify the primary themes that emerged as central across the collective interviews. The researcher sought to identify broad themes that capture and group the various interview-specific themes (henceforth called subthemes). This allows for each interviewee to retain his or her voice while contributing to a larger whole. It is to see the forest through the trees. Of course, what is described below does not exhaust the possible connections among these interviews but rather focuses on those themes that are most prominent and pervasive, and most important for the research question. This section will describe four broad themes as well as their contributing subthemes, highlighting how each subtheme reinforces the broad theme. Each broad theme is cast in terms of a tension, continuum, or relationship between two or more concepts, in order to highlight the variety of competing forces that are at play in ancestral veneration.

Broad Theme 1: Distinguishing *Form* and *Content*

Introduction

As the researcher compared interviews to each other, it quickly became clear that ancestral practices share similarities across all interviewees. For example, all of them identified the 1st and 15th of the lunar month as routine times of ritual interaction with the altar. All of them spoke about the prominence of death anniversaries and what happens at these events. All of them have similar types of altars with the same sorts of things on them. Speaking broadly, there is striking similarity in the occasions for ritual interaction, the ritual equipment used, the basic types of ritual engagement (e.g., cleaning, prayer, offering), and even procedures employed. This is not to say, however, that all interviewees practice ancestral veneration in the same way. As will be

shown below, there was significant difference in all these areas when looking more deeply than just the broadest conceptions. Indeed, what stands out more than the similarity is the flexibility in and the variety of ritual forms among practitioners.

But for all the interviewees, the forms themselves were not the point. Rather, the forms are vehicles for expressing deeper values. For most of them, ancestral veneration is not ultimately about external forms, but rather about internal meanings. This section will outline several themes that reveal this emphasis on form and show how interviewees, via their subthemes described in the previous section, emphasize form to different extents and in different ways. This first broad theme, detailing the distinction between form and content, plays an orienting role that will set the stage for the remaining three broad themes. Those remaining themes will represent the interviewees' answers to the question: what are the core internal meanings that lay behind the external forms?

Procedure/Ritual Form

Most interviewees mentioned procedural or form issues in some way. Perhaps the most widespread example is the requirement to clean the altar. While this was a central theme for I-9, it also came up in every other interview. I-2, for example, described her practice, "Every time I light incense, I must wipe off the altar so that it is very clean, and I must do it with a dedicated towel. One must not ever wipe the altar with a towel used for other purposes." She emphasizes not only the ritual action but also the specific ritual equipment to be used. Most interviewees mentioned the arrangement of ritual elements on the altar. For example, I-1 detailed the elements on his altar:

> After I clean [the altar], I ensure that everything is in the correct place. The venerated picture [*ảnh thờ*], that is the photo of the deceased, as well as other things like a jar, bottle, or bowl, chopsticks, and things displayed at the foot of the candle, should be

> arranged in the correct position. Further, I arrange the fruits, fruit cake, chicken, and other items I offer.

More than simply naming the elements themselves, I-1 is focused on their correct placement on the altar relative to other items.

Another procedural element that was similar across interviews was prayer. I-7 describes his practice: "After making an initial offering on the altar, I light a stick of incense, then I begin to bow. Then I start to speak, loudly or softly depending on the person." Regarding what is spoken, I-4 describes:

> I begin with a salutation, and then I start with supplications. "Today I come sincerely, and offer incense and fruit, and desire to be blessed, that luck will come to my family, my husband and I, and our children. And that our elders will have health." I desire the best things for my elders and my family and my children. And I will always end with a statement of thanksgiving for giving me a good life right now.

Most interviewees reported following a similar pattern in their verbal interactions with the ancestors. Each of these examples, then, speaks to the importance of ritual form. However, though all interviewees use the ancestral altar as a form, I-9 was, as shown above, the only interviewee who insisted on it as *the* proper form for expressing core meanings of ancestor veneration.

Flexibility/Variety

Even while there were some ritual commonalities, the differences were striking. Some interviewees themselves articulated the importance of flexibility. I-3 was especially clear on this point. When asked about her expenditures of time and money, she responded, "It depends on the idea of each household … for me, putting a small cake [on the altar] is a way that I remember or do this work. It is not true that I must make a large tray of food. So, there are many different ways; you don't have to fit into one mold." I-3 recognizes that her small cake is the flexible form that gives expression to remembrance.

Other times, however, the variety in forms only surfaced when comparing interviews. This was especially true with regards to the bowls for incense. Some interviewees, like I-4, have three bowls for incense on their altar. Meanwhile, I-9's simple altar has only one common incense bowl, though he acknowledges that some larger homes might have altars with four or five incense bowls. I-8, in mentioning her four incense bowls on the altar, remarked that three were for the ancestors, while one was for Buddha. Meanwhile, I-6, who was typically more concerned with procedure, insisted that Buddhist elements should not be mixed with ancestral veneration. Speaking about elements on the altar, she said, "A Buddhist altar cannot be combined with an ancestral altar." In this single example one sees great variety. However many bowls one uses, the researcher got no clear answers on what each one means. I-4 captured well the collective uncertainty of the group. After starting to describe each bowl, he gave up, confessing, "I don't really understand it deeply."

Unlike I-9 in the previous section, most interviewees were perfectly comfortable identifying and even extolling alternative external forms that give voice to the internal meanings they associate with ancestral veneration. As seen above, I-10 mentioned that she would be pleased, and it would be sufficient, if her children only followed the western practice of placing flowers at the gravesite. Further, I-7, who has no son to carry on the family's ritual life, spoke about his daughters, "It is certain that once they get married, they will follow their husband's family, and no one will venerate [us]." But I-7 conceded that, as an alternative, they would "only need to hang a picture or something like that." For I-7, the ancestral altar is a form that expresses the core value of filial piety, and so, "if someone chooses another way to express filial piety, then that person is a filial person."

Simplicity

This pliability in form is also seen in the emphasis on simplicity. Often, this emphasis was a reaction to laborious and time-consuming ritual practices.[36] Interviewees bemoaned especially the largess of death anniversaries, to which many family members are invited and must be fed. I-6 recognized how far things have already come, describing a death anniversary she had just been to, "Today it was only family eating together, without any outside guests, and the food and drink was simpler. But in the past, they would do it up in a very fussy way." Nonetheless, according to most there is still room for improvement. Despite his focus on ritual form, even I-9 did at times express the burden of it. When expressing what he wants to pass down to his children, he mentioned his hope that they can have a more simplified practice. Speaking about death anniversaries in his own family, he confessed, "If I had the power to decide I would decide for reductions, without too many rituals."

At other times, simplicity was upheld as a value in itself, seen as a more authentic way to express the essence of ancestral veneration. As seen above, I-2 says this explicitly, and it is worthy of reiteration: "I think that if I do [ancestor veneration] with my heart … then it still has meaning. But when it is done in a complicated way with too many procedures, I think it loses its meaning." For a concrete example, I-1 spoke about his close relationship with his grandfather. "My paternal grandfather has been gone a long time already, but he is still someone that I admire, and so I perform ancestral veneration well [for him]. Here, 'well' does not mean anything huge, but rather just cleaning the altar. I feel like that reminds me about the value of my

[36] One wonders if this is a remnant of the "revolutionary thrift" espoused by cadres during the revolutionary period. This was discussed in Chapter Two.

grandfather." For I-1 the goal is to remember, and a simple practice facilitates that remembrance better than anything "huge."

Perceptions of Others

Whether speaking about variety, flexibility, or simplicity, interviewees often cast their own practices in comparison or contrast to what others do. For those who contrast their own practices, the difference is often cast against those whose external forms are too numerous or overly burdensome. For example, speaking about expenditures related to ancestral practices, I-6 says, "Many people venerate in such a fussy way. But as for me, I do it very simply." For I-7, the contrast is more an emotional one, between those who are emotionally weak and those who are stronger. He described some people "who say that when they light incense and the ancestors hear [their prayers], then they get goosebumps or start to tremble, becoming limp … maybe they are people who are faint-hearted." I-7 goes on, "But as for me, I am strong enough, I am strong enough to not be influenced by that."

The word "superstitious" is sometimes used in this context. I-2 confesses, "I see everyone is very proper about it. They venerate, they go to the pagoda, they go to fortune tellers, all these things—everyone does more than me." But for I-2, there is a subtle sense that her more simplified practices are to be preferred. Regarding her children's practice, she hopes that they will know about ancestral veneration, but "only simply; I don't want them to be superstitious." When asked about the benefits ancestors receive, I-8 responded, "This is the thinking of Vietnamese, and they are rather superstitious." I-8 confessed that due to her predisposition to worry, she does participate in some of these rituals. But she seemed quick to separate herself from those who she labeled superstitious, saying, "Though I do engage in these [veneration rituals], I don't believe much in them."

At other times, instead of contrasting themselves with others, interviewees seem more concerned with being in step with the prevailing wisdom of others. Sometimes that concern is driven by falling into family roles and obligations, which will be discussed further in another section below. But other times it is a more general concern with what others do or teach. As noted above, even I-6, who contrasted herself with those whose practices are very fussy, also seemed concerned with what people say about ancestral veneration. In explaining different practices and procedures, she repeatedly refers to the influence of others. For example, when asked about the benefits ancestors receive, she began, "*People say* that there is a life after death. … *Everyone says* that if you don't take care of [the ancestors] then they will be hungry or they will be lonely. So, the monthly or weekly offerings that I offer with incense are so that I can give them extra" (italics mine). The form of her ritual practice is meant to be in step with the wisdom that she has received from others. Even in describing how ancestors eat or drink this extra that she offers, she again refers to prevailing wisdom, "*People say* that the deceased only smell it rather than eat it. They absorb the fragrance of it."

Nationalism

The interplay between form and content was very apparent when I-5 discussed nationalism. When asked about the relationship between ancestral veneration and her Vietnamese identity, she immediately brought up nationalism, noting the "problematic of Vietnamese identity and how it has been pushed along the way of nation-building." Specifically, ancestral veneration has been pushed as "the only way to distinguish Vietnamese from others nationally." Implicit in I-5's comments is the understanding that the government is utilizing the forms of ancestral rites and infusing them with nationalistic meanings, for political purposes. This makes ancestral veneration a defining feature of a government sponsored Vietnamese identity. I-5's distaste for

this rhetoric is shared by other interviewees. I-10 reflected, “In my view, ancestral veneration is not one aspect to express Vietnamese identity. For me, nationalism and national identity are expressed in other ways more [than ancestral veneration].”

Belief

The emphasis of some interviewees on the role of belief also highlighted the inadequacy of mere external forms. I-7 spoke about belief when performing ancestor rituals in hopes that the ancestors will help. “I have a belief that the ancestors will help. … I don’t only do [these rituals] and then that’s done. I don’t do it just to do it. Rather, I do it with belief and with a desire that [the ancestors’ help] will actually happen.” The forms do not serve themselves; rather, they serve a purpose that is fueled by I-7’s belief. As seen above, in speaking about whether the ancestors receive what is offered on the altar, I-4 conceded that he does not have a way to verify it. “I only believe that when I send [offerings] or wishes the ancestors will receive them … and belief is enough.” The external form cannot provide certainty, but belief is sufficient. When I-4 distinguished veneration at his home from veneration at his hometown, he was quick to say, “It is not necessary to travel to my hometown [to venerate], because when I venerate, I am sending belief.” More important than the external location is the internal belief. For I-4, belief is not just a means to an end. Rather it is the central value itself. He says, “When I perform [rituals] at the altar, it means I am believing in something, and that is the most valuable thing about venerating and praying at the altar.” For I-4, belief is the core of ancestor veneration.

Conclusion

Due to broad similarity and overlap in ritual forms, it would be an overstatement to say that the form of ancestral veneration is not important for the interviewees. However, it is clear from

the foregoing discussion that at deeper levels, there is more difference than similarity. A variety of forms are employed, and flexibility is widely encouraged. Modern practitioners are shifting to ritual forms that value simplicity in contradistinction to the largess and complexity of previous generations. There is recognition that behind any forms are deeper beliefs being expressed. Indeed, for some, belief is itself the main thing. Others, however, locate the core of ancestor worship elsewhere. The next sections will identify and demonstrate other concepts that constitute the chief content of ritual forms, as described by the interviewees.

Broad Theme 2: Understanding the *Individual* in Light of the *Family*

Introduction

The previous section ended with I-4's emphasis on belief as the core of ancestral veneration. However, I-1 provides an interesting contrast in that he is clear about his lack of belief. "I don't believe at all in an afterlife. … I don't believe that after I die I will exist in a spirit form." When pressed further, I-1 also confessed that he does not believe he will see his ancestors after death, nor does he believe they know about any ritual veneration performed for them, nor does he believe they receive any benefit from it. Further, he does not believe that the ancestors hear his prayers. And yet, he still prays![37] In other words, I-1 rejects the typical metaphysical beliefs that undergird ancestral veneration but continues to practice it. He explains this apparent contradiction after rejecting his belief in an afterlife, saying, "Though I don't believe, I still feel that I have a responsibility to perform [ancestral veneration] for deceased members of my family … it is still a responsibility of the son in a family." I-1 values his family to a significant extent and accepts the role of being the only son in his family and its corresponding responsibilities,

[37] Though I-1 did point out that his prayers do not include supplications for ancestors' help.

including ancestral rites. So central is his conception of family that he identifies it as his spirituality: "The only spirituality I have, if I have any, is in my family. That is my place of spiritual comfort." For I-1, family is the core meaning of ancestral veneration.

Though no interviewees said it quite so starkly as I-1, all of them spoke about the overriding importance of family with regards to ancestral veneration. As explained in Chapter Two, the family is the most fundamental unit of Vietnamese society. A person's identity is defined first by their membership in a family, and only secondarily by any individual traits. Further, membership in a family implies different roles with corresponding duties. The family's ritual life plays a central part in these roles and responsibilities. It is not surprising, then, that the initial online survey showed that family obligation is a top motivating factor for practitioners of ancestral veneration. This was also reflected by every interviewee to varying extents. This section will identify relevant subthemes from the interviews and show how they contribute to this broad tension between the individual and the family.

Roots/Family Line/Familyship

Performing ancestral veneration places the individual into a particular family. However, a particular family is not coterminous with a nuclear family. Rather, as discussed in Chapter Two, in Vietnamese conception the family is a diachronic entity that connects people across time and space, like a thread. This is what I-1 refers to as "familyship." As seen above, I-3's reason for performing ancestral rituals is to connect with this entity:

> First, [I do it] to orient myself back to my roots [*hương về cội nguồn*], for example at the death anniversary of my grandfather or grandmother. … For those who are living we show support to [the ancestors] in order to express our filial piety and concern. As for the those who have been lost, our veneration is an opportunity to remember them and appreciate them.

The act of ancestral veneration locates I-3 within a family which gives her life and identity. Other interviewees also acknowledged the power of roots. I-10 said, "Ancestral veneration is an expression of gratitude and a remembrance of one's roots [*nhớ về cội nguồn*]. For example, every time I light incense is a short amount of time to remember those who I have lost." I-4 used similar language with regards to what he wants his children to understand, "… when you drink the water, remember the source [*uống nước nhớ nguồn*]. This means that when I venerate, at the same time I know my children will also observe and remember, 'these are my grandparents, my parents.'"

The identity forming role of roots extends beyond the local family and altar and even includes remote family members and altars in one's hometown. I-1 beautifully describes going to his hometown's communal house (*đình*) and the effect it has on him: "The music they play at the communal house on every big occasion—when I hear it, I feel emotional. For example, every village has a village festival … and the music I hear during those days defines who I am."[38] His identity is formed by his family, of course, but also by the village from which that family comes, where many of his relatives still live.

Family Roles

Ancestral veneration does not only locate a person in a particular family; it also reinforces the roles and responsibilities of family membership. These roles depend on both gender and age. This was most clear when interviewees spoke about sons. When asking about I-2's family, she said that her husband is not the oldest son (*con trưởng*) and, regarding ancestral practices,

[38] The *đình* is a communal house in every locale which held religious, administrative, and social functions, most important of which is to house the village's guardian spirit. Veneration of that spirit and other local heroes happens there.

"doesn't know anything." But she went on to say, "But his older brother knows it all very clearly." Even speaking about her father's prayer life, I-2 confessed, "My father seldom [prays], because he is not the eldest son." Her brother and father's lack of engagement illustrates the central role that an oldest son plays in the family's ritual life. I-7 describes the duties he holds as an oldest son: "In a family with many siblings, the oldest son is the one who takes the main responsibility for organizing [ritual events] of the family. They don't do everything, but usually they act like the conductor of an orchestra." I-3 agrees, saying, "The oldest son usually stands up to handle everything, including issues in the present life, as well as issues related to past lives, like the veneration of the ancestors or sweeping the grave." I-1, an only son, describes it this way: "The son is the one who carries out the veneration [for the family]." This is not only a ritual role but also implies practical consequences. For example, I-1 mentions the inheritance of his family land.

> The transfer of property from one generation to another is related to ancestral veneration. The most important properties will be willed to the person who carries on [the family's] veneration … Ancestral practices include preparing feasts and many other things that are quite expensive. Therefore, the best properties will go to the person who has the potential to continue [the family's] ancestral veneration.

The ritual responsibilities and the material assets of the family are intertwined, all falling to the oldest son to manage.

But what happens when one has no son, or when a son refuses or fails to carry out his responsibilities? Interviewees indicated pragmatic approaches. For example, I-2 reports an exception for those who have no son to carry on their veneration: "When my grandmother died, my mom became the one who must venerate her. Because my grandmother had no son." As shown above, I-8 reported that her older brother absents himself from his duties as oldest son, and so those duties have fallen on her. I-9 also noted that his older brother was less enthusiastic about ancestral practices. He said, "He has responsibility, but he is not as meticulous as me." As

a result, though his brother formally holds the office of oldest son, I-9 is the one who often does most of the work. Each of these examples show that, while the role of the oldest son remains in force, there is considerable flexibility in how that role is carried out according to a variety of situations.

Ancestral veneration also implies roles and duties for women, namely, to participate in the ritual life of their husband's family. I-7 explains, "For daughters, when they get married, they must follow the family line of their husband and will not be able to install an altar for their own parents." After marriage, a woman's role in her birth family's ritual life becomes secondary to her in-laws' ritual life. As reported by interviewees, formally speaking, women serve in a support role. For I-6, this means that "I am the person who usually must make the food." When speaking of the stress women experience during death anniversaries, I-6 casts it entirely in terms of food preparations. I-8 bemoans the experience of a friend who lives with her husband's family: "she must go to the market early in the morning to buy flowers, fruit, rice and other items, and then display them all on the altar … all before going to work. I could not put up with that." Though their formal role might be support, women often go beyond that role. I-2 says, "If I am in my husband's [family's] home, I am just support. But in my family here in Hanoi, occasionally it will be my husband—but because my husband is sometimes not as careful or as proper as I am, then he will only do it when I can't." I-6 had a similar situation: "In traditional Vietnamese families, the man will be the one to venerate, but in my household, my husband doesn't like to do it, so he lets me take care of the altar." In these cases, the women are performing the functions of the role informally, even while their husbands still maintain the role formally.

Interviewees also spoke of roles between parents and children, though there was less uniformity. Regarding her teenage daughters, I-3 reported, "My kids do not help with cleaning [the altar], but they do participate in veneration." Of her daughter, who is only 3 years-old, I-5 said, "Sometimes my husband will bring my daughter to come [to the altar] and teach her how to bow and how to pray." Other interviewees reported less engagement from their kids. Nonetheless, as children get older, more is expected of them. I-8, an unmarried woman in her early 30s, said,

> When I was 18 or 20, I didn't really have a burden with lots of family responsibilities. I just went to school, went to work, and my parents did all the [ritual work]. But since I was about 20-30 years old, I've lived with my parents. Even if I was married, I would belong to my in-law's [house] and would need to follow their ideas. And I think they would have veneration rituals like this, or even more with greater requirements. At home, when adults tell me to do these things it is because I am older now and so I need to accept these duties.

As I-8 indicates, the key shift is when someone gets married, or is of marriageable age. When asked when her kids would start participating, I-2 responded, "I think probably when they get married." The reality or prospect of starting one's own family increases the necessity of grounding oneself in what I-1 called a "familyship."[39] On the other hand, that's not to say that a married person's parents are no longer involved in their ritual life. On the contrary, though I-5 is married with kids, and lives separately from her parents, she repeatedly mentioned the ongoing influence of her mom on her ritual life. Speaking about ancestral practices during the Lunar New Year, she says, "My mom would say it is the most important date and that we should do something more [on the altar]. Then we'll cook something, and actually, the food comes from my mom." A tension is created between the coming-of-age that requires an individual to

[39] I-1 used this term to refer to the family unit that persists over time, including past ancestors and future generations. See the summary of his interview above.

establish their own ritual practices, and the ongoing connection they have to their family roles and responsibilities.

Responsibility/Obligation

The roles and duties that are placed on individuals creates and reflects relationships that ties them together with the larger family. Personal choice or desire does not drive decisions, but rather obligation and responsibility. As seen above, I-8 reveals this most explicitly: "If my parents did not want me to do [ancestral veneration], I wouldn't concern myself with it." But because she has an obligation to her family, she does it. I-2 treats ancestral veneration like a given: "It is something I must do, like I must go to work, or I must go to school." When speaking about prayer, I-1 states, "If there was no one else at home, and it was just me then I would need to be the person to pray. There always must be someone to pray." I-1 also captures how the *must* of obligation is also the *should* of responsibility. "I feel I have a responsibility to perform [ancestral veneration] for the deceased people in my family." But his sense of responsibility is not actually to the ancestors themselves, but rather to his role in the family. Though he does not believe in any kind of afterlife, or that his ritual actions benefit the ancestors in any way, he says, "this is still the responsibility of a son in a family." His personal beliefs are secondary to his role within the family.

When pressed how they would respond if their children refused to participate in ancestor veneration, thus not fulfilling their obligations and responsibilities, many interviewees had trouble imagining such a situation. Moreover, they had very different answers. Some, like I-4, could accept their child's decision. "It's no big deal. When they are younger, they will just follow, but when they are older, they have a choice. When they are older, I would not meddle. But when they are younger, I will explain so that they understand the meaning of [ancestral

practices].” Of her daughter, I-5 says, simply, “It’s up to her.” Most other interviewees acknowledged some amount of personal freedom, though they often tempered this freedom. For example, I-7 says, “If my kids seriously refused, I would respect it … but the issue is that—because I am their dad—I have the right to know why they refuse.” I-10 is less conciliatory: “First I would try to explain it and convince them. I would tell them about the meaning of [ancestral veneration]. And I would speak about the meaning their activities would have with their parents after they are no longer there, that this is a connection.” At the prospect of her children not performing veneration, I-6 confesses that she “would feel very sad, because to refuse is to not fulfill the duty of a child to their grandparents and ancestors.” But she also acknowledges that she could not force it on her children, “because that is their choice.” This variety of answers only highlights the tension between the individual vis-à-vis their family relationships.

Gathering

Ritual practices at the ancestral altar are seldom performed individually. Rather, these are occasions for nuclear families, or extended families, to gather. This act of gathering has value in different ways. Speaking about death anniversaries, I-6 identifies them as a time to gather with those who are deceased. She calls death anniversaries a “family reunion,” and goes on to say, “Though [the ancestors] are in another world, they can still reunite with their family.” In this way, the altar becomes a point of communion between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Other interviewees, however, focus more on communion among the living only. For I-9, “I think this aspect of meeting together to perform the death anniversary makes everyone closer.” I-3 explains further, “This is an opportunity for many people who are still living and working, even if they are overloaded with work, to take time to meet, exchange, and chat.” So

important is this gathering that it might outweigh other procedural aspects. For example, I-6 mentioned a recent death anniversary for a distant grandparent, which her husband's paternal grandfather would have preferred to hold in that ancestor's hometown. "However, because it is so far and it would be inconvenient for all his children to travel there, and because this distant grandparent had died long ago, he decided to organize it [in Hanoi] so that all his kids and grandkids could participate." The value of having everyone present outweighed holding the event at the proper location. So strong is the importance of gathering that, for I-1, "the meaning of [the death anniversary] is family gathering, not memorializing somebody." In I-1's view, gathering is not an ancillary benefit but rather the primary meaning of death anniversaries.

Explicit in many interviewees' ideas about the value of gathering is an interplay between centripetal and centrifugal forces. I-2 said, "Because everyone lives far from each other, this is a chance for everyone to gather with each other." Though life circumstances act centrifugally to scatter family members all over, the family's ritual practice acts centripetally to bring them all together again. The centrifugal force is not only about geographic separation but also a separation brought on from busyness. I-1 says, "The death anniversaries … are a chance to sit and eat together. For Vietnamese this is everyday becoming more and more rare because everyone is everyday becoming more and more busy." These times of gathering reorient individuals and their nuclear families to the larger "familyship."

Conflict

Given the tension between the individual and the family, it is not surprising that conflict can erupt. In explaining the variety of ancestral practices in Vietnam, I-4 states, "Generally speaking with culture, each place has a different practice, which helps us understand that there is no standard practice." Though this chapter has shown this to be true, in the day-to-day realities of

family relationships, standards are applied. As seen above, I-8 described just such a situation, in which one family member applied her own standards to criticize the way another family member had prepared the meal and ritual performances for the death anniversary. It even turned into a verbal argument. I-6 describes a similar problem in her own family during a death anniversary that happened the very day the researcher interviewed her:

> Today I had an argument with my sister-in-law [*chị dâu*]. … Take lighting incense on the altar and carrying the tray of rice to make an offering as an example. In my home I only scoop one bowl of rice because that one bowl of rice is only a symbol. But she scoops six bowls of rice. But she is the oldest daughter-in-law in the family and so I deferred to her. She said what she wanted to do.

Thus, though death anniversaries are occasions for binding a family together, they can also create opportunities for conflict. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that I-6 deferred precisely because her sister-in-law is married to the eldest brother of the family and thus has preeminence. Her commitment to her family role diffused the conflict. The individual gave way to the family.

Other interviewees do not mention conflict directly but do indicate a fear of judgment by family members. I-1 emphasized his responsibilities to his ancestral land, but notes, "On the one hand, I receive this land, but on the other hand that means I must venerate the ancestors. So now, if no one performs the ancestral veneration … everyone will feel very disappointed [with me]." The fear of his family's judgment motivates his fulfillment of his responsibilities. He also tells a story from his childhood, about his paternal uncle:

> My uncle is a very clean person. Every time he came to my house, he would take a finger and wipe the altar like this [I-1 motions with his pointer finger, as if wiping its tip on a flat surface], to see if his finger had any dust on it. It was a small action, but it left an impression on me until now, so that every time I clean the altar, I try to clean it very well so that, in the event my uncle comes and wipes his finger across my altar, he won't find any dust.

Though I-1 shared this story with laughter, it reveals a tension between his individual ritual performance and the expectations and potential judgment of his family.

Conclusion

This broad theme has shown that ancestor veneration is just as much about the world of the living as it is about the world of the dead. Ancestor veneration roots the individual in a family that extends back to previous generations, and places on the individual specific roles and duties. This collective identity, with its attendant responsibilities and obligations, guides individual choices. These roles and duties are reinforced in the family's ritual gatherings, though not without occasional conflict.

Broad Theme 3: Securing *Human Benefit* and/or *Ancestor Benefit*

Introduction

While the previous theme highlighted the ways ancestral practices influence relationships among the living, this theme emphasizes how the ancestral altar becomes a place of interaction with the dead. The nature of this interaction is often cast in terms of benefits. Many interviewees expressed that their ritual actions are performed to benefit the ancestors in some way. Meanwhile, more expressed the hope that the ancestors would respond by blessing (*phù hộ độ trì*) their own lives. This dynamic was captured by I-2, I-3, and I-8 using the well-known Vietnamese proverb, "Venerate and you will be blessed, fast and you will receive good things" (*có thờ có thiêng, có kiêng có lành*).[40] Indeed, many interviewees reported that, apart from routine engagement with the ancestral altar (1st and 15th of the month, major holidays, death anniversaries, etc.), rites are also performed occasionally when there is a particular problem or need. The relative emphasis on benefits given versus benefits received varied among interviewees, though both were present in almost all interviews. This focus on benefits gives

[40] I-7 also made a similar sentiment, but with different wording: "I throw something good out into the universe and I receive something good in return." I-4 cast this idea in terms of cause and effect.

evidence to the transactional nature of the relationship between the living and the dead discussed in Chapter Two. Using subthemes identified in each interview, this section will unfold the dynamics of this transactional relationship from the perspective of the interviewees.

Fear/Worry

Fear plays a part in motivating interviewees towards ritual performance to seek out blessing and protection. Sometimes, interviewees identified the object of their fear or worry according to life circumstances. For example, health concerns were a primary fear. I-4 specifically mentioned COVID-19 and asking the ancestors to "help so that my kids do not get COVID." I-6 mentioned dangerous traffic in the context of ancestor help. "You know that riding a motorbike in Hanoi is very dangerous, right? Naturally, then, sometimes I am thinking about something, and my mind will wander off, and just then another motorbike will swerve towards me. But when I avoid [getting hit], I think, 'Whew, probably the ancestors helped me.'" Other times, fears were related to school or job. As seen above, I-8 mentioned how the fear of a job interview will cause anxiety, providing occasion to engage the ancestral altar. I-4 had similar sentiments: "Before important events, like a big exam or a big interview, I will light incense, as a way to announce [to the ancestors] that I hope for a good result." I-7 repeatedly mentioned the risky nature of business transactions. A fear of failure drives him to ritual performance: "My role at the company is to deal with all these things, and if I fail, it is with the title of Director." Speaking about the ancestors, he goes on, "I want to get an extra force for support."

Other times, the object of fear is the retribution of the ancestors themselves. I-7 has trouble putting it into words, but states, "Many people think that if [something bad] happens here or there, then it was certainly because you did not [perform your ancestral duties] that it happened." I-5 said something similar, tying it to her conception of security. "Security in the sense that if

we're not going to perform [ancestral veneration], we're going to get punishment. … It's a very common perception that people might associate so many of their life events with, 'you did something wrong to your ancestors.'" Of all interviewees, I-9 mentioned the punishment of the ancestors more clearly than anyone else. As shown above, I-9 fears that if his altar is not thoroughly clean, the ancestors might punish him. He relates another story from the past, when he took down the offered food before asking permission of the ancestors. "Just then, I got sick for three or four days. Seriously sick." He associated his sickness with the retribution of the ancestors. Above, I-9 mentioned the need to apologize when he missed a routine ritual obligation. When this is done, "then the ancestors won't punish you for that." Despite many interviewees speaking about fear, some, like I-10, were more skeptical: "Some people believe that if you don't perform [ancestral veneration], bad things will happen. I don't believe that."

Finally, a minority of interviewees spoke of their concerns about their own afterlife. The researcher asked I-9 if he would be worried if his children did not venerate him. "My belief is that there would be [a problem] in the underworld. If my children forget [to venerate me], when I go down there it will be very hard, and I won't have a connection with the living. Down there it will be very hard. I won't have any money or anything at all."[41] A few other interviewees acknowledged the possibility of problems in the afterlife, but did not see it as a present concern. For example, when asked if she wanted her children to venerate her, I-8 said,

> Right now, I don't, but when I am older I will. People's thinking always changes. When they are 20 years old, they think one way, but when they are 30 or 50 years old, they will think differently. I observe that most people who are older, like my parents now, they usually expect a lot from their children. Their fear of going to the afterlife increases, and they hope that when they go to a new environment, they will

[41] I-9 made a sharp distinction between the afterlife (*kiếp sau*) and the underworld (*âm phủ*). According to I-9, the latter is where one goes first and is where an ancestor can suffer. The former is when one is reborn again. No other interviewees made this distinction, nor did anyone else use the word "underworld."

> have the help of those who remain. … Take my grandmother as an example. The older she gets, the more she focuses on issues of veneration.

I-9 also observes that concern for and fear of the afterlife grows with age.

Results

As I-4 says, "I always wish for good things to come to me. There are some things that I don't know what I can do to get, and so I pray about those things." But while the desire for benefits pushes interviewees to entreat the ancestors, it is the results of these prayers that solidifies the sense that ancestors help. I-8 recognizes that as her perception of the ancestors' help grows, so does her belief. "When I have a small bit of belief and I pray for the ancestors to help me a little, or to be luckier, then after this my belief will gradually increase. Because many times I think I have already been helped." I-9 tells the story of his maternal grandmother, connecting the story explicitly to benefit:

> When my grandmother had to have surgery, my mom, along with my uncles and aunts in the household, went to venerate [the ancestors] quite a lot. They went to venerate my grandfather and other ancestors in the extended family. … At that time her treatment was very severe, and many people did not think she would recover, but afterwards she did. … Generally speaking, [ancestral veneration] has some benefit that I can see, that I can tell as a story. It's not as if I do it only for peace of mind.

For I-9, there is a clear expectation for a tangible benefit. In this case, his grandmother lived for another 12 years. As shown above, I-7's it-doesn't-hurt-to-try attitude is results-oriented. When speaking of ancestral engagement for work or health issues, he says, "I cannot be 100% certain that if I perform [ancestral veneration] then I will have a good result. But I just go ahead and do it and then see if I get a better result." As an example he spoke of his business, when his company gets into bidding wars with other companies. On many occasions, he prayed to the ancestors, and "there were a few projects in which my company was chosen for the job." So central is I-7's desire for the ancestor's help that his words quoted above bear repeating, "I truly

think that first and foremost I do ancestor worship for me. … I don't only do it for the ancestors." For him, human need rather than ancestor need drives the ritual action.

Human Effort

Though interviewees hope for and even expect the help of the ancestors, this is never a replacement for human effort. However, the value of human effort relative to ancestor help varied among interviewees. I-2 distinguished herself from her parents on this point:

> I think that my parents' generation believes that you must perform [ancestral veneration] thoroughly and after that you will have a blessed and successful life. Because, for example, everyone thinks that if you don't venerate properly then your business will be bad or you won't be lucky. But for me, I believe that whether you succeed or not depends on your own real effort, not on veneration.

For I-2, success in life is dependent entirely on one's own effort. I-8 communicated a similar sentiment: "I don't believe that you just need to pray and then you will have money and a job. I don't believe in that. I only perform [ancestral veneration] to help reduce my fear. But I believe that you have to prepare, you have to take appropriate action—that the material determines the next steps." A bit later in the interview, she said, "I give more importance to getting to work than to venerating on the 1st and 15th of each month." In this way, both I-2 and I-8 stress the priority and potential of human effort. Meanwhile, I-7, too, acknowledges the important role of human effort, but emphasizes its limits. In speaking of the ancestors' blessing in work endeavors, I-7 adds a caveat, "It is not only [ancestral veneration], it is not only dependent on that, but also on my own effort first. If I try but I see that it is not enough then I'll add some [ancestral] action with the hope of help." For I-7, human effort comes first, and when it reaches its limits, the ancestors are consulted. As shown in the summary of his interview's themes, when his kids are sick, I-7 and his wife try practical remedies first. If there is no or limited improvement once

those avenues have been exhausted, then the ancestors are approached for their assistance. The ancestors supplement human effort, doing what it cannot.

Material vs. Emotional Benefits

But what are the actual benefits that interviewees hope to receive? This varies widely among interviewees, though there are some noteworthy overall trends. Material and physical benefits will be considered first. No interviewees viewed ancestral veneration a quick way to secure material wealth. As seen above, I-4 agreed with his wife that one does not simply ask the ancestors for 10 billion Vietnam dong, saying, "It's not like you can just ask to hit the jackpot." I-4's wife did say she prayed for wealth, but she spoke of it only generally and in connection with other things: "I only pray that I want health and I want wealth [*giàu sang*] and I want safety." I-10's practice is different. She explains, "I don't have ambition or expectation to ask for wealth or riches or other [material things]. I don't believe in that." In fact, I-10 provides an honest assessment: "Speaking of material benefits, I've never seen any." Save for I-4, no other interviewees shared that they asked the ancestors for material wealth directly, though I-7 and I-9 did speak of their help in business.

Far more prominent across all interviewees were physical benefits, i.e., health and safety. The most prominent supplication across all interviewees was their own health and the health of their families. For example, when asked what he prays for, I-9 reports, "I pray for health, because my parents are older now and so I must prioritize them." Indeed, the story he shared above about his grandmother's surgery illustrates his point. I-6 describes her supplications: "I don't ask for anything too lofty; I only ask for peace and health for myself and for my family." I-2 also describes her "hope that [the ancestors] will bless me and my husband, and my kids with health." I-10 expresses similar ideas: "I ask for the blessing of peace and health for myself, my

family, and others close to me." Clearly, health is a major concern for interviewees, one that the ancestors are believed to be able to influence.

Interviewees emphasized the emotional benefits of ancestral veneration just as much as, if not more than, any material or physical benefits. As quoted earlier, I-10 says, "I spend material resources to receive emotional benefits." After I-8 performs ancestral veneration, she says, "it helps me to feel more confident." I-10 mentioned, "I should do [ancestral practices] so that I feel more relaxed in my spirit." She goes on to say that "it helps me and others around me feel secure and peaceful." Other interviewees used words and phrases related to peace. When asked what benefits she received from ancestral rites, I-2's first response was, "First, is peace of mind. I feel more assured." I-6 mentioned many things that she prays for, but summarized at the end, saying, "Mainly I ask them to bless me with peace." I-3 said, "[Ancestral veneration] brings peace into my thinking and into my everyday life." I-4's wife interjected during the interview on this point, adding, "Later on if I feel that my life is peaceful then I will feel that I received that peacefulness from the ancestors." I-6 also mentioned feeling protected: "I feel like I am protected, like there is some deity above that is protecting me." This feeling of security is shared by other interviewees. I-5 also mentioned something similar, saying, "the close people around me—my husband, my daughter, my family, my colleagues, my best friends—I feel that they are also being protected by something bigger than us."

Social Benefits

Beyond any benefits that are received by individuals and their families, a few respondents also noted that ancestral veneration, to use I-1's words, "is a good thing for society." I-7 says something similar and connects it to his kids, "I think this is a beautiful thing, a good tradition, and so I want my kids to understand it." I-10 spoke most compellingly about the social good of

ancestral rites. She mentions the danger of nonperformance, noting, "Forgetting to perform [ancestral veneration] might not have any influence on one's parents, but the children will feel like they have lost their origin, they will not be grateful, and they will be irresponsible." She explains this further in terms of expanding circles of social relationships:

> An individual lives in a community, and their family is the community that is closest to them. After that comes their neighbors around them, and then all of society. If someone first and foremost has responsibility with themselves, and they have responsibility with their family, then they will have responsibility with their neighbors and with society. You can't have someone who loves their family and who loves those around them that is evil. Maybe you could but the majority will turn into responsible and grateful people. I think we should educate our children about [ancestral veneration] so that they can turn into good people for society. It's a small thing, but naturally small things that we do—whether they have a small or large influence—will still be good for society.

In this way, I-10 makes a clear connection between the ritual practices associated with ancestral veneration and one's positive place in wider society.

Altruism

While interviewees spoke more about benefits received from the ancestors, some also altruistically spoke of wanting to help the ancestors. Undergirding this desire to help the ancestors is the well-known saying, which both I-3 and I-8 used, "as in this life, so the afterlife" (*trần sao âm vậy*).[42] Just as the living have needs, so the ancestors. I-8 explained, "It means that when they [make offerings], they are offering items for the afterlife." The actions of the living affect the lives of the dead.

Most interviewees were at least aware of the potential to help their ancestors. When praying, I-2 says, "I speak from the heart about the things I truly desire, for example, that the grandparents or parents that have died will be at ease in the afterlife." She also spoke of food

[42] This is sometimes written, *dương sao âm vậy*. The meaning is the same.

offered to her recently deceased grandmother, saying, “These days, having just lost my grandmother, I feel that I am inviting her to really eat. I think that when I [offer the food] she will really eat it.” It should be noted that some other interviewees did not believe in a literal eating but rather some form of nonliteral eating, while others did not believe ancestors receive any food at all. In connection with helping ancestors, I-6 spoke of spirits who wander (*linh hồn đi lang thang*) without anyone to venerate them, “My parents and grandparents are lost, but they have someone in their family to light incense, to venerate them, but [wandering spirits] don’t have anyone to take care of them and they are hungry.” For this reason, at certain times she makes offerings to these wandering spirits.

One traditional form for sending benefits to the ancestors is through votive papers. I-8 mentioned votive papers, saying, “Many people in my extended family, including uncles and aunts, burn votive papers because they want to pray that the deceased on that day … will receive them. So sometimes there are [votive paper] motorbikes, clothing, and other things.” But speaking about her own activities with votive papers, she reports, “I don’t burn them. Only my dad does. My generation doesn’t do that anymore.” However, I-9, who is the same generation as I-8, burns all types of votive papers. “If the children remember them, then the ancestors will live in the underworld more comfortably, with money and other things that the children burn for them. … My household burns lots of different votive papers … money, belongings, … furnishings, TV, refrigerator, tables.” I-9 told a story about votive papers:

> From the time he died, my maternal grandfather was very responsive. There is one story we tell in our family—at that time I was still small and I didn’t really understand anything. My grandmother was still alive then, but my grandfather had died already. One time we burned a [votive paper] suitcase for him. Afterwards, my grandma had a dream in which he came back and complained, “This suitcase has a hole in it!” When we looked in the ashes, sure enough, there was a piece missing in the suitcase.

Most other interviewees, however, used votive papers only sparingly (e.g., they burn only votive clothing, but not other things), and some do not burn at all.

Some had more idiosyncratic views on the benefits ancestors received. I-7, who above shared that he performs ancestral veneration first and foremost for himself, still qualified his statement. “I look more plainly [than others], and I truly think that first and foremost I perform [ancestral rites] for myself. I am doing it for me, but that doing-it-for-me is located within actions that benefit the ancestors.” Even if he could not clearly define what benefits the ancestors receive, I-7 was unwilling to say that their benefits were unimportant. Meanwhile, I-3 (who is married to I-7) barely mentioned personal benefits at all. Rather, she was the most altruistic of all interviewees, emphasizing helping the ancestors simply for their own sake, without expectation of anything in return, even though she could not say for certain if the ancestors received the benefit. She said, “Whether or not they receive it is their business. My job is to help.” Others, too, were hesitant to assert absolutely that the ancestors receive any benefit. I-10 is representative in this way. When asked whether ancestors receive benefits, she said, “I don’t believe that, but I don’t totally oppose it.” I-1 was the most clearly disbelieving. When asked if the ancestors receive any benefits, he responded, “My belief is that they don’t, and yet I still perform [ancestral rites]. I still do it even though I don’t believe.”

Conclusion

For some interviewees, ancestral veneration is a transactional ritual in which benefits are both given and received. Fear of trouble, whether it comes from natural or supernatural sources, motivates these interviewees to seek the help of ancestors. Interviewees hope, and sometimes expect, to receive tangible and intangible benefits in the day-to-day events of their lives—illnesses, business ventures, exams, job interviews and more. But interviewees still use medicine,

weigh risks, study for exams, and prepare for job interviews. The ancestors' help is a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, human effort. The benefits received from the ancestors might be physical, material, or even social, but are more often emotional. But even as humans try to secure benefits for themselves in this life, they also hope to secure benefits for the ancestors in the afterlife, though interviewees were less united on what that meant.

Broad Theme 4: Connecting the *Past* through the *Present* to the *Future*[43]

Introduction

For practitioners, ancestral veneration is a very personal ritual. While they do often venerate those who have long been dead, interviewees spoke more often of those deceased family members that they knew personally, describing veneration as a way to maintain a connection with them. Repeatedly, I-5 mentioned her grandmother. "The one that I talk to most when I pray and I converse is my grandma. I just ask how she is, like, 'Do you have your favorite food here [on the altar]?' It brings back memories with my grandma." Those who, for the living, are only a memory of the past, are brought into present focus. As I-3 puts it, "Every time I light incense and prepare the altar there is a connection between me and another world." For her and many others, the altar is a site of communion, communication, and connection—a bridge between the past and the present. And yet, that bridge does not end in the present, but extends on into the future as parents teach and model these practices for their children, and as these cultural customs are preserved as a society. This transmission connects with a subtheme

[43] The use of the word "past" is specific to this broad theme and should not be applied to other broad themes. While broad theme #2 showed the living and the dead to engage in a transactional relationship according to present needs in their respective worlds, this broad theme sees ancestral practices as avenues to stay connected to those who are no longer present in the world of the living and are, in some sense, seen in the past tense. Indeed, interviewees often referred to the ancestors in the past tense as those who have been lost (*đã mất*).

seen above: the notion of family line or "familyship" as a diachronic entity that begins in the past, runs through the present, and extends into the future. As a point of connection, ancestral veneration practices concretize this reality at a moment in time and in a local space. This broad theme will be unpacked through discussion of key subthemes that were identified in individual interviews.

Remembrance

More than any other single subtheme, remembrance was prominent across all interviewees. Interviewees constantly mention how ancestral veneration provides occasion for them to remember those whom they have lost. I-1 mentions his paternal grandfather, saying that the ancestral practices "remind me of the value of my grandfather, and I feel happier and more joyful." I-8 connected remembrance to emotional responses experienced at the altar just after someone dies. "If there is someone who has just died that day, or say in the first week, [there will be] the lighting of incense. After that person is gone, the family will continue to light incense. In the process of lighting incense and in remembering that person, then I will cry." Later, she makes this connection between remembrance and the altar explicit: "Standing in front of the altar with the picture of the person feels more formal, and it will remind me of the person even more." I-3 also explicitly connects a ritual action to remembrance. She says, "For me, offering just a small cake is one way for me to remember." Though I-9 is currently childless, he spoke of his potential children's ancestral practice, saying, "When I do have children, I want them to remember their ancestors. Firstly, to remember their parents."

As seen in I-10's words just above, for many interviewees, remembrance is connected to those with whom they have personally had experience. I-1 explains,

> On the altar are two kinds of people. One is those who I have never met, including those who died before I was born. It also includes my older sister, who died before I was born. And then there are those who I have met before, including my paternal grandmother, with whom I had 20 years of my life before they died.

Naturally, I-1 had greater emotional connection with those whom he personally knew. I-5 reflects this same point when she speaks of emotional remembrances of her grandmother. "It's just the flashback of memories with the person that I have a connection with. I feel a connection to my grandma. Some of the grandparents on my dad's side, I didn't live with them. They died before I was born." I-9 also mentioned a grandparent that was special to him. "If I venerate someone that I knew, then I remember that time when they were living, and their sentiments [*tình cảm*] for me. I feel grateful and appreciative of those sentiments when they were living."

For some interviewees, remembrance was such a strong component that it became a core part of ancestral veneration. I-10 explicitly connects remembrance to the core meaning of ancestor rites:

> Those [deceased people] that I have personally known in my life—everything passes away—I don't ever have time to sit and think about them. There are some things that are attached with me, and in these moments, even if only 10-15 minutes, I will have time to remember those who are gone. I think this is one meaning of [ancestral veneration].

Later she again emphasizes that she needs "only a little bit of time to remember again and have recollections" of those who have been lost. As seen above, when speaking of the veneration she hopes to receive, she even speaks of the possibility of abandoning ancestral veneration, allowing for a simple remembrance with flowers by a gravesite. I-3 makes a similar move, identifying remembrance as the core meaning of ancestral rites. In fact, when speaking of her children, she could accept it if they abandoned veneration practices entirely. "If the ideas [about ancestral veneration] change, my children can remember me in many ways. It doesn't have to be veneration." She later concedes, "There are people who do not venerate, but they still remember

the ancestors." For her, the most important thing is that those who are gone are remembered. Her husband, I-7, agrees, saying, [The altar] is not necessary, but I want my children to remember me. I know that society will change, and so only if my kids are conscious of this will they find a way. My kids can remember me by some other way, because the meaning of a father is inside of them already. An [altar] is just an expression." For each of these interviewees, remembrance is the internal core beneath the external forms of ancestor veneration.

Communication

While remembrance was a key subtheme, a simple recalling to mind does not adequately capture the depth of connection that some interviewees experience in ancestral practices. For them, it is not only remembering ancestors in the past but connecting with them presently. Many spoke of these practices, then, as a way to communicate. For I-7, this communication is two-way. The first part is what I-7 repeatedly refers to as "sending a message." He says, "I come to the altar to light incense with a desire to send a message of gratitude to the ancestors." But his own needs and desires are also a part of the message: "Prayer means that I speak my desires and send the message off." As for the second part of the communication, the response of the ancestors, I-7 does not report any audible responses. Rather, the response of the ancestors comes not through words but rather through the benefits received. "I want to present something, some message, to the ancestors for their help, and so I light incense on the altar and send the message." Regarding praying about the bidding wars that affect his company, he says, "I send the message up [to the ancestors] so that they can help me. If I get the result, then that's great."

In contrast, I-5 describes her prayers as one-way communication. "My praying, it's not actually praying, but it's more like a monologue. I talk to the ancestor." She explains further, "I just speak because I want to, and I think I should have some communication. Normally, I just

think in my mind and don't speak out loud. I would think that is enough of a communication—that I thought those conversations." Even speaking about her own children's veneration of her, I-5 describes it as "the way she would communicate with me," without mentioning any response.

Custom/Tradition

Every interviewee, to varying extents, referred to ancestral veneration as a custom or a tradition. This is, they all saw it as a part of the cultural fabric of Vietnam. When asked why I-4 participates in ancestral rites, he responded, "The first reason is the cultural practices of Eastern peoples, that they firstly remember their roots, their ancestors that are no longer here." When asked why he wants his children to participate, he said nearly the same thing. For her second reason to perform ancestral rites, I-3 says, "According to custom, Vietnamese think of [ancestral veneration] as a way for children and grandchildren to express their respect and filial piety to those who have died." When asked why she spends time and money performing these rites, I-2 explains, "I think this is a family tradition that expresses cultural values, morality, and it is something that I must do." Later she connected it to her personal desire: "I want to preserve this custom."

For some, recognizing ancestral veneration as a custom seemed to decrease its obligatory nature. For example, speaking about those who do not perform ancestral rites, I-4 was forgiving, saying, "It is only a custom, and so someone can follow this custom or not follow it, and I don't have any issue with those [who don't follow it]." Like many others, I-4 distinguished ancestral veneration from a formal religion, noting, "During the revolutionary period in Vietnam, the majority of people had no religion … and they only had these [ancestral] practices, to follow the customs of our ancestors." I-9 also sees ancestral veneration as "a family tradition that since

early times until now has been preserved." But for him, this does not decrease its importance, but rather, "it is something to take seriously."

Passing Down/Parental Modeling/Preservation

Interviewees viewed themselves both as inheritors of these customs and their guarantors. That is, there is a transmission of ancestral practices from past generations to present practitioners, and then from present practitioners to future generations. Perhaps the most important mode of transmission is the modeling that parents provide. First, modeling is experienced by those in the present as something received from past generations. I-9 sums it up very succinctly: "My ancestors used to do this at the altar and so I do it." I-2 identified the modeling she received from her parents as the primary reason for performing ancestral veneration. She says, "First, I follow the rituals of my family. That is, I saw my parents doing these things, and so now I do them, and I think that almost all Vietnamese families also do it." So influential was this modeling, she goes on to say, that, "If my parents and grandparents didn't do it, then I probably wouldn't do it either." I-6 says, "This tradition has been in the family since I was born. My parents venerated my grandparents. So now it is my turn to venerate my parents and my grandparents. That's it. Moreover, everyone around me does it, and so I perform [these rituals] like a regular activity of the family. There is nothing burdensome."

This received tradition from the past then becomes what interviewees desire to pass down to the future, especially through modeling to their children. I-2 says, "My kids see me do [ancestral practices], and they will imitate." Sharing a similar sentiment, I-4 calls it "a mirror. My kids will learn to do these [ancestral rites] because their parents did them." I-10 agrees, with particular emphasis on the traditions themselves, "When I perform [ancestral veneration rituals], my children will see it, and witness that this is a way to preserve tradition. Kids these days; … if

their parents don't do these things then they will not know about it, and then later they won't do it. They will forget." When speaking of the value of ancestral veneration in her family, I-6 says, "It is educational. If we don't have the custom of veneration, especially venerating the ancestors, then our kids will not remember their grandparents or parents." Both I-10 and I-6 want to pass down these traditions for the sake of remembrance—of both the ancestors and the custom itself. I-3 captures this as well: "For my family, this is a way I can teach my kids, so that the next generation will remember … their grandparents and parents, and also remember customs." For I-5, however, remembrance is not in focus, but rather she models these practices to her daughter to "teach her to show respect." For many interviewees, then, passing down the practices is equated with passing down the values they express, like remembrance or respect.

I-10 also emphasized the importance of preservation of cultural customs. She spoke of herself as someone who is quick to let go of old practices and adopt new ones. One gets the sense that she sees ancestral veneration almost like a relic of traditional Vietnamese culture, knowledge of which should be preserved. "When I learn about culture, I will understand about the ways that others think. For example, my kids must understand why their grandparents thought this way, why their parents thought this way. The kids might think differently, but they must respect the thinking of their parents and grandparents." This learning is not necessarily for imitation, but rather for preservation. She explains, "Some things can be preserved in books, in videos, in documents, but with life changing every day, there are some things that should be discarded for the younger generations, so that they don't have to deal with complicated things." She went on to speak of the value of museums for preservation of important cultural elements.

Conclusion

This broad theme has shown how interviewees described ancestral veneration as a connection point that links the past to the present and the present to the future. It provides occasion for practitioners to remember those who have gone before them, not only recalling them to mind but in some sense communicating with them. Further, these practices are cherished cultural customs and family traditions, passed down from generation to generation, that give expression to important values. As such, they are to be safeguarded for future generations through modeling at the family level and preservation at the societal level.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the two-phased procedure employed to collect data and presented the results of that data collection. The initial phase of data collection gathered responses to an online survey from 80 respondents. Aside from its primary goal of creating a pool of potential interview candidates, this survey also provided baseline data on reasons why respondents engage with the ancestral altar. Six reasons came to the foreground: desire to give honor and express gratitude to the ancestors, filial duty, family obligation, expressing/promoting family harmony, cultural custom, and hope that ancestors will bring prosperity. Adjusting these results for different criteria (gender, age, income, and education) revealed some surprising differences, especially with regards to the prominence of hope that ancestors will bring prosperity. The second and more important phase included in-person interviews of ten interviewees. After transcription, each interview was carefully read multiple times to discover various interview-specific themes, detailed above. These subthemes were then grouped to reveal four broad themes:

Distinguishing *Form* and *Content*	**Understanding the *Individual* in Light of the *Family***	**Securing *Human Benefit* and/or *Ancestor Benefit***	**Connecting the *Past* through the *Present* to the *Future***
Procedure/Ritual Form	Roots/Family Line/Familyship	Fear/Worry	Remembrance
Flexibility/Variety	Family Roles	Results	Communication
Simplicity	Responsibilities/ Obligations	Human Effort	Custom/Tradition
Perception of Others	Gathering	Material vs. Emotional Benefits	Passing Down/ Parental Modeling/ Preservation
Nationalism	Conflict	Social Benefits	
Belief		Altruism	

The first of these orients the rest by problematizing the connection between the form and content of ancestral rites. Though issues of procedure or ritual form are not unimportant, most interviewees emphasized variety and flexibility, especially the value of simplicity. They are wary of the costly and overly burdensome practices of others. They highlight not external forms but rather the internal meanings of ancestral veneration. However, they are skeptical of authorities who seek to infuse these rites with nationalistic content. Instead, they impart their own meanings to the rites, though these internal meanings vary considerably among interviewees. The remaining broad themes identify key foci of those meaning associations, according to interviewees. These remaining broad themes are not mutually exclusive but bleed into and out of

each other. Most interviewees expressed ideas that belong to all these broad themes, though interviewees usually had certain emphases that came to the fore.

Some interviewees stress the role that ancestral veneration plays in establishing and perpetuating a family unit that persists over time. This entity defines the identity of its member individuals, giving them clearly defined roles and corresponding duties. The ancestral altar is the locus for this "familyship," where disparate members gather and fulfill the duties of their family roles. While conflict can erupt, more often family harmony is expressed and fostered.

Many interviewees also emphasize the benefits they seek from ancestral practices. Fears and worries about the vagaries of life or even the retribution of ancestors motivate many to seek the ancestors' help as a supplement to their own efforts to secure prosperity. Benefits of ancestor veneration are not merely material, but more often are emotional or even social. Moreover, for some interviewees benefits flow not only *from* the ancestors, but also *to* them as living family members seek to express gratitude to their ancestors by helping them in the afterlife.

Ancestral veneration is also seen as a connection point between past, present, and future. Ritual practices provide occasion for remembrance of deceased family members, especially those to whom the person providing veneration personally knew. So strong is this remembrance that for some, a communication is taking place. Though they varied in what ritual practices they wanted their children to perform, all interviewees want their children to continue to remember. For others, however, the connection to the past is more about cultural customs and traditions that express positive social values, worthy of being passed down to future generations. Whatever the case, this transmission from past through the present and to the future takes place primarily through the modeling of parents to their children, though there is also a need for societal measures to preserve and teach these practices.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENTATIONS

Overview

From the start, ancestral veneration posed problems for Christian mission in Asia. As Peter Phan writes, "in countries and cultures permeated by Confucianism, such as China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam, ancestor veneration … has been and continues to be a vexing and contentious issue, with immense ramifications for evangelization and church life."[1] This continues in Vietnam today, as believers navigate the tension between their commitments to a monotheistic Christianity and a pluralistic cult of the ancestors which constitutes the ritual life of their unbelieving families. The latter situates the believer in rituals, roles, and responsibilities that are perceived to be in conflict with the former. Is it possible to be a Christian and participate in any way in ancestral veneration?

Further aggravating this tension is the history of Christianity's answer to the question above. During the three-centuries long Chinese Rites Controversy, the Roman Catholic Church lurched between permissive and intolerant attitudes, not resolving the issue until the first half of the 20th century. Rome's ultimately permissive stance towards ancestral rites, articulated in *Plane compertum est*, was formally applied to Vietnam with the 1965 instructions for the implementation of ancestor veneration in church life.[2] Today's Roman Catholics in Vietnam have incorporated robust ancestral practices into their ritual life both privately and corporately. Meanwhile, when Protestants in earnest began missions to Asia in the early 20th century, the

[1] Phan, "Culture and Liturgy," 403.

[2] These original guidelines have been supplemented with further guidance in 1974 and 2019. See Hội đồng Giám mục Việt Nam, Ủy Ban Văn Hóa [Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, Committee on Culture], "Hương Dẫn Việc Tôn Kính Tổ Tiên."

debate among missionaries regarding ancestral veneration was comparatively brief. Those in opposition to it ultimately prevailed, defining the Protestant attitudes and responses to ancestral rites in Asia. This overall Protestant opposition to ancestral practices has continued to the present day, leading many Vietnamese to regard it as the religion that discards the ancestors (*đạo bỏ ông bỏ bà*).

Central to both Protestant and Catholic answers to the problems posed by ancestral veneration were assumptions about its meaning. Are these practices merely civil or social in their meaning (as the Catholics suppose) or are they religious and therefore idolatrous (as many Protestants argued)? Though he writes about the Chinese Rites Controversy, George Minamiki's conclusion rings true for Vietnam: "The fundamental problem at issue was the symbolic meaning of the objects and gestures involved in the rites. This was the crux of the controversy."[3] While this study agrees that meaning is central to the issue, Chapter Three argued that there are two inherent problems in the way this meaning has been formulated. First, the terms of the question itself betray a Western worldview in which a distinction between civil/social and religious meanings is culturally tenable. Mark Luttio has argued persuasively that in Eastern cultures it is not.[4] Compounding the Western orientation of the discussion in Roman Catholic and Protestant circles was a lack of local voices both in delineating the rites' meaning and determining proper responses. Foreign missionaries and ecclesial authorities played the primary roles.

In both its purpose and methodology, this study has aimed to address these shortcomings in the Christian discussion of the problem of ancestral veneration in Vietnam. First, it has problematized the Western distinction between civil/social and religious meanings. The

[3] Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 206.

[4] Luttio, "Chinese Rites Controversy."

anthropological literature reviewed in Chapter Two suggests that for Vietnamese the social, religious, economic, and political meanings are intermixed. Second, and most importantly, through its use of interviews it has deeply listened to local voices, allowing today's practitioners to describe the meanings that ancestral rites hold for them. Chapter Five presented four broad themes that capture interviewees' descriptions. Fundamentally, interviewees revealed a distinction between the external forms of ancestral rites and their core meanings. The next three broad themes outline clusters of core meaning associations. Interviewees identified ancestral practices as a locus for the individual's role in collectively oriented family groups. They also spoke of the ancestral altar's critical role in their desire to both give benefits to and receive benefits from the ancestors. Finally, they consider the ancestral altar a connection point between past ancestors, present practitioners, and future generations.

This chapter will discuss the implications of these results for Christian mission into the future. The meaning associations revealed in Chapter Five can aid Catholics and Protestants alike in evaluating their responses to ancestral veneration, especially when put in dialogue with relevant Christian theological categories, including Luther's view of the First and Fourth Commandments, his approach to the cult of the saints, and his innovative doctrine of vocation. These discussions will unfold both the potential and peril of incorporating ancestral practices into Christian devotional life.

Discussion of the Results

Meaning Is Not Static and Singular but Plural and Fluid

The thesis of this study, that the meaning of ancestral rites is plural and fluid, was argued in Chapter Two through a discussion of the relevant anthropological literature. This plurality has been confirmed by the way that interviewees described their motivations and beliefs for

participation in ancestral rites, both individually and corporately. There was no interview in which an interviewee spoke of only one motivation or belief. Instead, they spoke of multiple motivations and beliefs depending on a variety of contextual factors, including family, illness, education, hopes, fears, emotions, and other life circumstances. Even considered in aggregate, no one theme surfaced that was adequate to capture all interviewees' responses, which could be identified as *the* meaning of ancestral veneration. Rather, they identified multiple loci of meaning associations, with varying importance. Some emphasized social aspects related to family and barely mentioned any spiritual power held by the ancestors. Others, however, were focused on benefits the ancestors provide, while family aspects faded to the background. Others, though acknowledging both of those aspects, focused on its value as a cultural custom. Ancestor veneration is activity interpreted by its practitioners multivalently. One cannot properly speak of its meaning, but only its meanings.

Further, the meanings of ancestral practices are not static over time, but instead are fluid, changing with time. Because this did not surface as a subtheme or broad theme in Chapter Five, a few representative words from the interviewees will suffice to illustrate. The fluidity of meanings of ancestral veneration was most evident when interviewees spoke of the differences between them and their parents. I-5 reflects,

> For my mom, I guess her generation bonded with the ancestors very differently. She was born in 1958, which is after the war, and so life and death would be a very thin border. Praying and requesting for peace and a better life would be something that's very essential. For me, I guess, first, it's like I feel my life has been very—I'm a spoiled kid, life is too easy on me. … I just met great people, and was always in my safety bubble, so I don't feel like my life has been turbulent or has met many adverse events. That's why I don't ask [the ancestors] for too much.

For I-5, the stark contrast between her mom's war-ridden childhood and her own relatively comfortable upbringing reduces the need for the ancestors help, and thus changes the nature of

her interaction with the ancestors.[5] I-2 noted how beliefs and practices have changed: "regarding complicated [rites], it is certain that my parents' generation was more complicated and during my parents' generation I think that everyone believed in an afterlife. They believed in that, and everyone also believed in fortune-telling." Nowadays, I-2 implies, there is more simplicity and less belief. She explains, "My parents' generation still believed that one must perform [ancestral rites] thoroughly and then one could have a blessed and successful life. They thought that if you don't venerate the ancestors then you will meet failure and will not have luck. As for me, I believe that success comes from our own effort rather than from veneration." For I-2, changed beliefs about causation have influenced her conception of ancestral veneration's primary meanings. Even I-7, an oldest son, acknowledges, "Previously the role [of oldest son] was extremely large. But now, it is not quite so strict." Nonetheless, he goes on to describe the responsibilities he currently fulfills in the role. While the scope of the role might have changed, the role itself has not been erased.

Christian Responses Should Not be Monolithic

If, as this study has argued, understanding the meanings of ancestral veneration is crucial to a contextual and faithful Christian response, and if those meanings are inherently plural and fluid, then this study problematizes monolithic Christian responses based on the assumption of a single or simplified meaning, a meaning that is true for all times and places, or which reduces

[5] I-5's comments here reflect the "secularization theory" popularized by Max Weber, in which he argued that greater economic prosperity would lead to the decline of religion. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Kalberg, rev. 1920 ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Though I-5's experience is consistent with Weber's thesis, it has been widely criticized in recent decades, including by scholars of religion in Vietnam. Philip Taylor et al. argue that instead of a decline of religion in Vietnam, prosperity has only increased the role of religion. Taylor, *Modernity and Re-Enchantment*.

ancestor veneration "to its most objectionable features."[6] Unfortunately, these responses happen too often, as discussed in Chapter Three.

As an example on the Protestant side, most early missionaries in China judged ancestral rites to be thoroughly idolatrous and bereft of value. In his 1877 address to the General Conference of Protestant missionaries in China, Southern Baptist missionary Matthew Yates spoke, "To supplement Christianity, and thereby make it more acceptable to the Chinese, by allowing, or conniving at any of the customs practiced in the worship of the dead, is to yield everything."[7] This all-or-nothing mentality prevailed in the brief Protestant disputes on the issue and was entrenched by the time the Protestant church in Vietnam was organizing itself, as evidenced by the prohibition of ancestral veneration as a condition to church membership in the Constitution of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam of 1936 (see Chapter Three). Phu Hoang Le notes that this stance was driven by foreigners: "the cult of ancestors [was] considered by the missionaries as another form of idolatry."[8] Henry Smith agrees, noting how foreign missionaries in China judged "every aspect of ancestor worship to be thoroughly idolatrous and, therefore, anti-Christian."[9] These rejectionist stances betrayed both a simplistic understanding of the rites that could not see their meanings as either plural or fluid, as well as the ethnocentric bias of foreign missionaries. The nuances revealed in this study's interviews suggest that such simplistic conceptions are not adequate for contemporary Vietnamese understandings of ancestral veneration.

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[6] Smith, "Typology of Christian Responses," 629.

[7] Matthew Yates, "Ancestral Worship," in *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China, Held at Shanghai, May 10-24, 1877* (Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1878; repr., Taipei: Ch'eng Wen Publishing Co., 1973), 386-387, quoted in Smith, "Typology of Christian Responses," 630.

[8] Le, "Short History," 182.

[9] Smith, "Typology of Christian Responses," 629.

Meanwhile, in *Plane compertum est*, the Catholic church also took a monolithic answer, but the opposite one, opening the doors for the uncritical incorporation of ancestral veneration into the life of the church. Of particular interest is the reason given for the change. As shown in Chapter Three, there was, on the part of the Holy See, recognition that the meaning of the rites had changed.

> Everyone knows that some ceremonies in Oriental countries, although in earlier times they were tied in with pagan rites, now that customs and minds have changed with the flow of the centuries, merely preserve civil expression of devotion toward ancestors, or of patriotism, or of respect for fellow countrymen.[10]

While the recognition of fluidity of meaning is laudable, the rationale still lacks an understanding of the rites' meanings as radically plural. Instead, the rites "merely" preserve civil values. One wonders on what basis it is asserted that "everyone knows" this. Such a totalizing interpretation of ancestral rites in Vietnam does not do justice to the plurality of meanings described by Vietnamese practitioners of these rituals. As the data from these interviews show, while civil/social values are certainly a major part of the complex of meanings of ancestral rites, they are not exhaustive. Even some Roman Catholics understand this. Peter Phan writes,

> Given the undeniably religious nature of ancestor worship, its liturgical inculturation can no longer be legitimated on the basis of its alleged "merely civil and political" character. Such a view, while making things easier for theologians and liturgists, empties the rituals of ancestor veneration of their deepest meanings and transforming power.[11]

Phan plainly acknowledges the religious aspects of ancestral rites, not, however, to call for their avoidance, but rather to call for a more radical inculturation of them. He goes on, "with its religious nature frankly recognized, it is possible to appeal to the doctrine of communion of saints and enlarge it in such a way that the ancestors can find their appropriate place in this

[10] Noll, *100 Roman Documents*, 87.

[11] Phan, "Culture and Liturgy," 420.

communion and receive due veneration."[12] Phan's enlargement of the communion of the saints to include non-Christian ancestors is a theological innovation that risks betraying the same convenience that Phan decried in those who deny the rites' religious meanings.

In summary, *Plane compertum est*'s appeal to "merely" civil meanings removes the threat of idolatry, but at the expense of an accurate, nuanced understanding of ancestral rites. A broad Protestant rejection of ancestral rites takes the issue of idolatry seriously, but also at the expense of a deeper understanding of ancestral practices. Phan's enlargement of the communion of the saints acknowledges the religious meanings of ancestral rites, but at the expense of the Church's theological teachings on the doctrine of the communion of the saints. In all cases, the issue of idolatry is either removed or sidestepped, or ancestral rites are not given their proper context. This study aims to do justice to both.

The Charge of Idolatry

The question of ancestral veneration's idolatry must not be downplayed or sidestepped but rather frankly acknowledged and discussed. The evil of idolatry is a consistent theme in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Torah, the command to fear and love God alone, and flee idolatry, forms the foundation of God's moral Law for His people (Exod. 20:3-6). In the period of the judges, the idolatry of the people is repeatedly cast in terms that they "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord."[13] The kings are judged on similar terms, with their effectiveness based on their avoidance of the "high places"[14] and fidelity to exclusive worship of Yahweh.[15] The

[12] Phan, "Culture and Liturgy," 420.

[13] For examples, see Judg. 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1.

[14] "High places" refers to places of sacrifice on elevated pieces of land, which increasingly became used to worship other gods.

[15] For examples, see 1 Kings 11:6; 14:22; 15:26, 34; 16:25; 22:52; 2 Kings 3:2; 8:18, 27; 13:2, 11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24, 28; 17:2; 21:2, 16, 20; 23:32, 37; 24:9, 19.

prophets spoke God's word of judgment on the people because of their idolatry.[16] The Psalms also describe the dangers of idolatry.[17] In the New Testament, Jesus reveals the idols of others (Mark 10:17–31), and himself flees idolatry by refusing the temptation to worship the devil, quoting the Torah's injunction to worship God only (Luke 4:8). The book of Acts describes how early Christians dealt with idolatry.[18] The epistles are filled with exhortations to flee idolatry.[19]

With such a firm biblical foundation, it is not surprising that Martin Luther wrote clearly about the danger of idolatry. His Small Catechism begins with the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3).[20] Luther explained the commandment positively, exhorting, "We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things."[21] By stating it this way, Luther highlights the preeminent place of God over all other possessions, relationships, or endeavors of life, encouraging his readers and listeners to consider what they place above God.

Luther uses the words "fear, love, and trust" because they are inclinations of the human heart. Though the Old Testament focuses on the connection of idolatry to created ritual objects, Luther pushes to the theological core of the term. For Luther, idolatry is not defined by its object; rather, it is first and foremost what happens in the heart. What is a god? In the Large Catechism, he answers, "A 'god' is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we

[16] The examples are too numerous to list thoroughly. For representative examples, see Isa. 2:8; 10:11; 40:19–20; 42:17; 44:6–20; Jer. 2:28; 3:6; 10:3–5, 14–15; 44:15–19; 51:17–18; Ezek. 6:13; 20:7–8; 23:2–8; Hos. 4:13; 10:6; Hab. 2:18; Mic. 1:7; Mal. 2:10–16.

[17] For representative examples, see Pss. 31:6; 78:58; 96:5; 97:7; 106:19–20, 36, 38; 115:4; 135:15.

[18] Acts 15:19, 29; 17:6; 21:25.

[19] For examples, see 1 Cor. 8, 10 (esp. v. 14); 12:2; 2 Cor. 6:16; Gal. 5:20; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Pet. 4:3; 1 John 5:21.

[20] Following the custom of the Middle Ages, Luther did not treat Exod. 20:4–6 separately, but rather collapsed Exod. 20:3–6 into one commandment on idolatry.

[21] SC I.2 in Kolb and Wengert, 351.

are to find refuge in all need."[22] While Luther acknowledges that idols can be tangible objects (he speaks specifically of money and property),[23] they might also include non-tangible concerns. For example, "So, too, those who boast of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor and who trust in them have a god also, but not the one, true God."[24] Anything can become a false god if it demands the ultimate devotion of its supplicant. For Luther, "it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol."[25] The creation of an idol does not truly happen in the holding of an object or even in the performance of a ritual but rather in the human heart that places its fear, love, and trust in that object or ritual.

Luther discerned that the common people turned to various persons, objects, and activities for provision and help. In doing so, they were creating idols, putting their fear, love, and trust in something other than God alone.

> The intention of this commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence of the heart, which fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone. What this means is: "See to it that you let me alone be your God, and never search for another." In other words: "Whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, crawl to me and cling to me. I, I myself, will give you what you need and help you out of every danger. Only do not let your heart cling to or rest in anyone else."[26]

For Luther, the First Commandment entails a dual movement. First, idolators turn away from their false providers and helpers. Second, they turn to God alone to supply all their needs and to aid in all their problems. The heart must cling to the one who truly has the power to provide and help, lest they "rely on an empty nothing."[27]

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[22] LC I.2 in Kolb and Wengert, 386.

[23] LC I.5-9 in Kolb and Wengert, 387.

[24] LC I.10 in Kolb and Wengert, 387.

[25] LC I.2 in Kolb and Wengert, 386.

[26] LC I.4 in Kolb and Wengert, 386–87.

[27] LC I.20 in Kolb and Wengert, 388.

Luther's exposition on the First Commandment is helpful for this study in three ways. First, it sets a clear boundary for what constitutes idolatry, namely, that in which the heart fears, loves, and trusts above God. Any consideration of Christian responses to ancestral veneration must keep this boundary in place to retain the exclusivity that is intrinsic to the Christian message. Second, by locating the creation of idols in the human heart, Luther implicitly acknowledges the subjectivity of the individual person in idol creation. That is, what is an idol for one person might not be an idol for another person. This conception is helpful precisely because the meanings of ancestral veneration are, as has been shown above, to a certain extent subjective. Ancestral veneration does not mean the same things to each interviewee. Third, the recognition of subjectivity then permits a Christian evaluation of ancestral rites that resists a one-size-fits-all judgment.

What then can be said about idolatry and the ancestral practices of the interviewees? While Luther's definition of idolatry provides a helpful grounding of the question, more discussion is needed to determine whether these practices might cause believers to "fear, love, and trust" in something other than God alone. To aid in this, the interview data will be considered in view of three relevant aspects of/issues in Christian theology: the Fourth Commandment, the medieval cult of the saints, and vocation. Each of these will reveal both the potential for a Christian practice of ancestral veneration as well as the perils of doing so uncritically. The remit of this study does not allow for a full treatment of each theological category, but rather each will be discussed according to its relevance for the issue of ancestral rites.

Honor Your Father and Your Mother:
Filial Piety as a Contextualized Expression of The Fourth Commandment

Introduction

As shown in the interviews, family dynamics play a decisive role in ancestral veneration. In particular, the relationship between parents and children is foremost. That relationship should be placed in the context of filial piety (*hiếu thảo*), mentioned by many interviewees as a foundational value that undergirds ancestral practices. Filial piety is a supreme moral virtue that entails honor, respect, obedience, and devotion towards one's parents and grandparents, both during their life and after their death, implicating both external actions and internal feelings.[28] I-7 stated, "the activities I do to venerate the ancestors help me to express my nature as a filial person." I-1 noted something similar: "For those us who are living, we show support to [the ancestors] in order to express our filial piety and concern." I-3 joins the refrain, saying "According to custom, Vietnamese think of [ancestral veneration] as a way for children and grandchildren to express their respect and filial piety to those who have died." For these interviewees, "ancestor worship is a ritualization of the moral significance of filial piety."[29]

This moral imperative to honor, respect, obey, and be devoted to one's parents is not foreign to Christian theology, but is in fact commanded by God in His foundational Law for humanity, expressed in what is traditionally called the Ten Commandments. The Fourth Commandment reads, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Exod. 20:12). Martin Luther's writings on the Fourth

[28] The Confucian underpinnings of filial piety are illustrated in Legge, "Xiao Jing"; Ying-lin Wang, *San Tzu Ching*.

[29] Young-chan Ro, "Ancestor Worship: From the Perspective of Korean Tradition," in *Ancestor Worship and Christianity in Korea*, ed. Jung Young Lee (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1988), 13. Wise says something similar with regards to the situation in Vietnam: "[Ancestor veneration] rites are a moral expression of the disposition of filiality." Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 145.

Commandment show that the relationship between parents and children was a central theological and practical issue. He viewed the family as the locus of societal life, and as such much of his writing was fueled by a genuine concern for everyday families. This concern flowed from Luther's conviction that families were a chief element in God's design for the world and that the Bible provides guidance in how family relationships should be ordered.

This section considers the interview data in view of Martin Luther's teachings on the Fourth Commandment. It considers whether the Fourth Commandment might be a theological home for filial piety and therefore ancestral veneration as one of its expressions, highlighting both the convergences and divergences, the potential and peril, of such a move. With regards to the dangers, this section will keep in mind the critical role of the First Commandment (Exod. 12:4–6), explicated above, in setting appropriate limits for a contextualized ancestral practice.

The Importance of Filial Piety and the Fourth Commandment

In writing about traditional Vietnamese values, Neil Jamieson has written, "The parent-child relationship was at the very core of Vietnamese culture, dominating everything else."[30] This relationship was itself defined by hierarchy. Specifically, a child's deference to parents in all matters was the highest good. Even if modern sensibilities have softened the demands of parents,[31] filial piety towards one's parents is still seen as the supreme Vietnamese virtue towards which family life is oriented. "Parents are still the superiors in their families."[32] I-7 even connects filial piety to Vietnamese identity: "If one is a filial person, then one is a Vietnamese." Indeed, throughout the interviews, the importance of deference to parents was paramount. Whether it is

[30] Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 16.

[31] Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 301–2.

[32] Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution*, 112.

oldest sons performing their duty to ensure veneration is carried out, or daughters joining in their husband's family's preparations for a death anniversary, or a mother's not so gentle reminders to her child to remember an occasion for veneration, an individual's engagement in ancestral veneration is determined by their role as a child in a family group and the duties associated with that role. A failure to perform the role and its duties is to fail the family.

Luther held the commandment to honor one's parents to be of the utmost importance. He asserted that "after faith in God there is nothing greater than obedience to parents."[33] Even as he placed it just below faith in God, Luther elevated parental honor above other good works: "even almsgiving and all other works for our neighbor are not equal to this."[34] Further, Luther repeatedly likens the role of parent to that of God. God "has put father and mother next to himself."[35] As such, parents are "God's representatives"[36] and so we honor them, "doing it as if for God."[37] Albrecht Peters helpfully summarizes, "the honor of the parents is tied back to God's honor, the Fourth Commandment, to the First."[38] For Luther, honor of parents *is* honor of God. Conversely, to fail to honor one's parents is to fail to honor God, who created parents and gave them as a gift.

Filial Piety's and the Fourth Commandment's Scope Beyond the Nuclear Family

The scope of parental honor extends beyond the nuclear family. Luther explains the Fourth Commandment, "We are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents

[33] *LW* 44:326.

[34] LC I.126 in Kolb and Wengert, 403.

[35] Martin Luther, "Ten Sermons on the Catechism, 1528," *LW* 51:146.

[36] LC I.108 in Kolb and Wengert, 401.

[37] LC I.111 in Kolb and Wengert, 401.

[38] Albrecht Peters, *The Creed*, trans. Holger K. Sonntag, Commentary on Luther's Catechisms (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 195.

and *others in authority*" (italics mine).[39] This extension to other authorities is given explicit shape in the Large Catechism: "in connection with this commandment, we must mention the sort of obedience due to superiors, persons whose duty it is to command and to govern."[40] This extension of the commandment's purview is repeated over and over again in Luther's engagement with the Fourth Commandment.[41] Honor given to father and mother implies honor towards "friends, relatives, godparents, temporal lords, and spiritual fathers"[42] precisely because "all other authority is derived and developed out of the authority of parents."[43] For Luther, parental authority is the foundation of all other earthly authority. Other authorities only share in what ultimately belongs to parents.

Interviewees also noted the ways that ancestral veneration, as a ritual expression of filial piety, extends beyond the family into societal life, though the emphasis was less on obeying authorities and more on social good. As shown above, interviewees spoke of ancestral practices as a social good worthy of passing on to future generations for their positive virtues. But it was I-10, quoted at length above, who most clearly connected responsible performance of filial duties with the fostering of responsible members of society. She described expanding spheres of relationships in which every Vietnamese participates: family, neighbor, and society. When someone takes personal responsibility in ancestral duties in the family, it fosters responsibility in broader relationships. Ritual practices established at home inculcate values that radiate out towards other areas of life. As I-10 said, "If someone first and foremost has responsibility with

[39] SC I.8 in Kolb and Wengert, 352.

[40] LC I.141 in Kolb and Wengert, 405.

[41] Examples include Martin Luther, "Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony, 1528," *LW* 40:281; Martin Luther, "Treatise on Good Works, 1520," *LW* 44:80; *LW* 51:148–49.

[42] *LW* 44:82.

[43] LC I.141 in Kolb and Wengert, 405.

themselves, and they have responsibility with their family, then they will have responsibility with their neighbors and with society."

The Content of Filial Piety and the Fourth Commandment

What does filial piety entail? How does one honor their father and mother? Lutheran sources give broad guidance for the practice, focused on interactions with living parents. The Small Catechism uses verbs like "honor, serve, obey, love, and respect."[44] The Large Catechism concretizes this, encouraging children "not to speak discourteously to [parents], to criticize them, or to take them to task, but rather to submit to them and hold your tongue, even if they go too far."[45] Positive actions are also encouraged, including "serving them, helping them, and caring for them when they are old, sick, feeble, or poor."[46] Luther also encourages gratitude for all that parents have done for children.[47] That gratitude expresses itself in providing for parents in their needs, not letting them "suffer want, to lack food, and perish with hunger," but rather giving them "the best you have in the house, the most precious treasure, which God has given to you in order that you may honor them."[48] For Luther, the Fourth Commandment is not just about internal feelings but about practical care.

While this study has focused on the filial piety shown to parents and ancestors after their death, in the form of veneration rituals, filial piety shown while parents are living is implied by many interviewees in their obedience to their parents. For example, both I-5 and I-8 repeatedly mentioned that their participation in ancestral veneration is driven largely by obedience to their

[44] SC I.8 in Kolb and Wengert, 352.

[45] LC I.110 in Kolb and Wengert, 401.

[46] LC I.111 in Kolb and Wengert, 401.

[47] LC I.127 in Kolb and Wengert, 404.

[48] *LW* 51:147.

parents. As an example, I-8, in speaking about why she has taken more responsibility than her older brother in ancestor veneration rituals, says, "When [my parents] tell me to perform [ancestral veneration] then I do it. And so next time, my parents will tell me to do it." Her obedience to her parents leads to their requesting her further participation. For I-5, deference to parents is the primary reason she participates. I-2 expresses a similar sentiment negatively, "If my parents and grandparents did not perform [ancestral veneration] then I probably wouldn't do it either." I-7 is the most explicit on how filial piety is not only for the dead but must first be shown to the living. "Many people, while [their parents] are still living, don't express their filial piety. But when [their parents] die, then they perform ancestral veneration on the altar in an appalling way, decorating everything." For I-7, veneration after death should flow from love and care shown before death. True filial piety begins with practical care of parents while they are living.[49]

The Origin of Filial Piety and the Fourth Commandment

For Luther, the appeal to honor one's father and mother is grounded in God's created order. He identifies children (and by implication parents) as a part of God's "First Article" gifts:[50] "God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, *spouse and children*, fields, livestock, and all property—along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life" (italics mine).[51] Family is a gift from God meant for our wellbeing. This gift

[49] During the interview with I-7, this author mentioned an upcoming trip he was taking with his mother to spend time together. I-7 considered it a positive example of filial piety, exclaiming, "That is an expression of the filial nature of the Vietnamese!"

[50] "First Article Gifts" are those blessings that God the Father gives by virtue of his function as Creator of the world, as confessed in the First Article of the Apostles' Creed. These gifts are enjoyed by all people regardless of religious affiliation.

[51] SC II.2 in Kolb and Wengert, 354.

was given to the first human parents, Adam and Eve, when God instructed them to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:26). The family unit is a part of God's created intention. Following from this, the appeal to honor one's parents is made explicit as a part of His foundational Law for His people: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Exod. 20:12). This is not an arbitrary suggestion, but rather children are to honor their parents precisely because "God has ordained and commanded" it.[52] When children honor their father and mother, they are "in tune" with the way God intends the world to work as His creation.

Not surprisingly, interviewees did not ground ancestral veneration practices in a creation narrative or divine command, or any foundational reality. Instead, they repeatedly referred to it as a custom or a tradition which has been passed down across generations. I-9 said, "The ancestors of past times made altars and so I will venerate." He elaborated, "I think [ancestral veneration] is a custom of my people, and therefore I should follow it." The formal origin of ancestral practices was not important for the interviewees; what was important was that they had received it and were expected to perform it. There is a givenness to the practices, as evidenced by I-2's statement, "It is something I must do, like I must go to work or I must go to school."

The Motivation for Filial Piety and the Fourth Commandment

Motivation is an area of significant difference. As reported in Chapter Five, interviewees' motivations for ancestral veneration were varied. Respondents were a mix of many motivations, including desire to give honor and express gratitude to the ancestors, cultural custom, hope that ancestors will bring prosperity, filial duty, family obligation, expressing/promoting family

[52] LC I.116 in Kolb and Wengert, 402.

harmony, psychological comfort, helping the ancestor in the afterlife, and more. For each interviewee, however, certain motivations came to the fore as primary. For some, family obligation and duty prevailed. Others were motivated most by simple remembrance of and connection with a deceased loved one. Others saw the ancestors as a potential source of blessing and protection.

Luther also acknowledges a sense of duty when speaking of the Fourth Commandment. He uses that very word regarding children's gratitude to their parents: "it is our duty before the world to show gratitude for the kindness and for all the good things we have received from our parents."[53] Luther is even exuberant about the this-worldly emotional and material benefits of obeying the Fourth Commandment. "Another strong incentive to attract us into keeping this commandment is that God has attached to it a lovely promise, 'that you may have long life in the land where you dwell.'"[54] The Large Catechism explains this promise broadly, using the following words to describe its results: goodness, happiness, love, kindness, harmony, prosperity, joy, thankfulness, long life, sustenance, and peace.[55] But for Luther, duty or benefits are motivators not because of their objects or their results, but because of their ultimate subject. Our obedience "has its place and setting within that jewel and holy shrine, the Word and commandment of God."[56] The Word of God is primary for Luther. Honor to parents, and by extension other authorities, is motivated by the very command of God, which, as shown earlier, is connected to His created order. Luther also places proper motivation in the context of faith.

[53] LC I.127 in Kolb and Wengert, 404.

[54] LC I.131 in Kolb and Wengert, 404.

[55] LC I in Kolb and Wengert, 399–410.

[56] LC I.117 in Kolb and Wengert, 402.

Our honor of father and mother is "nothing else but an expression and exercise of faith,"[57] to be done in "in the confidence of divine favor … simply without any thought of reward, but out of love and good will toward God, which grow out of a faith of this kind."[58] This foundation of faith is why Luther can encourage that honor of father and mother be done "cheerfully, but also with humility and reverence, doing it as if for God."[59]

The Duration of Filial Piety and the Fourth Commandment

This is a chief area of difference. For Vietnamese, filial piety is a virtue displayed first during the lives of parents and elders, but which is then extended after their deaths. Death is not a terminus for interactions between a parent and child. Rather, filial interactions continue, albeit in different forms. Shaun Kingsley Malarney observes this in connection with funerary rites, "A parent's death provides an immediate test of a child's filial piety that is measured by the type and quality of the parent's funeral."[60] This test extends beyond funerary rites to include annual death anniversaries and ongoing rituals at the family altar. All of these are acts of filial piety towards those who are deceased.

By contrast, Luther's discussion of the Fourth Commandment is silent on this point. In the resources consulted in this study, he only speaks of honoring *living* fathers and mothers. However, Luther does note that "what is said and commanded of parents must also be understood of those who, when the parents are dead or not there, take their place, such as friends, relatives, godparents, temporal lords, and spiritual fathers."[61] At death, it seems, the honor due to

[57] *LW* 44:87.

[58] *LW* 44:98.

[59] LC I.111 in Kolb and Wengert, 401. See also LC I.143.

[60] Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution*, 112.

[61] *LW* 44:82.

one's parents is transferred to those who take their place as authorities in one's life. No mention is made of responsibilities to the deceased parents in the context of the Fourth Commandment. To address this gap, Luther's thought on the cult of the saints will be discussed below.

Analysis

Reflecting on this brief comparison, it is apparent that Luther's exposition of the Fourth Commandment unfolds meaning and force that shows some similarity to how the interviewees describe their filial actions related to ancestral veneration. Both Luther and the interviewees agree that honor of father and mother is of utmost importance. Both articulate the content of filial piety in terms of both obedience and care, affection of the heart and action of the body. Both Luther and the interviewees see this virtue as extending beyond the family unit and into other relationships of authority, including elders, neighbors, and even governing powers. Both see cultivation of the family, centered in honor of father and mother, as promoting not only a happy home but also harmony in all of society. In speaking of Christianity and Confucian ethics (including filial piety), Stephen Oliver notes that they "are similar in their goal of positively fulfilling the common desires of humanity. They have a corporate human element, an integral social dynamic."[62]

Thinking about this theologically, then, these convergences between Luther and the interviewees can be understood in terms of humanity's "horizontal" duties before the world (*coram mundo*). That is, both are concerned about a person's interactions with the world around him or her. In other words, the immediate object of both filial piety and the Fourth

[62] Stephen Oliver, "The Moral Visions of the Epistle of James and Zhongyong" (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, 2002), 18.

Commandment is other humans. The direction of action or affection is from human to human (whether alive or deceased), or from human to wider society.

But for Luther, these human-to-human interactions are predicated upon a strong doctrine of God as Creator and Lawgiver. That is, God is the one who created all parents and children alike, gifting them to each other. Further, His Law governs their relationships with each other. These foundational truths affect the way that these relationships are interpreted. For example, interviewees noted filial piety's that's-just-the-way-it-is given-ness, rooted in custom and tradition passed down across generations. The Fourth Commandment has a given-ness, too, but this given-ness is animated by a fuller description of the Giver, the God who created the heavens and the earth according to His order and for His purposes. Interviewees also mentioned duty to family as a motivating factor for ancestral veneration. Luther can speak of duty, too, but in the context of God as Creator of parents as His very representatives, this duty is not only towards parents but ultimately towards God Himself. This is evidenced by the way Luther begins each explanation to the subsequent commandments after the first. For example, for the Fourth Commandment, he writes, "*We are to fear and love God*, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority, but instead honor, serve, obey, love, and respect them" (italics mine).[63] J.-M. Berentsen is correct that the sequence of the Ten Commandments, "puts the regulations for interhuman behavior in proper context."[64] That is, while Luther agrees with the interviewees with regards to "horizontal" *coram mundo* works, for Luther those works can only find their truest expression in the context of a primary "vertical" relationship before God (*coram Deo*).

[63] SC I.8 in Kolb and Wengert, 352.

[64] Berentsen, *Grave and Gospel*, 160.

When this *coram Deo* relationship is brought to bear, it protects against potential abuses in expressions of filial piety. It is precisely at this point that the issue of duration is important. Ongoing relationships with ancestors that are no longer living are inherent to the practice of ancestral rites. Without a strong doctrine of God, the ancestors themselves are at risk of being treated as gods. For example, as seen above, many interviewees look to the ancestors to bless and protect them. Without a strong vertical relationship *coram Deo*, the horizontal *coram mundo* relationships can invert and become a false vertical. A strong doctrine of God as creator tempers this inclination, divesting ancestors of spiritual power and pointing family members back to God as the source for their provision and protection. This point cannot be overstated. Having put God in His proper place, other authorities can be put in their proper place. Luther writes,

> Although much that is good comes to us from human beings, nevertheless, anything received according to his command and ordinance in fact comes from God. Our parents and all authorities—as well as everyone who is a neighbor—have received the command to do us all kinds of good. So we receive our blessings not from them, but from God through them. Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings.[65]

For Luther, blessing and protection ultimately come from God, even though He might bestow those blessings by means of various living human channels. Ultimate attribution of these gifts to others encroaches on the First Commandment, putting those others in a space that is reserved for God alone. Even a great virtue like filial piety or honor of parents is subordinate to worship of God.

[65] LC I.26 in Kolb and Wengert, 389.

Conclusion

"The person who is concerned with the honor and respect of God cannot bypass the honor and respect due to his parents."[66] It is in the context of the Fourth Commandment, in close connection with the First, that filial piety and its various performances can find their truest Christian expression. This makes the Fourth Commandment a suitable theological "home" for a Christian filial piety. This is not a difficult notion for Vietnamese Christians, because, as Wise details, initial translators of the Bible created a new Vietnamese term that rendered the Fourth Commandment in terms of filial piety (*hiếu kính cha mẹ*).[67] Moreover, this section suggests that a Christian filial piety might include a Christian ancestral practice, because it places that practice in the context of a creator God who is the source of all human blessings, including families, and is the ultimate end of parental honor. This might give the common Vietnamese phrase "remembering roots" (*nhớ về cội nguồn*) a multilayered meaning: remembering not only one's ancestral heritage, but also the family's ultimate roots in God's creative action. In this way, God is both the first subject and the final object of filial piety and its expressions. This very context guards against the human tendency towards idolatry, that is, to place ultimate "fear, love, and trust" in entities above God Himself. Ancestral veneration could, then, feasibly be conceived of as a contextualized expression of the filial piety required by the Fourth Commandment.

And yet, there remains the lingering issue of the nature of ancestors as deceased persons. With this issue, the limits of Luther's exposition of the Fourth Commandment are exposed,

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[66] Berentsen, *Grave and Gospel*, 225.

[67] Wise shows that in most Vietnamese translations of the Bible, the Fourth Commandment is rendered, *hiếu kính cha mẹ*. The word *hiếu* refers to filiality (from *hiếu thảo*), while *kính* refers to high honor. It is difficult to translate into English but would add a sacredness to English notions of honor. It connotes something higher than honor but lower than worship. Unfortunately, however, this innovative phrase is not known to non-Christians and so is not able to function well as a missiological bridge to wider society. See Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 137–45.

because it only addresses living authorities. Indeed, though Christians in Vietnam already think of the Fourth Commandment in terms of filial piety due to its clever translation, it is "focused totally on the living."[68] But love and obedience shown to, and provision and protection received from, the living cannot be fully compared to interactions with deceased family members. Given the discussion thus far, what prevents the view that ancestors are, to use Luther's verbiage, simply a channel of God's blessing, to whom humans can and should look for provision and protection? This question opens a parallel to the medieval cult of the saints, who were often viewed exactly in that way. If it is true that "ancestors are like the saints,"[69] Luther's confrontation with the cult of the saints provides a suitable context in which to address the specific problem of idolatry in relation to interactions with the dead.

The Cult of the Saints:
Spiritual Power Defines the Boundary of Idolatry

Introduction

By the time of Luther, the medieval cult of the saints was fully developed, practically and theologically. The creation of shrines, the popularity of pilgrimage, and the trade in relics—all focused on the cult of the saints—challenged "most of the imaginative boundaries which ancient men had placed between heaven and earth, the divine and the human, the living and the dead."[70] The saints could be involved in the world of the living, acting as a bridge between heavenly blessing and earthly need. They were seen as sources of blessing and healing for those faced with

[68] Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 140.

[69] Daniel Xuan–Vu Nguyen, "Pauline Freedom: Idolatry and the Vietnamese Ancestor Cult" (Master's Thesis, Trinity Lutheran Seminary, 2016), 107, https://etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send_file?accession=trin1455712662&disposition=inline.

[70] Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 21.

material or physical challenges. For those in spiritual need, the plentiful good works of the saints created a treasury of merits, available to those whose scales were tipped due to a preponderance of sins. This dynamic created a middle realm where the saints became patrons imbued with spiritual power, mediating God's blessings. These "invisible patrons"[71] commanded the allegiance, and the money, of the common people. Philip M. Soergel describes Bavaria's shrines as "marketplaces in a sacred economy, exchanging healing, intercession, and indulgences in return for a pilgrim's visits, prayers, and gifts."[72] The enormous revenues generated by these transactional sacred economies did not escape the attention of ecclesial authorities, who co-opted the patronage of the saints, seeking to regulate and expand these markets for political and financial gain.

As argued in Chapter Two, the veneration of the ancestors also carries economic associations. That is, it creates a transactional economy between the living and the dead. This was confirmed in Chapter Five's analysis of the interviews. For many interviewees, the ancestors are seen as active in the world of the living, capable of both blessing and harm. These hopes and fears motivate ritual engagement at the ancestral altar. Regarding blessing and hope, I-6 notes, "[At the altar,] I ask for blessing, for health, for blessing for my whole family, including grandparents, parents, and children." Regarding harm and fear, recall I-9's story of taking offered food down from the altar without asking the permission of the ancestors. "I took it down and was immediately sick for three or four days." This middle realm, in which the world of the dead affects the world of the living (and vice versa), promotes the creation of marketplaces for ritual objects and services, expanding the opportunity for and scope of ritual performance.

[71] Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 39.

[72] Philip M. Soergel, *Wondrous in His Saints: Counter-Reformation Propaganda in Bavaria*, Studies on the History of Society and Culture 17 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 28.

The issue of the cult of the saints is multifaceted, and a full treatment is beyond the scope of this study. This section will explore Martin Luther's evaluation of the cult of the saints from a perspective relevant to the study's purposes. Even more than the crass material abuses that resulted from the practice of the saints, Luther vehemently attacked the theological abuses that the cult of the saints inflicted on the faith of the common people.[73] Crucial for this study, the saints were an important fault line in Luther's view of idolatry. More than robbing people of money, Luther saw the cult of the saints robbing people of the very Savior whose merits were sufficient to already complete the work of their salvation. And yet, this section will also note Luther's measured response to the abuses of the saints. Unlike other reformers, Luther did not seek to abolish the saints, but rather to expunge practical and theological abuses while retaining a purified veneration of the saints. For Luther, the veneration of the saints had positive value worth preserving. Luther's evaluation of the saints will be related to interviewees' motivations for engaging the ancestors, revealing an important boundary marker for the issue of idolatry while also affirming positive values that ancestral veneration might hold for Christians.

The Ascription of Spiritual Power as Idolatry

As explored above, for Luther, idolatry occurs when the heart places its ultimate allegiance in something other than God Himself. But how does one know when this happens? The medieval cult of the saints provides a practical context in which Luther applies his theology of idolatry. In the case of the saints, the key issue is the spiritual power ascribed to the saints by the common

[73] Nonetheless, Luther certainly did not shy away from highlighting the material abuses. He writes, "Although the canonization of saints may have been a good thing in former days, it is certainly never good practice now. Like many other things that were good in former times, feast days, church holdings, and ornaments now are scandalous and offensive. For it is evident that through the canonization of saints neither God's glory nor the improvement of Christians is sought, but only money and reputation." Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, 1520," *LW* 44:187–88.

people. That is, they saw the saints as living entities with the ability to affect their lives. Robert Kolb explains,

> The saint, on the basis of his or her holiness, was thought to command the power to meet the needs of people who encountered signs of their own helplessness and impotence at every turn. Peasants and townspeople looked to cunning men, soothsayers, and witches, but above all to the saints, to provide for their physical well-being and for vengeance, love, and reassurance about death.[74]

Gábor Klaniczay pinpoints the particular quality that sources of spiritual power, the saints among them, possess. He calls it charisma, defining it as "a capacity to marshal supernatural, suprahuman, transcendental powers, which is ascribed to certain (living or dead) persons by a group of people in a given historical situation."[75] This charisma was *the* quality that legitimized a saint's veneration in the eyes of everyday people, sometimes in contradiction to official ecclesial dictates. "People had their own ways of deciding whom they would venerate."[76] The saints were very attractive to everyday people who dealt with enormous uncertainty due to hunger, plagues, political upheaval, and economic turmoil, becoming a resource to which they could supplicate for help when faced with suffering or calamity. People were no longer turning exclusively to God for their needs, but rather had alternatives from which to choose depending on the situation and the need. With reports of the miraculous deeds of the saints widely circulated, their powers came to predominate the minds of everyday Christians.[77] Peter Brown contends that the rise in

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[74] Robert Kolb, *For All the Saints: Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 3.

[75] Gábor Klaniczay, *The Uses of Supernatural Power: The Transformation of Popular Religion in Medieval and Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Karen Margolis, trans. Susan Singerman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 8.

[76] Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints & Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 142.

[77] The collection of essays in *Promoting the Saints* shows how hagiographies, biographies, and art were used to popularize the saints. Ottó Gecser and Gábor Klaniczay, eds., *Promoting the Saints: Cults and Their Contexts from Late Antiquity until the Early Modern Period*, CEU medievalia 12 (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2011).

popularity of the saints marked a significant change in the balance of spiritual power: "to seek the face of a fellow human being where an earlier generation had wished to see the shimmering presence of a bodiless power is no small change."[78] Though Roman Catholic defenders insisted on a distinction between the veneration given to the saints and the worship due to God, this "meant little to the peasant whose fields gave abundant yield or the journeyman whose blind daughter was made to see by a local holy man."[79]

This ascription of spiritual power was the key problem that drew Luther's most direct criticism. People were prone to look for power in the saints that should only be sought in God alone. In his lectures on Genesis, Luther notes,

> The books of Judges and Kings testify that they heaped up idols throughout the land, just as we, too, did under the papacy and in a far more flagrant manner filled everything with the idolatrous worship of the saints. One man worshiped Erasmus in order that this saint might bestow wealth. Another person worshiped Margaret in order that she might bring help to women in childbirth. And Mary was worshiped by all as a mediatrix and helper in all necessities. No one wanted to hope for or expect liberation from God. A woman in childbirth wanted immediate help. Therefore she called upon Margaret, not upon God.[80]

With a myriad of spiritual powers to choose from, people failed to seek help from where it is properly found: God Himself. Luther connects this explicitly with idolatry in the Smalcald Articles:

> Although the angels in heaven pray for us (as Christ himself also does), and in the same way also the saints on earth and perhaps those in heaven pray for us, it does not follow from this that we ought to invoke angels and saints; pray to them; keep fasts and hold festivals for them; celebrate Masses, make sacrifices, establish churches, altars, or worship services for them; serve them in still other ways; and consider them as helpers in time of need, assign all kinds of assistance to them, and attribute a

[78] Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 51.

[79] Weinstein and Bell, *Saints & Society*, 146.

[80] Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," *LW* 8:203.

> specific function to particular saints, as the papists teach and do. This is idolatry. Such honor belongs to God alone.[81]

For Luther, the problem is two-fold. First, the saints are ascribed powers that properly belong to God. Second, their invocation for help reveals that the heart of the invoker fears, loves, and trusts in the saints above God. There is a dual sin—a turning towards the saints that at one and the same time is a turning away from God. This places the saints in a position of priority that only God should occupy. Further compounding the problem was a complete lack of biblical precedent for the invocation of the saints. "It is neither commanded nor recommended, has no precedent in the Scripture."[82] Therefore, Luther calls the cult of the saints idolatry.

Considering this study's interviews in light of the discussion above, it is clear that, in many cases, the ancestors are ascribed spiritual power, leading some interviewees to invoke the ancestors for supernatural assistance. Rituals at the altar are the location of such transactions. While interviewees are quick to note that this assistance does not negate human effort, nor is it to be used for crass material gain, nonetheless some interviewees clearly hold that the ancestors have power to affect their lives. I-7 frequently noted the need to invoke the help of the ancestors in both work and family matters. He says, "In the process of beginning a new business effort, or even in everyday life, if I have something that I feel I need, like I want to present something or send a message to the ancestors so that they will help, then I light an incense on the altar and send the message." Though I-7 was not so confident as to say for certain when the ancestors did or did not help, I-9 was, as reported in Chapter Five, more bold to associate his grandmother's healing to the ancestors. "Generally speaking, [ancestral veneration] has some benefit that I can see, that I can tell as a story. It's not as if I do it only for peace of mind." In these cases, the

[81] Smalcald Articles, II.26 in Kolb and Wengert, 305. Hereafter SA.

[82] SA II.25 in Kolb and Wengert, 305.

ascription of power to the ancestors applies with both general supplications for health, peace, and prosperity, but also for specific occasions of need (e.g., exams, business ventures, health emergencies, etc.). It also applies to both material and non-material assistance.

The above discussion has shown Luther's clear basis for judging aspects of the cult of the saints as idolatrous, namely the ascription of and the invocation to a spiritual power other than God. It has also shown that, for some interviewees, spiritual power is ascribed to and invoked in the ancestors. Given these realities, one must conclude that ancestral veneration, in some cases, qualifies as idolatrous. It risks ascribing to ancestors powers that properly belong to God, causing the heart to fear, love, and trust the ancestors above God.

Benefitting the Dead through the Mass

Though the interviewees focused far more on the flow of benefits from the dead to the living, they did also note benefits from the living to the dead. For this reason, a few brief comments are warranted. In Luther's day, common people sought to benefit the souls of the dead, specifically by helping them in purgatory through the practice of sponsoring Masses for the dead person.[83] This, too, became an income generating endeavor for the Church, with Masses performed repeatedly in the hope that the merit generated by a good work could be applied to a soul in purgatory. In writing about the Mass, Luther had no tolerance for these abuses.

> They "traded" in purgatory … so that the Mass is only used on behalf of the dead, although Christ instituted the sacrament only for the living. Purgatory, therefore, with all its pomp, requiem Masses, and transactions, is to be regarded as an apparition of the devil. For it, too, is against the chief article[84] that Christ alone (and not human works) is to help souls. Besides, concerning the dead we have received neither

[83] The term *Mass* refers to the liturgical service which includes celebration of the Eucharist.

[84] For Luther, the "chief article" is the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. See AC IV and Ap IV in Kolb and Wengert, 38–40; 120–73.

> command nor instruction. For these reasons, it may be best to abandon it, even if it were neither error nor idolatry.[85]

Luther identifies the doctrine of purgatory as the culprit in spurring the proliferation of Masses for the dead. With so many deceased loved ones trapped in purgatory due to their lack of sufficient merit, living family members were motivated to help the dead escape. Luther decries this as an assault on the sufficiency of Christ himself in helping the souls of the dead. The more people look to Masses, the less they look to Christ. Luther again solidifies his judgment on Masses for the dead by a lack of Scriptural evidence on the living's ability to influence the dead. In the final sentence, he implies that the practices are idolatrous.

Some interviewees were motivated to perform ancestral veneration by their desire to help the ancestors with their material needs in the afterlife. An unvenerated ancestor might become a wandering ghost, unable to find final rest.[86] Speaking about her offerings on the altar, I-6 says, "If I don't take care of [the ancestors] in that way, they will be hungrier or more lonely or something. And so my monthly or weekly offerings that I make with incense are so that I can give them something extra." I-9 spoke of burning all sorts of votive papers, from motorbikes to villas to TVs, to send to ancestors in the afterlife. Though opinions varied widely on how or in what form ancestors received those benefits, for those interviewees there was a clear sense that the actions of the living can benefit the dead. Considered in light of Luther's judgment on Masses for the dead, however, activities which seek to benefit the dead are Scripturally baseless at best and idolatrous at worst.

[85] SA II.12 in Kolb and Wengert, 303.

[86] Belief in so-called hungry ghosts varied among interviewees. Some denied they exists, other feared them, while some were ambiguous.

Luther's Measured Response to the Cult of the Saints

Considering his clear and forceful diagnosis of the abuses of the cult of the saints, Luther was surprisingly restrained in his prescription on how to deal with them. "In contrast to Bucer, Zwingli, and Bullinger, who argued for complete purification of Christianity from those 'heathen' idolatries, Luther refused to deny the saints any function in a renewed Christian religion."[87] The Calvinists, in particular, took an iconoclastic stance, seeking to purge churches of "superstitious" practices, including those practices that had no explicit biblical origin. Luther and his followers, on the other hand, saw the saints not as an evil to expunge but as a devotional resource to reform.

The basis for this measured response was twofold. First was the conviction that, were the saints devoid of spiritual power, they would cease to tempt people to idolize them.

> If such idolatrous honor is taken away from the angels and dead saints, then the honor that remains will do no harm and will indeed soon be forgotten. When physical and spiritual benefit and help are no longer expected, then the saints will be left in peace, both in the grave and in heaven. For no one will long remember, esteem, or honor them simply out of love with no hope of return.[88]

In other words, people will not turn for help to someone who they believe has no power to help them. Second, this divestment of the saints' spiritual power would open the way for "other good ways I can honor, love, and thank [the saints] in Christ."[89] This last statement suggests that Luther sees positive functions the saints might serve in the life of the people.

What are those "other good ways?" In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, which received Luther's praise along with widespread and immediate adoption by Lutheran reformers,

[87] Soergel, *Wondrous in His Saints*, 62.

[88] SA II.28 in Kolb and Wengert, 306.

[89] SA II.27 in Kolb and Wengert, 306.

his erudite compatriot, Philip Melanchthon, sketched a threefold honor that can be given to the saints.

> Our confession approves giving honor to the saints. This honor is threefold. The first is thanksgiving: we ought to give thanks to God because he has given examples of his mercy, because he has shown that he wants to save humankind, and because he has given teachers and other gifts to the church. Since these are the greatest gifts, they ought to be extolled very highly, and we ought to praise the saints themselves for faithfully using these gifts just as Christ praises faithful managers. The second kind of veneration[90] is the strengthening of our faith. When we see Peter forgiven after his denial, we, too, are encouraged to believe that grace truly superabounds much more over sin. The third honor is imitation: first of their faith, then of their other virtues, which people should imitate according to their callings. The opponents do not require these true honors. They only argue about invocation, which, even if it were not dangerous, is certainly not necessary.[91]

The honor of thanksgiving is given to God Himself as the source of the saint's life and service. God created each saint, endowing them with gifts to use in service to Church and world. The second honor, that of strengthening faith, points to the saints' example of faith. Melanchthon does not refer to Peter's successes, but rather to his denial of Christ that resulted in his need for Christ's forgiveness. This encourages a more balanced view of the saints, seeing them as fallible humans who received God's grace, reminding the people of their same status. The final honor takes a two-tiered approach, extolling first the saints' example of faith, and then their other virtues, as worthy of imitation. These imitated virtues will benefit others as Christians go about their daily callings. It is noteworthy that in this threefold honor/veneration, the saints are never the beneficiaries of the honor or veneration. Rather, *God* receives the honor of thanksgiving, *our*

[90] The choice of English word here is crucial. The original Latin version uses the word *cultus*, which is translated in many ways depending on context, but connotes honor, reverence, and even worship. The Kolb-Wengert edition quoted here accurately translates it *veneration*. The Concordia Triglotta of 1921 renders it *service*, a potentially misleading choice. See F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau, eds., *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), 344–5. The Tappert edition of the Book of Concord of renders it *honor*, which is in keeping with the rest of the paragraph. See Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Mühlenberg, 1959), 229.

[91] Ap XXI.4–7 in Kolb and Wengert, 238.

faith is strengthened by the second honor, and *the world* receives our service in the honor of imitation.

Melanchthon's threefold honor/veneration is instructive in tracing the contours of a responsible Christian ancestral practice. One's parents, grandparents, and ancestors are "First Article" gifts of God who have bestowed life and provision, and as such are worthy of the honor of thanksgiving, which goes ultimately to God as their origin. The second honor, the strengthening of faith, is less straightforward. For those Vietnamese who come from Christian homes, the application is easy. But for most Vietnamese, whose parents are not Christians, the application cannot be made directly because the parents' example is not one of faith. Any application can only be made indirectly and very generally. For example, the remembrance of a grandfather's gracious and tender qualities might indirectly remind a Christian of God's own care and love, thus strengthening their faith in God. As for the third honor, of imitation, its second tier that focuses on the virtues of the saint can be applied to the ancestors. A grandfather's grace and tenderness can provide an example for imitation to a grandchild once they start their own families.

Conclusion

In the context of Luther's treatment on the cult of the saints, the veneration of the ancestors can find its appropriate limits. Like some interviewees' notions of the ancestors, the saints functioned as patrons of spiritual power in a middle realm between heaven and earth, between the dead and the living. Luther was bold to call this idolatry and identified the ascription of spiritual power as the key feature leading to that judgment. He sought to divest this middle realm of power, severing the flow of benefits between the saints and the common people, and pointing the common people back to the Triune God as the only legitimate source of spiritual power. He

also criticized the practices of Masses for the dead, closing the flow of help from the living to the dead. A Christian ancestral practice in Vietnam must not be afraid to acknowledge when idolatry is present and diligently guard against a two-way transaction between family members and ancestors by avoiding ascribing spiritual power to the ancestors. Instead, it should point people to God's First-Article gifts, and His Second Article gift of Christ, as sufficient for both the dead and the living.

Just as Luther and Melanchthon sought to retain the saints because they found positive value in them, might Vietnamese Christians find positive value in ancestral veneration worth retaining? Melanchthon's honor of thanksgiving and honor of imitation seem like easy places to start. However, the honor of strengthening of faith raises difficult questions precisely because, for most Vietnamese, the ancestors are not Christians. Luther and Melanchthon were writing into a 16th century German context in which nearly all the population was ostensibly Christian. In 21st century Vietnam, however, most people, including their ancestors, are not Christian. Is it theologically tenable to consider a Christian veneration of non-Christian ancestors? The next section will consider this question, among others, in the context of Luther's teaching on vocation, that is, the callings God places on all people.

The Social is Religious:
Ancestor Veneration as Vocational Duty

Introduction

The medieval world into which Luther was born was an enchanted one in which supernatural, unseen forces influenced the natural, seen world, and vice versa. In this middle arena, between the supernatural/heavenly and the natural/worldly, the saints functioned as sources of spiritual power, mediating the blessings of God. In his treatment on the saints,

specifically his attack on their spiritual power, Luther removed the saints from this privileged status, effectively expelling them from the middle. As Chapters Two and Five showed, the world of the Vietnamese is similarly enchanted.[92] In using Luther's thoughts on the saints to warn against an idolatrous ascription of spiritual power to the ancestors, this study also takes them out of a middle realm.

In doing so, the study subjects itself to what missiologist/anthropologist Paul Hiebert calls, "the flaw of the excluded middle."[93] This occurs when, in cross-cultural missions, Western, dualistic conceptions of reality fail to account for, or even expel, the middle realities that are common in non-Western cultures. This exclusion of the middle often leaves unanswered many of the questions or problems which the middle previously addressed, including how to secure blessing and stave off calamity. "Given no answer, [everyday people] return to the diviner who gave them definitive answers, for those are the problems that loom large in their everyday lives."[94] Hiebert urges Christian missions to develop holistic theologies that "include a theology of God in human history. … This must include a theology of divine guidance, provision, and healing; of ancestors, spirits, and invisible powers of this world; and of suffering, misfortunate, and death."[95]

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[92] Philip Taylor and other contributors show how, despite historic government repression and burgeoning modernity, various religious traditions are thriving in today's Vietnam. See Taylor, *Modernity and Re-Enchantment*.

[93] Paul Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," in *Landmarks Essays in Mission and World Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, American Society of Missiology Series 43 (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009), 179–89.

[94] Hiebert, "Flaw of the Excluded Middle," 188. Elsewhere, Hiebert calls this "split-level Christianity," in which someone actively engages in Christian activities (going to church, praying to God, etc.) while at the same time still engaged in aspects of their cultures' folk religious practices. See Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, 15–29.

[95] Hiebert, "Flaw of the Excluded Middle," 188.

Such a multifaceted theology is well beyond the scope of this study. However, this section will suggest that aspects of Martin Luther's theology of vocation are one piece of that wider theology. Even as Luther downgraded the power of the saints in the life of the Christian, he upgraded the everyday work Christians do in the context of their callings in family, society, and church. Luther believed that God places people into certain offices, such as husband, wife, father, mother, child, teacher, student, worker, employer, citizen, government official, pastor, layperson, and so on, each with its own attendant duties. Luther called these offices *vocations*, from the Latin word for *call*. For Luther, it is through these ordinary callings and everyday labors that God Himself works to provide for and protect the world. Instead of looking to alternative spiritual powers, the Christian sees God working through the mundane activities of everyday people. By turning all kinds of labors into holy works of God, the natural/seen world is given a supernatural/unseen significance that bridges the gap left by an excluded middle. Within this context, this section will suggest that a Christian ancestral veneration might be conceived as an appropriate contextual vocational duty of children in Vietnam.

Family Responsibilities as a Holy Work

Martin Luther's theology of vocation, or calling, arose out of a medieval context in which only those who engaged in church work were properly said to have a calling, that is, a sense they had been placed in their office by God Himself and that their work in that office was valuable in God's Kingdom. Priests, nuns, monks, and other ecclesial officials were those with true callings. In this way, their work was seen as sacred while the work of common people was considered profane. The church or monastery was God's arena, whereas the home and the workplace were the arena of sinful humans and the devil. The life of the monk was the "extraordinary way" to be

lifted up as the ideal, with the life of the common person being merely the "ordinary way."[96] Luther would turn this system on its head in his 1521 *Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*.

Luther declared that vocations were not just found in the confines of the church or monastery but were also found in the normal routines of everyday life. Domestic or public stations in life were given by God Himself, a means through which He provides for the world. Part of Luther's demotion of monastic vows was based on their tendency to draw people away from their other God-given vocations. Monastic vows required monks to withdraw from societal life, including eschewing their duties to their families. In times of need, monks might even refuse to receive their parents' visits, lest it interfere with their holy calling.[97] Luther had no tolerance for this dereliction of filial duty. Nothing, not even the vows of monks, should minimize the honor and obedience a child owes their parents. "Let the man be anathema who has taken a vow or will have kept a vow in conflict with his responsibility towards his parents and toward his neighbor."[98] Luther deems the extraordinary work of monks as inferior, even contrary to, the ordinary work of a child obeying parents. For Luther, the key issue on this point was the clear command of God, which monastic vows lacked and obedience to parents possessed. Without that clear command of God, monastic vows amounted to a denial of what God has in fact commanded: "Just as you cannot take vows to deny God and his commandments, so you cannot take vows which deny obedience to parents and service to neighbor; for God has commanded obedience to parents and service to neighbor."[99]

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[96] *LW* 44:265.

[97] *LW* 44:327.

[98] *LW* 44:326.

[99] *LW* 44:326.

Explicit in Luther's demotion of monastic vows from their place of prominence is a concomitant promotion of family life to a privileged position. For him, "after faith in God there is nothing greater than obedience to parents."[100] Obedience to parents (and other authorities) is hallowed by the Fourth Commandment which has come from God himself. Thus, obedience to parents is obedience to God Himself. This gives obedience to parents a holiness that monastic works cannot match. "Much holier and much more excellent than the obedience of monks is that of a wife, of children, servants, prisoners, and such people."[101] Over and against the self-congratulating work of the monastic, Luther taught that "this very obedience to parents and service to neighbor is the real and true worship of God."[102]

Masks of God

Lest any construal of human vocation contain any hint of works-righteousness, Luther took care to cast the direction of vocation as flowing from God to the world. Luther used the term *mask* to speak of how God hides Himself in the vocations of ordinary people. In normal human experience, God is not seen directly, but is nonetheless actively working, hiding behind the everyday work of common people. They are his masks.

> What else is all our work to God—whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in government—but just such a child's performance, by which He wants to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the masks of God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things.[103]

In most cases, God does not provide food directly through miracles, but rather He provides through the work of farmers who cultivate the land, merchants who sell goods, and parents who

[100] *LW* 44:326.

[101] *LW* 44:363.

[102] *LW* 44:331.

[103] Martin Luther, "Psalm 147, 1532," *LW* 14:114.

buy and prepare those foodstuffs to feed their families.[104] These people, by virtue of their vocations, function as God's messengers of His blessings. In other words, "man becomes God's mask wherever man acts."[105] Though others see only an ordinary parent, Luther taught that the parent who provides for their children is a mask of God's fatherly care. "He is a tool in God's hand … active outwardly, so that God reveals himself to others through man's actions."[106] Through the provision of parents, then, the child can learn something of God's goodness, abundance, and care.

In this way, Luther defined the beneficiaries of human vocation as other humans. Against any notions of works-righteousness, Luther taught that human vocation does not benefit God. The flow of benefits is always from God, through a person's vocation, to the neighbor. As Wingren crystalizes it, "God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does."[107] The work of vocation is only indirectly service to God; primarily it seeks to serve the neighbor. "In his vocation one is not reaching up to God, but rather bends oneself down toward the world."[108] Or, even more emphatically, God himself continues to bend down to the world through vocation.

The Social is Religious

In lifting family relationships out of the world of the profane and declaring them sacred, Luther problematized the entire distinction between sacred and profane. The lines between God's

[104] This should in no way imply that God is incapable of miraculous provision or refuses in all cases to do so. Indeed, Scripture is full of examples when God provided miraculously (e.g., Exod. 16; Matt. 14:13–21). Rather, what is said here is that apart from certain exceptional occasions, God *normally* provides through the work of humans in their vocations.

[105] Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1957), 137.

[106] Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 137.

[107] Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 10.

[108] Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 10.

work and human work, holy and unholy space, the extraordinary and ordinary, were blurred. The holy God comes down to work through so-called profane human works, meaning that those very profane works are raised up as holy vocations. Ordinary family life was infused with extraordinary sacredness. In vocation, the religious and the social are joined together, creating a new middle that bridges the natural and supernatural, the seen and the unseen.

Luther's approach can provide a point of contact between Christianity and Vietnamese culture. Chapter Two argued that applying the distinction between the social and the religious to the issue of ancestral rites was a Western imposition. Among many Asians, no such distinction exists. In an Eastern worldview, one cannot speak of the sacred apart from the secular, because "in the end the religious and secular worlds collapse into one—coalescing together in the world of sacred corporate ritual."[109] As a result, one cannot parse ancestral rites for what is religious and what is not. Rather, religious associations are integrated throughout social meanings, and other meanings still. The social *is* religious and vice versa. The interviews in this study revealed the same attitude. Not a single interviewee made a distinction between religious meanings and social meanings. For them, the two are not separable categories, but together, along with other meanings, form a cohesive whole.

Herbert Fingarette argues that, from the standpoint of Confucian ideology, this close association between the religious and the social entails that "explicitly sacred rite can be seen as an emphatic, intensified, and sharply elaborated extension of everyday civilized discourse."[110] In the case of Vietnam, this is evidenced by the saying, oft repeated by interviewees, *trân sao âm vậy*, i.e., the notion that the ancestors' afterlife reflects the same needs (food, clothing, shelter,

[109] Luttio, "Chinese Rites Controversy," 309.

[110] Fingarette, *Confucius*, 11.

etc.) as this life. Ancestral rites become reflections of everyday interactions. On the other hand, however, the coalescence of the sacred and the secular also implies that everyday life is itself imbued with a sacred character. In other words, sacred rituals are not only an extension of everyday life; rather, everyday actions *are* the sacred rituals themselves. This is broadly consonant with Luther's doctrine of vocation.

I-1 provides a helpful example. As shown in Chapter Five, for I-1 ancestral veneration is an expression of his role as the eldest son in his family. So strong is this obligation to his family, that he says, "The only spirituality I have, if I have any, is in my family." For I-1, his role as eldest son, along with its attendant obligations (including ancestral veneration), are defining characteristics of not just his social life but also his spiritual life. On the face of it, a statement like this might be interpreted as crossing the line of idolatry. According to the discussion above, an idol is made when someone places their ultimate allegiance in something other than God himself. Indeed, Wingren notes the tendency of non-believers towards this very problem because they only see the mask of vocation.

> He who does not have faith and, through faith, access to the heavenly kingdom, knows only different masks. He knows only the earth, where God appears solely as hidden behind his many masks: parents, rulers, neighbors, wives, children, etc. Without faith, a man cannot distinguish between God and his masks. To some who fill certain offices he accords a glory of their own, independent of God, as if the mask were not a mask, or veil, but God himself. [111]

One could argue, then, that I-1 falls into this trap. He sees only the mask—his family—but not God. Without faith, he can only see the gift of family, not the Giver. As a result, he ascribes to his family an importance in his life that should be reserved for God alone. God alone should form the center of one's spiritual life.

[111] Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 140.

For a Christian, however, the doctrine of vocation is helpful precisely because it restores the ability to distinguish between God and his masks. A Christian recognizes family not as an end in itself but as a means of God's blessings. A Christian also recognizes his or her own efforts in vocation not as determinative in themselves, but as playing a part in God's overarching purposes. That is, a Christian knows that God is the ultimate subject of all giving and doing, and that they are mere receivers of His blessings and instruments through which he blesses. A Christian "maintains a proper perspective in respect to all earthly glory by putting everything in its right place. In his affirmative response to his vocation he affirms a world whose totally relative character before God has already been recognized."[112] With everything in its right place, a Christian can pursue his or her vocations without fear of idolatry.

In the context of a rightly ordered understanding of human vocation, in which God is recognized as the source of all blessing while human vocation is seen as God's mask through which he grants those blessings, I-1's sentiments about his family being his spirituality might find new meaning that avoids the possibility for idolatry. Through the lens of Christian vocation, one's spiritual life is not found in retreat from the world but rather in engagement in the world. That is, the family can be seen as a God-given arena in which God's blessings flow back and forth. As a beneficiary of the care of family members according to their vocations, the Christian rightly gives thanks to God for that provision. At the same time, within his or her various vocations as a member of the family, the Christian recognizes that God is using him or her to care for others. As such, the family is a valid context for living out the Christian life. Family life *is* spiritual life.

[112] Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 141.

As Gene Edward Veith Jr. and Mary J. Moerbe write, "Even after we have grown, we remain children—children of our parents, when they are old and even after they have died—and children of Abraham."[113] Ancestral veneration, then, might be conceived as an extension of a son or daughter's vocational duty after the death of the parents. That is, it is a way that God blesses the neighbor through the vocation of that son and daughter. What neighbors are being served in ancestral veneration? I-1 himself provides some clues, speaking of the ways that ancestral rites serve living family members. For example, he said, "I don't believe in a soul, but I still clean and interact with the altar in order to preserve the relationships with members of the family." For him, ancestor veneration promotes harmony in the extended family. One way it does this is by providing occasion for disparate family members to gather. He explains, "[Ancestral veneration] doesn't just help me but rather it helps the family, those who are living, to have a better connection." In those gatherings, the ancestors are remembered for their positive life and example. Indeed, I-1 speaks of how ancestor veneration "reminds me of the values of my grandfather." Placed within a framework of Christian vocation in which God is distinguished from his masks and recognized as the source of and provider for family life through different family vocations, these statements can find their truest and fullest meaning. Through the lens of vocation, ancestral veneration can be spoken of as a deeply religious act, but not necessarily an idolatrous one.

Non-Christian Ancestors

The doctrine of vocation also helps address the difficult question of non-Christian ancestors, a pressing issue for Vietnamese Christians precisely because so few of their ancestors

[113] Gene Edward Veith Jr. and Mary J. Moerbe, *Family Vocation: God's Calling in Marriage, Parenting, and Childhood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 175.

are Christian. Are non-Christian ancestors worthy of the same veneration as Christian ancestors? As seen above, a solution which enlarges the communion of the saints to include non-Christian ancestors is a theological innovation which departs from the historic teaching on the communion of the saints as the holy community of believers which transcends time and space.[114] Luther's doctrine of vocation, however, provides a foundation on which a veneration of non-Christian ancestors might be laid.

As shown in the section on the Fourth Commandment, parents are First Article gifts given to all people regardless of any religious affiliation.[115] God uses parents as his instruments to create new life when they have children, and to provide for those children by caring for their needs. For the parent, "on earth and in relation to his neighbor he fills an 'office,'" even if he does not know it.[116] God places a person into the office of parent, and the neighbors that the parent serves are his children. Because parents are in this office, they are due the same obedience and honor from children that the Fourth Commandment requires. Even if a child cannot thank God for the faith of his or her parents, thanks can still be given for their "other virtues."[117] In other words, "God is working even through those who do not know Him. In His earthly kingdom, God is active in the secular sphere, even among nonbelievers."[118] This understanding has biblical precedent. Perhaps the clearest biblical example of this is the pagan Persian king Cyrus, whom God explicitly used according to His own purposes, with Isaiah even referring to

[114] Peters, *The Creed*, 260–6.

[115] In Matt. 5:45, Jesus proclaims that God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." Like the sun and the rain, human family is a gift that all people are given.

[116] Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 6.

[117] Ap XXI.6 in Kolb and Wengert, 238.

[118] Gene Edward Veith Jr., *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 33.

Cyrus as the Lord's anointed (Is. 45:1). Another example is Romans 13, in which Paul exhorts the Romans to "be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1–2). Paul wrote this in the context of a pagan Roman emperor, who is, nonetheless, "God's servant for your good" (Rom. 13:4). In a similar way, even if a non-Christian parent does not teach or model the faith, nonetheless, that parent can function as a mask of God who, through their care for their children, reveals something about God's care to a Christian child. That is, a Christian child can see behind their parents' imperfect care the perfect care of God himself. This reinforces that "God's power and His providential care extend beyond the Church, that He rules in the secular realm, even among those who are rebelling against Him."[119] On this basis, then, a Vietnamese Christian could rightly venerate a non-Christian ancestor, even while acknowledging that the ancestor did not fulfill God's full design for his or her vocational duties.

Conclusion

Luther did not jettison the idea of an enchanted middle but rather reframed its structure. Luther relocates the locus of the middle world away from external spiritual powers and towards God who works through human vocations. This is, then, one helpful tool for avoiding Hiebert's "flaw of the excluded middle." Further, it provides a context in which ancestral veneration can be restrained from any idolatrous tendency while uplifting its positive value. First, vocation focuses attention on God as the source of provision through this-worldly human vocations. This protects against seeking provision through the ancestors as external spiritual powers. Second, vocation places the honor and obedience that children give to parents in the context of God's

[119] Veith Jr., *God at Work*, 35.

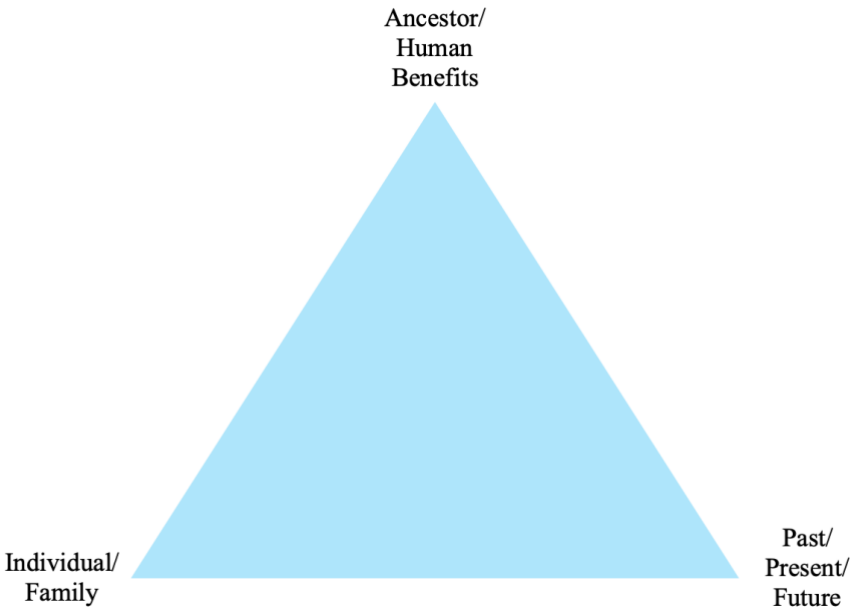
purposes. This protects against veneration becoming a tool for private self-interest and instead reorients it to God's overall work in the family. Third, vocation clearly defines the beneficiary of human work as the living neighbor. This protects against veneration becoming a way to help the dead by turning family members towards the needs of those around them. In other words, vocation protects against idolatry.

Using the Broad Themes and Theological Insights as a Diagnostic Tool

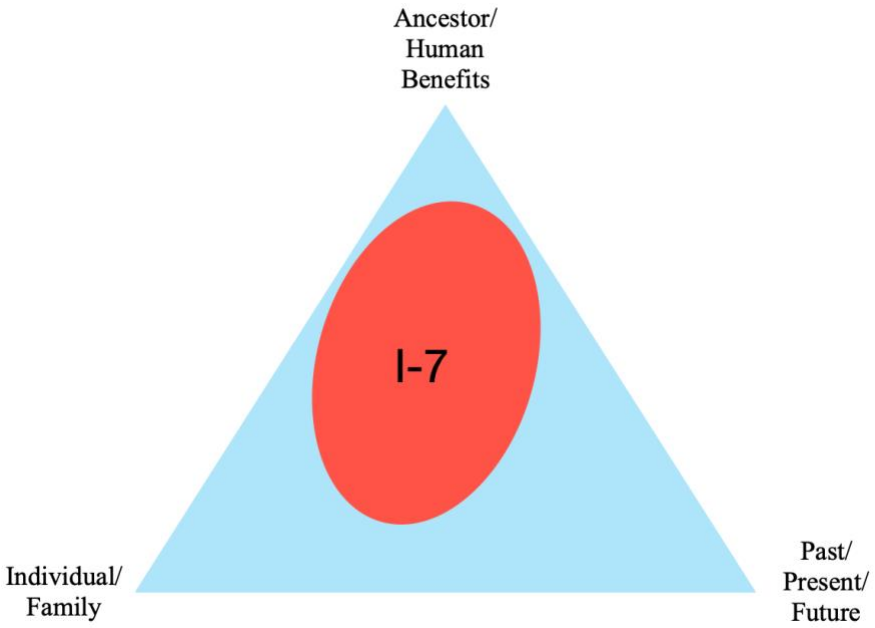
The preceding discussion adds further caution against extreme positions with regards to ancestral rites. First, the analysis should give pause to those who would immediately and uncritically embrace ancestral rites. Luther's insistence on the First Commandment's priority over the Fourth, his attack on the ascription of the spiritual power to the saints, and his God-centered framework for human vocations, set clear boundaries for idolatry, boundaries which this study's interviews sometimes cross. Second, however, this analysis should give pause to those who would immediately and uncritically dismiss ancestral rites. Luther's insistence on the importance of the Fourth Commandment, his positive view of the ongoing value of the saints, and his understanding of how God works through all human vocations, contain important connection points with the meanings of ancestor veneration revealed in the interviews, making Luther's insights valuable resources that can inform a faithful and contextual Christian ancestral practice in Vietnam. These theological insights can be used in conjunction with the broad themes discovered in Chapter Five. Used together, these broad themes and theological insights can assist the Vietnamese Church as it responds faithfully, thoughtfully, and sensitively to the issue of ancestral veneration, not with monolithic answers but with care and compassion.

This study proposes using the broad themes as a diagnostic tool to aid Christians in understanding how everyday Vietnamese approach the ancestors. This can be accomplished by

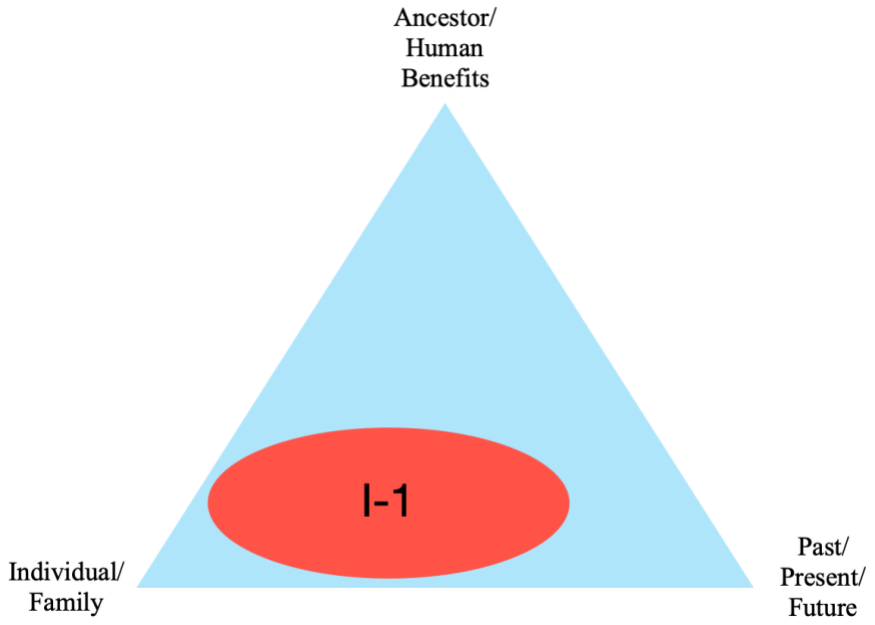
applying a ternary diagram to the broad themes. The first broad theme revealed by interviewees played an orienting function, distinguishing the form of ancestral veneration from its content and posing the question: what is the content, i.e., what are the core meanings of ancestral practices? The next three broad themes (understanding the individual in light of the family, securing human and/or ancestor benefits, and connecting the past through the present to the future) captured the interviewees' reflections on those meanings. These three themes can be visualized as the points of the ternary diagram, as below.



Using this basic visualization, each interviewee can be plotted in the ternary diagram in order to capture the balance of themes for that interviewee. For example, I-7 focuses heavily on securing benefits in his work and family life, but given his role as the oldest son, also emphasizes responsibilities to his extended family. He also touches on passing down these traditions to future generations. With this balance of themes, his diagram would take on a distinct shape.

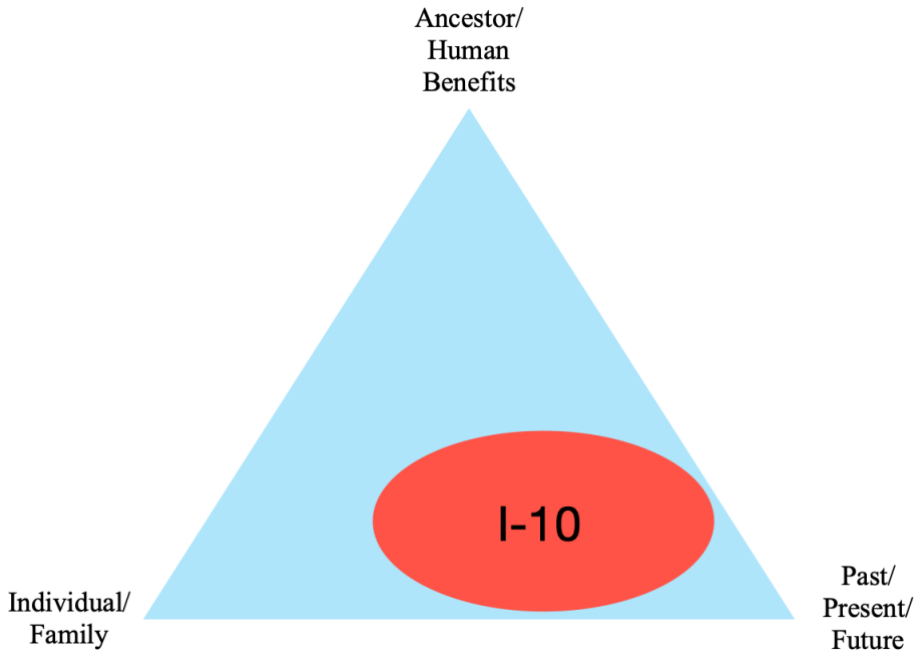


Meanwhile, given his emphasis on his role as the oldest son, the responsibilities that role brings, family gatherings, and "familyship," as well as his lack of emphasis on securing benefits, I-1's views on ancestor veneration might be visualized as follows.[120]



[120] These diagrams are thematic approximations based on overall qualitative data of the interviewee. They are not based on any quantitative analysis and so should not be understood as precise.

Finally, I-10 emphasized ancestor veneration as a cultural custom, preserved by those of the past and worthwhile to pass on to the future. She highlighted the emotional benefits of the practice, most of which connected to the theme of remembrance. Through ancestor veneration, she remains connected to her roots and has opportunity to express her gratitude to those who have come before. As a result, I-10's ternary diagram might be visualized like this:



Diagrams can be created for each interviewee, though these examples are sufficient to illustrate the potential of this visualization both methodologically and missiologically. As to methodology, the ternary diagram is suitable for this study's data because it resists clear boundaries or mutually exclusive categories. It eschews either/or dichotomies and promotes both/and representations. This makes it capable of holding together, in broad terms, the plurality of meanings that interviewees hold for ancestral veneration, rather than forcing them into isolated categories.

The ternary diagram can also be used by missionaries and local Christians in evangelism and discipleship efforts as a diagnostic tool for understanding an individual's conceptions of

ancestral veneration. As conversations take place over time, the evangelist/teacher/pastor/missionary/believer (henceforth referred to as the proclaimer[121]) will gain a sense of the unbeliever or believer's interactions with ancestral rites and the meanings attached to those interactions. The proclaimer will then be able to plot these meanings on the ternary graph. Their relative position on the diagram can help orient appropriate responses about the issue of ancestral rites for a particular person.

For example, consider how I-7's ternary diagram above would alert a proclaimer to potential opportunities and dangers in the evangelism or discipleship task. Given his focus on benefits received from the ancestors, evangelism and discipleship efforts would necessarily problematize the ascription of spiritual power to the ancestors as potentially idolatrous. I-7 would inevitably need to grapple with his ancestral practice as it relates to the First Commandment. All these discussions would be geared towards leading I-7 to place his fear, love, and trust, in God alone for all his needs, while placing the ancestors in their proper place relative to God. Towards this end, I-7's emphasis on filial piety and his role as the eldest son might provide an opportunity to locate filial piety in the context of the Fourth Commandment (in close connection with the First). Further, some Christian scholars have noted the potential for designating Jesus as the fulfillment of true filiality, casting him as the ultimate filial Son of God who fulfilled his obligations to both his earthly parents and to God the Father, even unto death, for the sake of salvation of all God's children.[122] Finally, his role as eldest son could be theologically legitimized

[121] Proclaimer here refers to the one who is evangelizing or discipling.

[122] Roman Catholic scholar Peter De Ta Vo argues for seeing Jesus as the perfect filial Son of God, though he does concede its limitations, acknowledging biblical stories in which Jesus goes against the grain of filial piety. See Peter De Ta Vo, "A Cultural and Theological Foundation for Ancestor Veneration among Catholics in Vietnam" (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 1999), 263–68, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. Further, Joan M. Wise reports Vietnamese evangelical pastors using the notion of Jesus as filial Son of God in a sermon. See Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 145.

through an understanding of Christian vocation, by which God uses humans to channel his blessings to the world.

As another example, I-1's ternary diagram above provides guidance for how a proclaimer might respond to him on the issue of ancestral practices. For I-1, the risk of idolatry is not associated with the rituals of ancestral veneration per se, because I-1 does not believe in an afterlife nor in the ability of the dead to affect the lives of the living (and vice versa). As such, a proclaimer need not spend much time on the problem of the ascription of spiritual power. For I-1, the ancestors have none. However, I-1 is susceptible to a more subtle idolatry, seeing the family unit itself as the locus of his spiritual life, placing his obligations to it above all else. In this case, I-1 would benefit from discussions about the relationship between the First and Fourth Commandments, specifically that devotion to family properly flows out of a primary fear and love of God.[123] This would define his family, including his ancestors, as gifts of God that I-1 stewards through his vocation as the eldest son. That stewardship of vocation would be defined by God's purposes for his creation, including the family.

Meanwhile, I-10's ternary graph can direct a proclaimer's pastoral conversations in different ways. For I-10, there were no clear signs of idolatry throughout her interview. She ascribes no spiritual power to the ancestors but instead sees their veneration as a positive force for society, inculcating important cultural values. A discussion of vocations in society might help orient her ideas around God's purposes for human activity. A biblical understanding of vocation would also give shape to her remembrance, promoting expressions of gratitude for the positive virtues that even non-Christian ancestors displayed. Moreover, a proclaimer might acquaint her

[123] Luther connects honor of parents and the fear and love of God beautifully in the explanation of the Fourth Commandment: "We are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority, but instead honor, serve, obey, love, and respect them." SC I.8 in Kolb and Wengert, 352.

with the communion of saints, in which by faith Christians become members, and through which Christians receive new ancestors, namely, those believers who have preceded us in death. Most important among those ancestors is Jesus himself. Peter De Ta Vo has argued, "Christ is not one among many ancestors, but rather 'ancestor par-excellence,' or 'proto-ancestor.'"[124] Such a proclamation to I-10 would ground the cultural value of ancestor veneration in a Christ-centered whole.

The examples above are not meant as an entire approach for evangelism to or discipleship of I-1, I-7, and I-10. Rather, they are an initial indication of discussion or study points on the specific issue of ancestral veneration. These discussions and studies would only be tenable within a larger program of evangelism or discipleship that teaches the basic tenants of Christianity.

A Pastoral Approach to Ancestor Veneration

At a 1974 seminar on anthropology for Christian missionaries in Vietnam, Walter A. Routh Jr. cautioned, "ln our ministry we should l) be careful not to approach everyone on the problem of ancestor worship with a simple legalistic prohibition and 2) be careful not to put each individual in the same category with everyone else; failing to find out as closely as possible just where the individual is in the problem."[125] The entire method of this study agrees with his sentiment, and the brief analysis of three interviewees above has suggested what a balanced response might look like. In some evangelism or discipleship efforts, it might be necessary to gently counsel someone away from ancestral rites for a time due to the pervasiveness of

[124] Vo, "A Cultural and Theological Foundation," 279–80.

[125] Walter A. Routh Jr., "The Indigenous Man Engages in Traditional Worship: Ancestor Worship or Veneration" (Presented at the Seminar on Anthropology, Dalat, 1974), 7.

idolatrous meanings. In other cases, when there is no danger of idolatry, clear biblical teaching on the First and Fourth Commandment, spiritual power, and vocation, can place ancestral practices into a Christian framework that provides appropriate guard rails. This approach resists embracing a single answer to ancestral veneration in Vietnam and instead proposes that different gestures might be needed depending on the needs of the individual. In other words, it places the question of ancestor veneration into the realm of pastoral care.[126]

Fundamentally, a pastoral approach represents a qualified accommodation. To be clear, Scripture or Christian teachings are not accommodated to Vietnamese culture, but rather a practice of Vietnamese culture might be accommodated into Christian use. That is, this approach suggests that ancestral veneration might be seen as a potentially valid contextualized practice of the Vietnamese Christian life. At the same time, it does not preclude the ability to acknowledge and guard against the potential abuses of ancestral veneration. Indeed, it is from within what Henry Smith terms an "accommodative approach" that different gestures are made possible. He articulates this as follows:

> Accommodation, then, offers the most appropriate ground from which to advance the dialogue between Christianity and contemporary ancestor worship. While the churches must not endorse actions that ancestral practitioners themselves regard as superstitious, they must embrace the abiding values and traditions associated with ancestral concerns. Protestants should finally agree with Roman Catholics on this premise. By adapting the church's liturgy to traditional customs, Christians may capitalize on the strengths of the other historical approaches to ancestor worship. They would earn the right to reject superstitious ceremonies and thus reflect the biblical fidelity of the displacement model.[127] An accommodative policy would provide opportunities for reinterpreting ancient forms and for suggesting, as the fulfillment strategists attempt to do, their contemporary spiritual, moral, and social

[126] For the purposes of this study, pastoral care refers to the application of biblical and theological truth to the issues of an individual's life with a view towards lovingly leading them to repent of sin, turn to Jesus for forgiveness, and live according to biblical truth. This care is not necessarily provided only by a pastor.

[127] By "displacement model," Smith means approaches that are based on a firm rejection of ancestor veneration. These were discussed in Chapter Three's section, "Protestant Responses in Vietnam." That section also outlines approaches that look for functional substitutes, and approaches that see Christianity as the fulfillment of cultural values. These correspond to Smith's *substitution* and *fulfilment* approaches, respectively.

> significance. Finally, the churches would be in a position to add the kinds of innovations recommended by the substitution approach.[128]

Smith sees accommodation of ancestral rites not as a blanket acceptance of all practices and beliefs, but as a basic posture that allows for different gestures according to diverse situations. This posture is better able to bridge the gap between what it means to be Vietnamese and what it means to be Christian.

Admittedly, this does not erase all risks. First, because the pastoral approach advocates different responses according to the circumstances of individual people, it might be seen as inconsistent or confusing. Why is one person permitted to engage in ancestral practices while another is encouraged not to? The importance of discipleship is key on this point. Though the responses might vary, the teaching on the issue should not. All Christians in Vietnam, regardless of their individual practices, should be educated on the nuances of a Christian evaluation of and response to ancestral veneration. This chapter has highlighted biblical/theological categories that can aid in that process. More work is needed to develop teaching resources that are publicly available to all churches.

Second, the danger of syncretism still lingers. Despite the best discipleship efforts, it must be conceded that believers might relapse into old understandings that mix with Christian teaching and infringe upon the borders of idolatry that have been discussed here. However, this risk is not unique to ancestral veneration but exists in all human artifacts, relationships, and endeavors. As Luther himself taught, "There are some who think that they have God and everything they need when they have money and property,"[129] and again, "So, too, those who boast of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor and who trust in them have a

[128] Smith, "Typology of Christian Responses," 647.

[129] LC I.5 in Kolb and Wengert, 387.

god."[130] Nevertheless, Luther does not advocate for the abandonment of these objects and endeavors but rather permits their continued use while urging that they be given their proper importance relative to God. Potential abuse should not lead to complete disuse. Considering the possibilities of syncretism in Asian folk religious expressions like ancestral practices, influential Singaporean theologian Simon Chan urges his readers to remember to

> recognize two kinds of syncretism: both accommodation to the primal worldview, as well as accommodation to modern culture. We tend to recognize syncretism of the first kind, but not the second, because the former is associated with "primitive" culture (which we disparage), while modernity is considered "high" culture (which we admire). But in point of fact, syncretism of the second kind is by far the more destructive and devastating.[131]

Chan acknowledges the risk of syncretism in Asian folk religions, but reminds Western Christians not to miss what are, for him, more damaging forms of syncretism in their own backyard. Chan's sentiments do not sidestep the question of syncretism in Asian folk religious expressions, but rather place the issue into a broader context in which the danger of syncretism is found in all cultural contexts. The danger of syncretism is always present. It is not a problem to finally remove, but an ongoing tension to actively engage with the truth of God's Word within each and every context in the world.

The pastoral approach's numerous advantages outweigh these ongoing risks. First, it situates the discussion about ancestral veneration at the ground level, i.e., in the context of a concrete relationship rather than in mere generalizations. Second, it positions the proclaimer first as a listener, seeking to understand the ideas and beliefs of a person emically before any advice or prescription is given etically. Third, and conversely, it gives voice and agency to the listener, allowing them to set the terms of the discussion. Fourth, it resists monolithic responses that are

[130] LC I.10 in Kolb and Wengert, 387.

[131] Chan, "Asian Christian Spirituality," 38.

applied to all people in all situations, because it seeks nuanced responses according to the specific situation of the individual person. Fifth, it grounds responses in established but relevant theological categories to ensure that responses are faithful to biblical truth. Sixth, it gives proclaimers flexibility in how they speak to the issue, drawing from a variety of biblical/theological resources. Seventh, it encourages a contextual response that is sensitive to the deep motivations and beliefs of a person. Eighth, through all the above, the whole evangelism/discipleship process is placed in the context of pastoral compassion for the person. Ultimately, any advice or prescriptions given by a proclaimer will only inform decisions that the individual will make, publicly or secretly, about his or her own participation in ancestral veneration. Acknowledgement of this reality underscores the importance of a pastoral approach that cares for the person.

Limitations of the Research

This study was admittedly limited, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not, in numerous ways. These limitations are listed below.

1. This project has limited itself to a study of ancestral veneration in Vietnam only. But in fact, ancestral practices are a missiological issue in other parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and in diaspora communities of various ethnic groups who settle in other countries. Studies can be found for each group and location, but few have broadly tried to relate them to each other. This kind of meta-analysis would be fruitful in fostering conversation among diverse practitioners to identify broad patterns and develop responses.[132]

[132] One study looked at examples from both Africa and Asia as the foundation for a theological appraisal. See Choon Sup Bae, "Ancestor Worship and the Challenges It Poses to the Christian Mission and Ministry" (PhD diss.,

2. With only 10 interviewees, most of whom were in the middle-upper class, and all located in Hanoi, the study's sample size was too small and focused on a narrow geographical area. A larger study would yield more representative results that could be differentiated more effectively and applied more widely.
3. The study restricted itself to only one (admittedly ubiquitous) aspect of Vietnamese religious life: veneration at the ancestral altar. But in fact, Vietnamese religious life is multifaceted, incorporating several religious influences over thousands of years and taking place at gravesites, temples, pagodas, homes, and other venues still. Indeed, I-1 was adamant about the importance of the gravesite for family life. Moreover, I-4 veered off on a fascinating tangent during his interview, detailing the different agendas leading people to go to the pagoda over the temple, and vice versa. Kimson Nguyen's work is helpful in putting these disparate influences into a larger context, which he calls "Vietnamese syncretistic spirituality."[133] More work is needed to consider the specific issue of ancestral veneration missiologically from within that multifaceted spirituality.
4. While this study has made some broad, tentative suggestions, it has resisted making judgments about what specific practices should or should not be permitted with regards to ancestral veneration among Christians in Vietnam.[134] This is in keeping with the four-step process of critical contextualization laid out by Paul Hiebert, in

University of Pretoria, 2007). Also, see the collected essays for the Consultation on the Christian Response to Ancestor Practices, held in 1983 and including participants from nine Asian countries. Bong Rin Ro, *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices*.

[133] Nguyen, *Cultural Integration and the Gospel*, 85–119.

[134] For example, judgments about the appropriateness of certain occasions (e.g., death anniversaries, veneration during the Lunar New Year, etc.) or ritual forms (e.g., pictures of the deceased, burning of incense, burning of votive papers, etc.).

which etic stakeholders' primary role is to help exegete culture phenomenologically and identify relevant biblical and theological data.[135] This study has restricted itself to these two tasks, leaving it to Vietnamese Christians themselves to make critical responses and establish new contextualized practices. This is a task for which the Vietnamese are well practiced, as evidenced by a long history of resisting and assimilating religious traditions,[136] but which Vietnamese Protestants have never truly engaged in due to the endurance of postures inherited from early missionaries.

5. This study has not evaluated the issue of ancestor veneration based on full exegesis of all relevant biblical texts. This author knows of no such full study. However, many Christian studies of ancestral veneration include some biblical analysis, though in piecemeal, dealing with certain texts while leaving others unaddressed. Further, conclusions are often dictated by the presuppositions brought both to ancestral rites themselves and to the text of Scripture.[137] For that reason, this study has sought to problematize some of those presuppositions. Nonetheless, a full treatment of ancestral veneration must grapple with all the relevant biblical texts.

Recommendations for Further Research

Though the issue of ancestor veneration has perplexed Christian mission in Vietnam for centuries, it remains a relevant discussion. As shown in Chapter Two, with Vietnam rapidly changing due to the forces of political revolution, international markets, global communications,

[135] Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 75–92.

[136] Kimson Nguyen identifies these assimilating and resisting forces. Nguyen, *Cultural Integration and the Gospel*, 85–119.

[137] For example, the association of ancestors with the "demons" referred to in 1 Cor. 10:20–21. Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 37–38.

and increasing wealth, perceptions and practices regarding ancestral veneration are changing. Christian mission must grapple with those changes in how it responds to ancestral practices. This necessitates further research on the issue. Below are the most pressing opportunities that arise from this study's methodology and results.

1. More studies are needed that seek to deeply understand ancestral veneration from the ground level of practitioners to both verify and augment the results of this study. These studies could similarly utilize interviews for data collection but should also incorporate quantitative methods that would be easier to scale up. Ideally, such mixed methods studies would include a larger sample size that crosses demographic barriers. To understand the full complex of meanings given to ancestral veneration, studies are needed that can differentiate among various demographic factors, including gender, age, education, wealth, ethnicity, and location. Do Vietnamese born after *Đổi Mới* ascribe spiritual power to the ancestors to the same extent as those born before? What about those in cities versus those in rural areas? How are ethnic minority peoples' (*người dân tộc*) conceptions of ancestral veneration different than the ethnic majority (*người kinh*)? Some of these questions were teased out in this study while others were ignored entirely. All, however, are important to a fuller understanding of how contemporary Vietnamese make meaning of ancestral rites and thus critical to an appropriate Christian response.
2. This study has specifically targeted non-Christian Vietnamese, since they represent the vast majority of practitioners of ancestral veneration, as well as being the object of Christian mission. Meanwhile, recent studies on the ancestral practices of Vietnamese Protestants have revealed the persistence of a rejectionist stance

towards ancestor veneration based on idolatry.[138] More work is needed, then, to bridge the gap between practices based on the assumption of idolatry and the plurality of meanings associated with ancestral veneration as it is practiced by everyday Vietnamese. Wise emphasizes cultural points of contact already extant within the Vietnamese evangelical community, particularly the longstanding Christianization of the virtue of filial piety. But Wise also concedes that there is still a long way to go in the creation of local theologies that give birth to revised stances and/or new contextualized practices. This final chapter has made an initial attempt to outline some theological categories in the body of Christian teaching that could inform these local theologies and contextualized practices, based on a more nuanced understanding of ancestral rites. But it is Vietnamese Christians who should lead the way in articulating these local theologies and revising old practices and/or creating new practices. What might a Christian ancestral veneration look like?

3. Though the rejectionist stance is ingrained in Vietnamese evangelical culture, Wise shows how some Vietnamese find creative ways to participate. More research is needed to explore this phenomenon. To what extent do Vietnamese evangelicals continue to engage in ancestral veneration, and in what ways? To what extent do believers practice what Paul Hiebert calls "split-level Christianity," publicly engaging in church life while privately engaging in ancestor veneration?[139] If this occurs, to what extent is it idolatrous? How are the meanings they make of their

[138] Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation"; Nguyen, "Tin Lành."

[139] Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, 15–29.

participation similar to or different than the meanings revealed in this study? Care must be taken in research methodology since evangelical respondents will be reticent to admit that they participate in ancestral rites. Study on this phenomenon should include participant observation of evangelicals' participation at rites, as well as qualitative interviews to understand the reasons for that participation.

4. Flowing from the previous recommendation, life history interviews with individual Vietnamese Christians would help provide a richer understanding of how they grapple with this issue, giving voice to individual tensions and struggles within family life. These longform interviews of both Christians and their non-Christian families, along with participant observation of rites and gatherings, would seek to understand an individual Christian's experience with ancestral veneration, from their childhood to adulthood, within the context of their family life, including how their Christian faith has informed their ancestral practice and the consequences of those practices or lack thereof. These stories need to be made more widely accessible.
5. A deep study and evaluation of the Vietnamese Catholics' rationale and guidance for ancestral veneration might provide helpful insights for Protestants who are considering more contextual responses. The Vietnamese Catholic stance is clearly articulated in official guidance but is largely ignored by Protestants.[140] Contrasting Catholic responses to recent Protestant teachings and practices would help divulge both differences in theological and cultural assumptions as well as areas of

[140] Hội đồng Giám mục Việt Nam, Ủy Ban Văn Hóa [Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, Committee on Culture], "Hương Dẫn Việc Tôn Kính Tổ Tiên."

commonality and potential for reformulating Protestant responses. Are there aspects of Roman Catholic practice that Protestants should reconsider? For example, Wise identifies the practice of the Lord's Supper as ripe for bridging the gap between Christian and non-Christian filiality.[141] Indeed, it is the Eucharistic liturgy itself that Roman Catholics have revised to specifically mention the ancestors.[142]

6. This study has attempted to listen deeply to individual Vietnamese to understand how they describe the meanings of ancestral veneration, and in some cases has found that no idolatry exists. However, these individuals perform ancestral rites not alone but rather within families whose members might find different meanings in the rituals. In the case of a Christian with non-Christian family members who might hold idolatrous beliefs about ancestral veneration, how should the Christian think about his or her engagement at the altar?[143] For example, food offered to ancestors has been a contentious issue among Protestant Christians who come from these mixed families. Daniel Xuan–Vu Nguyen studies the issue through the lens of Paul's concept of Christian freedom in 1 Cor. 8–10. In his estimation, instead of requiring a refusal of ancestral veneration, as is often interpreted by Vietnamese Protestants, a careful analysis of 1 Cor. 8–10 places the issue within the realm of "Christian freedom for the sake of contextualization of the Gospel."[144] How might

[141] Wise, "Seeking Christian Enculturation," 167–227.

[142] Phan, "Culture and Liturgy," 423–24.

[143] Henry Phan has considered this question for the sake of Vietnamese Christians in the United States. However, his theological foundation assumes an inherent idolatrous nature of the rites themselves. Therefore, his prescriptions are mostly related to finding Christian alternatives to ancestor veneration. Phan, "Model for Training Vietnamese Christians."

[144] Nguyen, "Pauline Freedom and the Ancestor Cult," 139.

such a concept aid Christians from mixed families in making decisions about what aspects of ancestral veneration that they can engage in?

Conclusion

The central problem of this project has been the clash between Christianity's exclusive monotheism and widespread practices of ancestor veneration in Vietnam. This has been a vexing issue throughout the history of Christian mission in Vietnam, with everyday believers caught in the middle, wondering how they can reconcile Christianity's exclusivity with ancestor veneration's plurality. Adding to the confusion, Christians have given different and conflicting answers during different periods of history. Roman Catholics now take a permissive approach, while in practice Protestants remain opposed. The former risks an over-contextualization that opens the door for syncretism, while the latter risks an under-contextualization that might needlessly create conflict with families, erect barriers for potential converts, and lead to a covert syncretism.

The issue of the meaning of ancestral veneration has been the focal point of controversy. Unfortunately, discussions about that meaning happened mostly among foreign missionaries and ecclesial authorities, with little or no involvement or input from local people. The resulting answers were based on etic observations, utilizing distinctions that only make sense in a Western cultural worldview, with some contending the meaning of ancestral veneration is religious and therefore idolatrous, and others insisting the meaning is civil/social and not religious.

This study has asked a deceptively simple question: how do those who perform ancestral rites describe their meaning? Instead of assuming meaning based on external factors such as ancient documentation about ancestors or the minutia of ritual performance, it has utilized interviews to hear directly from practitioners themselves, asking them what meaning they make

of these rites. This corrects the exclusion of local believers' voices in previous iterations of controversy on this issue. If Luther is correct, as this project believes, that idols are made in the heart, then one must understand the heart level meaning associations of practitioners of ancestral veneration before a judgment of idolatry can be made.

The results of the interviews have confirmed both a plurality and fluidity to the meanings the interviewees ascribe to ancestral veneration. Far from uniformity, each interviewee held a different complex of meanings for their ancestral practices. And yet, the presence of plurality did not entail the absence of similarity. While each interviewee was unique, there were repetitions and overlaps that made possible, through a rigorous process of coding, the grouping of different units of meaning into broad themes. This study identified four such broad themes: distinguishing form from content, understanding the individual in light of the family, securing ancestor benefit and/or human benefit, and connecting the past through the present for the future.

These non-mutually exclusive broad themes have been put in dialogue with three relevant theological categories: Martin Luther's exposition of the First and Fourth Commandments, his response to the medieval cult of the saints, and his doctrine of vocation. This study suggested ancestral veneration might be conceived of as a contextual expression of Fourth Commandment, placed within the framework and limits of the First Commandment. Those limits were given clear definition with Luther's attack on the ascription of spiritual power to saints, which, as some interviewees showed, is ascribed to ancestors as well. And yet, for Luther, the abuse of the saints did not lead to their disuse. Melanchthon and Luther did not discard the saints but maintained a positive role for them in a Christian's devotional life, laying a foundation for conceiving of a Christian ancestral practice. This is further strengthened by Luther's doctrine of vocation, which identified everyday family life as a mask of God's ongoing care for the world. Family roles and

duties, including ancestral veneration, are given relative value and purpose as tools used by God to achieve his ends. Within this framework, ancestral practices can be properly affirmed as a religious work, but not necessarily an idolatrous one.

These theological insights, when coupled with the broad themes, are a potential resource for Christians in Vietnam as they consider how to respond to ancestral veneration among themselves and with non-Christians. This project suggested ternary diagrams as a tool to visualize the complex of meanings a person gives to ancestral veneration. That diagram can then aid proclaimers in determining appropriate evangelism or discipleship responses, utilizing the theological insights from Luther. This entire process places the question of ancestral veneration into the context of pastoral care, freeing proclaimers to provide a nuanced, compassionate, faithful, and contextual response.

APPENDIX ONE

INFORMED CONSENT FORM—SURVEY

Study Title: Seeing Through the Incense Smoke: A Typology of Meaning of Ancestral Rites in Vietnam for the Sake of Christian Mission
Researcher: Rev. J.P. Cima - Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Email Address and Telephone Number: xxxxxxxxxx, xxxxxxxxxx
Research Supervisor: Dr. Douglas Rutt
Email Address: xxxxxxxxxx

You are invited to be part of a research study. The researcher is a student at Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri (USA) as part of the Doctor of Philosophy program (PhD). The information in this form is provided to help you decide if you want to participate in the research study. This form describes what you will have to do during the study and the risks and benefits of the study.

If you have any questions about or do not understand something in this form, you should ask the researcher. Do not sign this form unless the researcher has answered your questions and you decide that you want to be part of this study.

WHAT IS THIS STUDY ABOUT?
This study is related to the broad topic of Christian responses to ancestral veneration in Asia, with a particular focus on Vietnam.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Vietnamese adults describe the meaning of ancestral veneration performed at the family altar. Why do Vietnamese maintain family altars and perform rituals there? The study wants to hear directly from those who practice these rituals.

On the basis of this clearer understanding of the rites' meaning for those who practice them, the study will evaluate current Christian responses to ancestral rites while also suggesting new or modified approaches.

WHY AM I BEING ASKED TO BE IN THE STUDY?
You are invited to be in the study because you:

- Are Kinh Vietnamese residing in Vietnam.
- Are 18 years-old or older.
- Have a family ancestral altar at your home or at the home of an extended family member.
- Interact with that altar regularly. An interaction could be arranging the altar, cleaning the altar, bowing at the altar, making food or other offerings at the altar, praying at the altar, etc.

If you do not meet the description above, thank you very much for your time, but this study will be limited to those who meet the above description.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL BE IN THIS STUDY?
About 50 participants will complete this initial survey, and about 10 of those participants will be interviewed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The researcher is an employee of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. He spent 10 years living in Vietnam (2007–2017) working in areas of rural development.

WILL IT COST ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?
You do not have to pay to be in the study.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THE STUDY?
If you decide to be in this study, your participation will last about 20 minutes for this initial survey, which can be completed online on the device of your choice (e.g., computer, tablet, mobile phone, etc.).

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?
If you decide to be in this study and if you sign this form, you will do the following things:

- Give personal information about yourself, such as your age, gender, occupation, and education level, and possibly your name and contact information.
- Answer a few questions about the meaning ancestral veneration has for you.

While you are in the study, you will be expected to:

- Follow the instructions you are given.
- Answer questions truthfully and completely.

WILL I BE RECORDED?
You will not be recorded.

WILL BEING IN THIS STUDY HELP ME?
Being in this study will not help you personally. However, information from this study might help researchers and practitioners understand the meaning of ancestral rites in Vietnam.

ARE THERE RISKS TO ME IF I AM IN THIS STUDY?
No study is completely risk-free. However, the researchers don't anticipate that you will be harmed or distressed during this study. You may stop being in the study at any time if you become uncomfortable.

WILL I GET PAID?
You will not receive anything for being in the study.

DO I HAVE TO BE IN THIS STUDY?
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can decide not to be in the study and you can change your mind about being in the study at any time. If you desire to stop, simply close your browser.

WHO WILL USE AND SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT MY BEING IN THIS STUDY?
Any information you provide in this study that could identify you, such as your name, contact information, age, or other personal information, will be kept confidential. After the survey, your personal information will be disassociated from your responses. In any written reports or publications, your name will not be used and no one will be able to identify you.

The researcher will keep the information you provide in a password protected (with two-factor authentication) cloud service in Microsoft OneDrive and only the researcher, the research assistant (Ms. xxxxxxxxxx), and the research supervisor will be able to review this information.

Even if you leave the study early, the researcher may still be able to use your data. For example, if you close your browser after answering some questions, the answers you gave up until that point might be utilized if deemed useful.

Limits of Privacy (Confidentiality)
Generally speaking, the researcher can assure you that he will keep everything you tell him or do for the study private. Yet there are times when the researcher cannot keep things private (confidential). The researcher cannot keep things private (confidential) when:

- The researcher finds out that a child or vulnerable adult has been abused,
- The researcher finds out that that a person plans to hurt him or herself, such as commit suicide,
- The researcher finds out that a person plans to hurt someone else.

There are laws that require many professionals to take action if they think a person might harm themselves or another, or if a child or adult is being abused. In addition, there are guidelines that researchers must follow to make sure all people are treated with respect and kept safe. In the United States, there is a government agency that must be told if someone is being abused or plans to hurt themselves or another person. Please ask any questions you may have about this issue before agreeing to be in the study. It is important that you do not feel betrayed if it turns out that the researcher cannot keep some things private.

WHO CAN I TALK TO ABOUT THIS STUDY?
You can ask questions about the study at any time. You can call or email the researcher if you have any questions, concerns, or complaints, using the phone number and email address listed on page 1 of this form.

DO YOU WANT TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

I have read this form, and I know that I can stop and contact the researcher with questions if something is unclear. At this time, I feel I have all the information I need and I do not have any questions. I voluntarily agree to be in this study. I agree to allow the use and sharing of my study-related records as described above.

By clicking this button, I have not given up any of my legal rights as a research participant.

_____
Printed Name of Participant

_____ _____
Signature of Participant Date

I attest that the participant named above had enough time to consider this information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

_____
Printed Name of Researcher

_____ _____
Signature of Researcher Date

INFORMED CONSENT FORM—SURVEY (VIETNAMESE)

Đề tài nghiên cứu: Xuyên màn khói nhang: Lý giải và phân loại ý nghĩa tập tục thờ cúng tổ tiên ở Việt Nam để phục vụ mục đích truyền đạo Cơ Đốc
Nghiên cứu sinh: Mục sư J.P. Cima
Địa chỉ email và số điện thoại: xxxxxxxxxx, xxxxxxxxxx
Giám sát nghiên cứu: TS. Douglas Rutt
Địa chỉ email: xxxxxxxxxx

Bạn đã được mời làm đối tượng tham gia nghiên cứu khoa học. Nghiên cứu sinh là học viên khóa học Tiến Sĩ (Doctor of Philosophy) tại Trường Dòng Concordia, thành phố Saint Louis, bang Missouri (Hoa Kỳ). Các thông tin trong đơn này nhằm mục đích giúp ông/bà quyết định việc tham gia vào quá trình nghiên cứu. Đơn này mô tả các công việc bạn cần làm trong quá trình nghiên cứu, cũng như các rủi ro và lợi ích của đồ án nghiên cứu.

Nếu bạn có bất kỳ câu hỏi hay thắc mắc gì về đơn này xin hãy liên lạc với nghiên cứu sinh. Khi các thắc mắc chưa được nghiên cứu sinh hồi đáp và bạn chưa chính thức quyết định việc tham gia, xin không ký vào đơn này.

ĐỀ TÀI NGHIÊN CỨU

Đồ án này nằm trong mảng đề tài quan niệm và phản ứng của đạo Cơ Đốc giáo đối với tập tục thờ cúng tổ tiên ở châu Á, đặc biệt là ở Việt Nam.

Mục đích của đồ án là để tìm hiểu một cách sâu sắc cách người Việt Nam biểu đạt ý nghĩa của tục thờ cúng tổ tiên tại bàn thờ gia đình. Tại sao người Việt lại giữ gìn và cúng vái trước bàn thờ gia đình? Đồ án này muốn lắng nghe trực tiếp từ những người đang thực hiện các nghi lễ thờ cúng này.

Dựa trên mục đích tìm hiểu rõ hơn ý nghĩa của các nghi lễ đối với người trực tiếp thờ cúng, đồ án nghiên cứu sẽ đánh giá quan niệm hiện tại của đạo Cơ Đốc về tập tục này, đồng thời sẽ gợi ý quan niệm mới hoặc đưa ra các phương án sửa đổi quan niệm cũ.

LÝ DO MỜI THAM GIA NGHIÊN CỨU

Bạn được mời tham gia nghiên cứu vì bạn:

- Là người Việt dân tộc Kinh sống tại Việt Nam
- Trong độ tuổi từ 18 trở lên
- Có bàn thờ tổ tiên đặt trong nhà mình hoặc nhà một người thân họ hàng xa.
- Có động chạm hoặc làm công việc thờ cúng tại bàn thờ thường xuyên. Ví dụ: sắp xếp đồ đạc trên bàn thờ, lau dọn bàn thờ, vái lạy hoặc khấn trước bàn thờ, làm cơm hoặc các đồ cúng khác trên bàn thờ, vân vân.

Xin cảm ơn tất cả các ứng cử viên có ý muốn tham gia khảo sát. Chỉ những người đáp ứng mọi tiêu chí trên mới có thể tham gia khảo sát.

SỐ LƯỢNG THAM GIA NGHIÊN CỨU
Khoảng 50 người sẽ tham gia hoàn thành khảo sát sơ bộ, trong đó có khoảng 10 người sẽ tham gia phỏng vấn.

MÂU THUẪN LỢI ÍCH
Nghiên cứu sinh đang làm việc cho tổ chức LCMS. Anh/Ông sống và làm việc tại Việt Nam 10 năm (2007–2017) trong các lĩnh vực phát triển nông thôn.

PHÍ THAM GIA
Việc tham gia làm đối tượng nghiên cứu là miễn phí.

THỜI LƯỢNG KHẢO SÁT
Nếu bạn quyết định tham gia, bài khảo sát sẽ kéo dài khoảng 20 phút. Ông bà có thể hoàn thành bài khảo sát trên các thiết bị cá nhân.

CHI TIẾT BÀI KHẢO SÁT
Nếu bạn đã quyết định tham gia khảo sát và đã ký vào đơn này, bạn cần làm những việc sau:

- Khai thông tin cá nhân như: tuổi, giới tính, nghề nghiệp và trình độ học vấn. Ngoài ra bạn có thể lựa chọn khai họ tên và địa chỉ liên lạc.
- Trả lời một số câu hỏi về việc thờ cúng tổ tiên có ý nghĩa thế nào với bạn

Trong khi tham gia khảo sát bạn cần:

- Làm theo hướng dẫn của bài khảo sát
- Trả lời câu hỏi một cách hoàn thiện và trung thực

VỀ VIỆC GHI ÂM/GHI HÌNH
Người phản hồi khảo sát sẽ không bị ghi âm hoặc ghi hình.

LỢI ÍCH CỦA ĐỒ ÁN NGHIÊN CỨU
Việc tham gia làm đối tượng nghiên cứu không có lợi ích trực tiếp với người tham gia. Tuy nhiên, các thông tin từ đồ án có thể sẽ giúp các nhà nghiên cứu hiểu về ý nghĩa của tục thờ cúng tổ tiên ở Việt Nam.

RỦI RO KHI THAM GIA LÀM ĐỐI TƯỢNG NGHIÊN CỨU
Không đồ án nghiên cứu nào là hoàn toàn vô rủi ro. Tuy nhiên, các nghiên cứu sinh không cho rằng bạn sẽ phương hại về mặt thể chất hay tâm lý trong buổi phỏng vấn. Bạn có quyền lựa chọn dừng phỏng vấn ngay nếu cảm thấy không hài lòng.

THÙ LAO
Bạn sẽ không được nhận thù lao khi tham gia làm đối tượng nghiên cứu.

THAM GIA TỰ NGUYỆN
Việc tham gia khảo sát của bạn là tự nguyện. Bạn có quyền quyết định không trả lời và có thể thay đổi quyết định và dừng tham gia bất kỳ lúc nào. Bạn có thể tắt bài khảo sát nếu không muốn tiếp tục trả lời.

VỀ VIỆC SỬ DỤNG VÀ CHIA SẺ THÔNG TIN
Bất kỳ thông tin nào mang tính chất định danh mà bạn cung cấp trong đồ án nghiên cứu như tên tuổi, thông tin liên lạc hoặc các thông tin cá nhân khác, sẽ được giữ bí mật. Sau bài khảo sát, mọi thông tin cá nhân của bạn sẽ được tách biệt khỏi các câu trả lời còn lại. Mọi bài viết và báo cáo sẽ không nhắc đến tên bạn và người ngoài không thể định danh bạn.

Nghiên cứu sinh sẽ lưu thông tin bạn cung cấp trong Microsoft OneDrive dưới tài khoản của nghiên cứu sinh, sử dụng xác thực hai yếu tố. Chỉ nghiên cứu sinh, trợ lý nghiên cứu (xxxxxxxxxx), và người giám sát nghiên cứu được xem các thông tin này.

Nếu bạn ngừng tham gia giữa bài khảo sát, người phỏng vấn vẫn có thể sử dụng thông tin bạn cung cấp. Ví dụ, nếu bạn tắt bài khảo sát sau khi trả lời một số câu hỏi, những câu trả lời đã được cung cấp, nếu cần thiết, vẫn sẽ được sử dụng trong đồ án nghiên cứu.

Giới hạn Quyền riêng tư (Bảo mật)
Nói chung, nghiên cứu sinh có thể đảm bảo việc giữ bí mật mọi thông tin bạn cung cấp cho đồ án nghiên cứu. Tuy nhiên vẫn có lúc nghiên cứu sinh không thể giữ bí mật thông tin, ví dụ như:

- Nghiên cứu sinh phát hiện có trẻ em hoặc người lớn dễ tổn thương bị lạm dụng
- Nghiên cứu sinh phát hiện có người có ý định tự làm hại bản thân, ví dụ như tự sát,
- Nghiên cứu sinh phát hiện có người có ý định làm hại người khác.

Luật pháp quy định nhiều ngành nghề phải báo cáo hoặc can thiệp trong trường hợp họ cho rằng có người có ý định làm tổn thương bản thân hoặc người khác, hoặc trẻ em hoặc người lớn bị lạm dụng. Ngoài ra, người làm nghiên cứu phải làm theo quy định để đảm bảo tất cả mọi người được tôn trọng và giữ an toàn. Cơ quan nhà nước tại Mỹ cần được thông báo trong trường hợp có người bị lạm dụng hoặc có ý định làm hại bản thân hoặc người khác. Trong trường hợp nghiên cứu sinh buộc không thể giữ bí mật một số thông tin, việc đối tượng nghiên cứu hiểu và thông cảm là rất quan trọng. Mọi câu hỏi và thắc mắc cần được giải quyết trước khi bạn đồng ý tham gia phỏng vấn. Nếu nghiên cứu sinh buộc phải tiết lộ một số thông tin cá nhân, việc này là bất khả kháng và ngoài ý muốn. Nghiên cứu sinh mong người được phỏng vấn không cảm thấy bị phản bội.

QUYỀN BÀN LUẬN VỀ ĐỒ ÁN NGHIÊN CỨU
Bạn có thể đặt bất cứ câu hỏi gì về đồ án với nghiên cứu sinh. Bạn có thể gọi điện hoặc email cho nghiên cứu sinh nếu có bất kỳ thắc mắc, lo ngại hay phàn nàn gì. (Xem địa chỉ liên lạc ở phần 1 đơn này.).

CAM KẾT CỦA NGƯỜI THAM GIA KHẢO SÁT

Tôi đã đọc bản cam kết này và hiểu rằng tôi có thể dừng tham gia và đặt câu hỏi với nghiên cứu sinh ngay khi có vấn đề không rõ ràng. Tại thời điểm này, tôi cảm thấy mình đã có đủ mọi thông tin cần thiết và không có câu hỏi gì. Tôi tự nguyện đồng ý tham gia đồ án nghiên cứu này. Tôi đồng ý cho phép việc sử dụng và chia sẻ các thông tin tôi cung cấp cho đồ án như trên đã nêu. Bằng việc nhấn nút này, tôi bảo toàn mọi quyền hợp pháp của bản thân khi tham gia đồ án nghiên cứu.

_____
Họ tên người tham gia

_____ _____
Chữ ký người tham gia Ngày tháng năm

Tôi chứng nhận rằng người tham gia đã ký tên ở trên đã có đủ thời gian suy nghĩ về các thông tin đã nêu, có cơ hội chia sẻ thắc mắc và đã tự nguyện đồng ý tham gia đồ án nghiên cứu.

_____
Họ tên nghiên cứu sinh

_____ _____
Chữ ký nghiên cứu sinh Ngày tháng năm

APPENDIX TWO

LETTER TO INFORM OF SELECTION FOR INTERVIEW

Greetings to you!

I thank you for recently completing my online survey about ancestral veneration. In the survey, you indicated that you would be willing to participate in an interview about your beliefs and motivations to venerate the ancestors. Thank you for your willingness! A random sample was taken of all those who indicated they were willing, and you have been selected as an interviewee. Your participation in the interview is a great help as I seek to understand deeply why Vietnamese perform ancestor veneration.

The interview will last approximately 90 minutes. There is nothing you need to do to prepare. The questions will be simple, and there are no right or wrong answers. You only need to share, in your own words, about your motivations, beliefs, and experiences related to ancestor veneration.

As shared previously in the survey's consent form, Ms. xxxxxxxxxx is assisting in this research. She will reach out to you very soon via text message to schedule an interview, to take place at a convenient and quiet location of your choice sometime between August 7 and 12. Her phone number is xxxxxxxxxx. She is authorized to schedule these interviews on my behalf and has signed a form agreeing to strict confidentiality.

Remember that your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. At the beginning of the interview, you will be asked to sign a consent form (similar to the consent form you agreed to in the online survey). I have attached the consent form here so that you can review it prior to the interview.

Please don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions or concerns. I look forward to learning from you!

Best regards,

J.P. Cima
Researcher

LETTER TO INFORM OF SELECTION FOR INTERVIEW (VIETNAMESE)

Xin chào bạn!

Cảm ơn bạn đã hoàn thành khảo sát online về phong tục thờ cúng tổ tiên tại Việt Nam. Chúng tôi ghi nhận trong bài khảo sát là bạn đã đồng ý tham gia phỏng vấn trả lời các câu hỏi về đức tin và động lực cho việc thực hiện các nghi lễ thờ cúng tổ tiên. Xin cảm ơn bạn đã đồng ý phỏng vấn! Bạn là một trong những người được chọn ngẫu nhiên để tham gia buổi phỏng vấn trực tiếp với chúng tôi. Việc bạn tham gia phỏng vấn sẽ giúp chúng tôi rất nhiều trong việc tìm hiểu sâu sắc hơn lý do tại sao người Việt thực hiện các nghi lễ thờ cúng tổ tiên.

Buổi phỏng vấn kéo dài khoảng 90 phút và sẽ được ghi âm. Bạn không cần phải chuẩn bị gì. Các câu hỏi đều tương đối đơn giản và ở dạng mở, không có đáp án đúng sai. Bạn chỉ cần chia sẻ bằng ngôn ngữ và câu từ của chính mình về động lực, đức tin, và các trải nghiệm của bản thân liên quan đến phong tục thờ cúng tổ tiên.

Như đã chia sẻ trong đơn đồng thuận, cô xxxxxxxxxx là trợ lý đồ án nghiên cứu này. xxxxxxxxxx (*SĐT:* xxxxxxxxxx) sẽ sớm liên lạc với bạn bằng tin nhắn để sắp xếp lịch phỏng vấn. Buổi phỏng vấn sẽ diễn ra ở địa điểm tùy ý bạn lựa chọn, miễn là địa điểm này tiện lợi và yên tĩnh. Ngày phỏng vấn nằm trong khoảng mùng 7-12/8. Cô xxxxxxxxxx đã được cho phép thay mặt nghiên cứu sinh sắp xếp lịch phỏng vấn và cũng đã ký bản cam kết bảo mật nghiêm ngặt.

Xin bạn lưu ý, việc tham gia phỏng vấn là hoàn toàn tự nguyện. Trước khi bắt đầu phỏng vấn, bạn sẽ cần phải ký vào một đơn đồng thuận (tương tự như đơn bạn đã hoàn thành trong khảo sát online). Tôi có đính kèm đơn trong mail này để bạn tham khảo trước ngày phỏng vấn.

Nếu có bất kỳ câu hỏi hay nhận xét gì, xin bạn đừng ngại phản hồi mail này. Tôi rất mong được học hỏi thêm từ bạn!

Trân trọng,

J.P. Cima
Nghiên cứu sinh

APPENDIX THREE

INFORMED CONSENT FORM—INTERVIEW

Study Title: Seeing Through the Incense Smoke: A Typology of Meaning of Ancestral Rites in Vietnam for the Sake of Christian Mission
Researcher: Rev. J.P. Cima - Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Email Address and Telephone Number: xxxxxxxxxx, xxxxxxxxxx
Research Supervisor: Dr. Douglas Rutt
Email Address: xxxxxxxxxx

You are invited to be part of a research study. The researcher is a student at Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri (USA) as part of the Doctor of Philosophy program (PhD). The information in this form is provided to help you decide if you want to participate in the research study. This form describes what you will have to do during the study and the risks and benefits of the study.

If you have any questions about or do not understand something in this form, you should ask the researcher. Do not sign this form unless the researcher has answered your questions and you decide that you want to be part of this study.

WHAT IS THIS STUDY ABOUT?

This study is related to the broad topic of Christian responses to ancestral veneration in Asia, with a particular focus on Vietnam.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Vietnamese adults articulate the meaning of ancestral veneration performed at the family altar. Why do Vietnamese maintain family altars and perform rituals there? The study wants to hear directly from those who practice these rituals.

On the basis of this clearer understanding of the rites' meaning for those who practice them, the study will evaluate current Christian responses to ancestral rites while also suggesting new or modified approaches.

WHY AM I BEING ASKED TO BE IN THE STUDY?

You are invited to be in the study because you are:

- Have completed the online initial survey.
- Are Kinh Vietnamese residing in Vietnam.
- Are 18 years-old or older.
- Have a family ancestral altar at your home or at the home of an extended family member.
- Interact with that altar at least monthly. An interaction could be arranging the altar, cleaning the altar, bowing at the altar, making food or other offerings at the altar, praying at the altar, etc.

If you do not meet the description above, thank you very much for your time, but this study will be limited to those who meet the above description.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL BE IN THIS STUDY?

About 50 participants will complete the initial survey, and about 10 of those participants will be interviewed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The researcher is an employee of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. He spent 10 years living in Vietnam (2007–2017) working in areas of development.

WILL IT COST ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

You do not have to pay to be in the study.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to be interviewed, your participation will last about 90 minutes. It will be completed at the location of your choice.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?

If you decide to be in this study and if you sign this form, you will do the following things:

- Spend 90 minutes with the researcher and a research assistant, Ms. xxxxxxxxxx. Ms. xxxxxxxxxx is there to ensure that the researcher clearly communicates questions and clearly understands answers.
- Answer questions about the meaning ancestral veneration has for you. These questions might include:
    - What you do at your ancestral altar.
    - Why you interact with the altar.
    - Who else participates with you in ancestral rites (their names will not be needed).
    - Special experience you have had at the ancestral altar.
    - Your beliefs about your ancestors.
    - Your hopes for your children's ancestral practices in the future.

While you are in the study, you will be expected to:

- Follow the instructions you are given.
- Answer questions truthfully and completely.
- Tell the researcher if you want to stop being in the study at any time.

WILL I BE RECORDED?

The interview will be audio recorded. Your answers will be analyzed for data about the meaning of ancestral rites.

The researcher will only use the recordings of you for the purposes you read about in this form. They will not use the recordings for any other reasons without your permission unless you sign another consent form. The recordings will be kept for seven years and they will be kept confidential. The recordings will be destroyed after seven years.

WILL BEING IN THIS STUDY HELP ME?

Being in this study will not help you personally. However, information from this study might help researchers and practitioners understand the meaning of ancestral rites in Vietnam.

ARE THERE RISKS TO ME IF I AM IN THIS STUDY?

No study is completely risk-free. However, the researchers don't anticipate that you will be harmed or distressed during this study. You may stop being in the study at any time if you become uncomfortable.

WILL I GET PAID?

You will not receive anything for being in the study.

DO I HAVE TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can decide not to be in the study and you can change your mind about being in the study at any time. If you desire to stop, please inform the researcher.

WHO WILL USE AND SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT MY BEING IN THIS STUDY?

Any information you provide in this study that could identify you, such as your name, contact information, age, or other personal information, will be kept confidential. After the survey, your personal information will be disassociated from your responses. In any written reports or publications, no one will be able to identify you.

The researcher will utilize a third-party service, Sonix, to convert the audio recordings into text. Sonix has confidentiality practices in place to protect the data they receive. After transcription, the audio and video recordings, transcripts, and other data will be encrypted and stored securely in Microsoft OneDrive on the researcher's account, using two-factor authentication. Though the researcher will take every available precaution, no system is full proof, and so the researcher cannot guarantee confidentiality.

Even if you leave the study early, the researcher may still be able to use your data. For example, if you stop the interview part-way through, answers you have provided up to that point might still be used.

Limits of Privacy (Confidentiality)

Generally speaking, the researcher can assure you that he will keep everything you tell him or do for the study private. Yet there are times where the researcher cannot keep things private (confidential). The researcher cannot keep things private (confidential) when:

- The researcher finds out that a child or vulnerable adult has been abused,
- The researcher finds out that that a person plans to hurt him or herself, such as commit suicide,
- The researcher finds out that a person plans to hurt someone else.

There are laws that require many professionals to take action if they think a person might harm themselves or another, or if a child or adult is being abused. In addition, there are guidelines that researchers must follow to make sure all people are treated with respect and kept safe. In the United States, there is a government agency that must be told if someone is being abused or plans to hurt themselves or another person. Please ask any questions you may have about this issue before agreeing to be in the study. It is important that you do not feel betrayed if it turns out that the researcher cannot keep some things private.

WHO CAN I TALK TO ABOUT THIS STUDY?

You can ask questions about the study at any time. You can call or email the researcher if you have any questions, concerns, or complaints, using the phone number and email address listed on page 1 of this form.

DO YOU WANT TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

I have read this form, and I know that I can stop and contact the researcher with questions if something is unclear. At this time, I feel I have all the information I need and I do not have any questions. I voluntarily agree to be in this study. I agree to allow the use and sharing of my study-related records as described above.

By signing my name, I have not given up any of my legal rights as a research participant.

_____
Printed Name of Participant

_____ _____
Signature of Participant Date

I attest that the participant named above had enough time to consider this information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

_____
Printed Name of Researcher

_____ _____

Signature of Researcher Date

DO YOU WISH TO BE AUDIOTAPED IN THIS STUDY?

I voluntarily agree to let the researcher video and audiotape me for this study. I agree to allow the use of my recordings as described in this form.

_____

Printed Name of Participant

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

INFORMED CONSENT FORM—INTERVIEW (VIETNAMESE)

Đề tài nghiên cứu: Phía sau màn khói nhang: Lý giải và phân loại ý nghĩa phong tục thờ cúng tổ tiên ở Việt Nam để tạo sơ sở cho phản ứng của đạo Cơ đốc giáo đối với phong tục này
Nghiên cứu sinh: Mục sư J.P. Cima
Địa chỉ liên hệ: xxxxxxxxxx, xxxxxxxxxx
Giám sát nghiên cứu: TS. Douglas Rutt
Địa chỉ email: xxxxxxxxxx

Cảm ơn bạn đã tham gia làm đối tượng tham gia nghiên cứu khoa học. Nghiên cứu sinh là học viên khóa học Tiến sĩ tại Trường Dòng Concordia, thành phố Saint Louis, bang Missouri (Hoa Kỳ). Đơn này nhằm mục đích giúp bạn quyết định việc tham gia vào quá trình nghiên cứu. Thông tin trong đơn bao gồm các công việc bạn cần làm khi là đối tượng nghiên cứu, cũng như các rủi ro và lợi ích của đồ án nghiên cứu.

Nếu bạn có bất kỳ câu hỏi hay thắc mắc gì về đơn này, xin hãy liên lạc với nghiên cứu sinh. Nếu bạn chưa chính thức quyết định việc tham gia khảo sát mà nghiên cứu sinh chưa hồi đáp thắc mắc của bạn, xin vui lòng không ký vào đơn này.

ĐỀ TÀI NGHIÊN CỨU

Đồ án này nằm trong mảng đề tài về quan niệm và phản ứng của đạo Cơ Đốc giáo đối với tập tục thờ cúng tổ tiên ở châu Á, đặc biệt là ở Việt Nam.

Mục đích của đồ án là để tìm hiểu một cách sâu sắc cách người Việt Nam biểu đạt ý nghĩa tục thờ cúng tổ tiên tại bàn thờ gia đình. Tại sao người Việt lại đặt bàn thờ trong nhà và cúng vái gia tiên tại đây? Đồ án này muốn lắng nghe trực tiếp từ những người đang thực hiện các nghi lễ thờ cúng này.

Dựa trên mục đích tìm hiểu rõ hơn ý nghĩa của các nghi lễ đối với người trực tiếp thờ cúng, đồ án nghiên cứu sẽ đánh giá quan niệm hiện tại của đạo Cơ Đốc về tập tục này, đồng thời sẽ gợi ý quan niệm mới hoặc đưa ra phương án sửa đổi quan niệm cũ.

LÝ DO MỜI THAM GIA NGHIÊN CỨU

Bạn được mời tham gia nghiên cứu vì bạn:

- Đã hoàn thành khảo sát sơ bộ online.
- Là người Việt dân tộc Kinh sống tại Việt Nam.
- Trong độ tuổi từ 18 trở lên.
- Có bàn thờ tổ tiên đặt trong nhà mình hoặc nhà một người thân họ hàng xa.
- Có làm công việc thờ cúng tại bàn thờ thường xuyên. Ví dụ: sắp xếp đồ đạc trên bàn thờ, lau dọn bàn thờ, vái lạy hoặc khấn trước bàn thờ, làm cơm hoặc các đồ cúng khác trên bàn thờ, vân vân.

Xin cảm ơn tất cả các ứng cử viên có ý muốn tham gia phỏng vấn. Chỉ những người đáp ứng mọi tiêu chí trên mới có thể tham gia phần phỏng vấn.

SỐ LƯỢNG NGƯỜI THAM GIA NGHIÊN CỨU

Khoảng 50 người sẽ tham gia hoàn thành khảo sát sơ bộ, trong đó có khoảng 10 người sẽ tham gia phỏng vấn.

MÂU THUẪN LỢI ÍCH

Nghiên cứu sinh đang làm việc cho tổ chức LCMS. Anh/Ông sống và làm việc tại Việt Nam 10 năm (2007–2017) trong các lĩnh vực phát triển nông thôn.

PHÍ THAM GIA

Việc tham gia làm đối tượng nghiên cứu là miễn phí.

THỜI LƯỢNG PHỎNG VẤN

Nếu bạn quyết định tham gia phỏng vấn, buổi phỏng vấn sẽ kéo dài khoảng 1 tiếng rưỡi (90 phút). Bạn có quyền lựa chọn địa điểm phỏng vấn.

CHI TIẾT BUỔI PHỎNG VẤN

Nếu bạn quyết định tham gia phỏng vấn và đã ký vào đơn này, bạn cần làm những việc sau:

- Tham gia phỏng vấn 90 phút với nghiên cứu sinh và trợ lý nghiên cứu (xxxxxxxxxx). xxxxxxxxxx có mặt để đảm bảo nghiên cứu sinh có thể giao tiếp rõ ràng các câu hỏi cũng như hiểu đúng câu trả lời của người được phỏng vấn.
- Trả lời các câu hỏi về ý nghĩa của tục thờ cúng tổ tiên đối với cá nhân bạn, ví dụ như:
    - Bạn làm gì ở bàn thờ tổ tiên
    - Tại sao bạn lại tương tác với bàn thờ
    - Trong công việc thờ cúng, còn có ai cùng tham gia với bạn (không cần cung cấp tên cụ thể)
    - Trải nghiệm đặc biệt tại bàn thờ
    - Những niềm tin của bạn về tổ tiên
    - Những kỳ vọng của bạn đối với con cháu trong việc thờ cúng tổ tiên trong tương lai

Trong khi tham gia phỏng vấn, bạn cần:

- Làm theo hướng dẫn của nghiên cứu sinh
- Trả lời câu hỏi một cách hoàn thiện và trung thực
- Thông báo với nghiên cứu sinh ngay nếu muốn dừng phỏng vấn

GHI ÂM/GHI HÌNH TRONG BUỔI PHỎNG VẤN

Buổi phỏng vấn sẽ được ghi âm. Các câu trả lời của bạn sẽ được phân tích để tìm ra ý nghĩa của tục thờ cúng tổ tiên.

Nghiên cứu sinh sẽ chỉ sử dụng bản ghi âm cho các mục đích đã nêu. Nếu không có sự đồng ý của bạn qua đơn này hoặc thông qua các hình thức văn bản khác, bản ghi âm sẽ không được dùng cho bất kỳ mục đích nào khác. Các bản ghi âm được lưu trữ và bảo toàn bí mật trong 7 năm. Sau 7 năm, các bản ghi âm sẽ được hủy bỏ.

LỢI ÍCH CỦA ĐỒ ÁN NGHIÊN CỨU

Việc tham gia làm đối tượng nghiên cứu không có lợi ích trực tiếp với người tham gia. Tuy nhiên, các thông tin từ đồ án có thể sẽ giúp các nhà nghiên cứu hiểu về ý nghĩa của tục thờ cúng tổ tiên ở Việt Nam.

RỦI RO KHI THAM GIA LÀM ĐỐI TƯỢNG NGHIÊN CỨU

Không đồ án nghiên cứu nào là hoàn toàn vô rủi ro. Tuy nhiên, các nghiên cứu sinh không cho rằng bạn sẽ phương hại về mặt thể chất hay tâm lý trong buổi phỏng vấn. Bạn có quyền lựa chọn dừng phỏng vấn ngay nếu cảm thấy không hài lòng.

THÙ LAO

Bạn sẽ không được nhận thù lao khi tham gia làm đối tượng nghiên cứu.

THAM GIA TỰ NGUYỆN

Việc bạn tham gia phỏng vấn là tự nguyện. Bạn có quyền quyết định không tham gia phỏng vấn cũng như thay đổi quyết định hoặc dừng tham gia bất kỳ lúc nào. Nếu muốn dừng tham gia, xin hãy thông báo ngay với nghiên cứu sinh.

VỀ VIỆC SỬ DỤNG VÀ CHIA SẺ THÔNG TIN

Bất kỳ thông tin nào mang tính chất định danh mà bạn cung cấp trong đồ án nghiên cứu như tên tuổi, thông tin liên lạc hoặc các thông tin cá nhân khác, sẽ được giữ bí mật. Sau bài khảo sát, mọi thông tin cá nhân của bạn sẽ được tách biệt khỏi các câu trả lời còn lại. Mọi bài viết và báo cáo sẽ không nhắc đến tên bạn và người ngoài không thể định danh bạn.

Nghiên cứu sinh sẽ sử dụng dịch vụ bên thứ ba (Sonix) để chuyển đổi bản ghi âm thành văn bản. Sonix có áp dụng các biện pháp bảo mật để bảo vệ dữ liệu của khách hàng. Sau khi chép lời, bản ghi âm và bản chép lời cùng các dữ liệu khác sẽ được mã hóa và lưu trữ an toàn trong Microsoft OneDrive dưới tài khoản của nghiên cứu sinh, sử dụng xác thực hai yếu tố. Nghiên cứu sinh sẽ áp dụng mọi biện pháp an toàn; tuy nhiên không hệ thống nào là hoàn hảo. Do đó nghiên cứu sinh không thể đảm bảo hoàn toàn về vấn đề bảo mật.

Nếu bạn ngừng tham gia giữa buổi phỏng vấn, người phỏng vấn vẫn có thể sử dụng thông tin bạn đã cung cấp. Ví dụ, các câu trả lời trong thời gian tham gia phỏng vấn vẫn có thể được sử dụng.

GIỚI HẠN QUYỀN RIÊNG TƯ (BẢO MẬT)

Nói chung, nghiên cứu sinh có thể đảm bảo việc giữ bí mật mọi thông tin bạn cung cấp cho đồ án nghiên cứu. Tuy nhiên vẫn có lúc nghiên cứu sinh không thể giữ bí mật thông tin, ví dụ như:

- Nghiên cứu sinh phát hiện có trẻ em hoặc người lớn dễ tổn thương bị lạm dụng
- Nghiên cứu sinh phát hiện có người có ý định tự làm hại bản thân, ví dụ như tự sát,
- Nghiên cứu sinh phát hiện có người có ý định làm hại người khác.

Luật pháp quy định nhiều ngành nghề phải báo cáo hoặc can thiệp trong trường hợp họ cho rằng có người có ý định làm tổn thương bản thân hoặc người khác, hoặc trẻ em hoặc người lớn bị lạm dụng. Ngoài ra, người làm nghiên cứu phải làm theo quy định để đảm bảo tất cả mọi người được tôn trọng và giữ an toàn. Cơ quan nhà nước tại Mỹ cần được thông báo trong trường hợp có người bị lạm dụng hoặc có ý định làm hại bản thân hoặc người khác. Trong trường hợp nghiên cứu sinh buộc không thể giữ bí mật một số thông tin, việc đối tượng nghiên cứu hiểu và thông cảm là rất quan trọng. Mọi câu hỏi và thắc mắc cần được giải quyết trước khi bạn đồng ý tham gia phỏng vấn. Nếu nghiên cứu sinh buộc phải tiết lộ một số thông tin cá nhân, việc này là bất khả kháng và ngoài ý muốn. Nghiên cứu sinh mong người được phỏng vấn không cảm thấy bị phản bội.

QUYỀN BÀN LUẬN VỀ ĐỒ ÁN NGHIÊN CỨU

Bạn có thể đặt bất cứ câu hỏi gì về đồ án với nghiên cứu sinh. Bạn có thể gọi điện hoặc email cho nghiên cứu sinh nếu có bất kỳ thắc mắc, lo ngại hay phàn nàn gì. (Xem địa chỉ liên lạc ở trang 1 đơn này).

CAM KẾT CỦA NGƯỜI THAM GIA PHỎNG VẤN

Tôi đã đọc bản cam kết này và hiểu rằng tôi có thể dừng tham gia và đặt câu hỏi với nghiên cứu sinh ngay khi có vấn đề không rõ ràng. Tại thời điểm này, tôi cảm thấy mình đã có đủ mọi thông tin cần thiết và không có câu hỏi gì. Tôi tự nguyện đồng ý tham gia đồ án nghiên cứu, và đồng ý cho phép việc sử dụng và chia sẻ các thông tin tôi cung cấp cho đồ án như trên đã nêu.

Bằng việc ký vào đơn này, tôi bảo toàn mọi quyền hợp pháp của bản thân khi tham gia đồ án nghiên cứu.

_____
Họ tên người tham gia

_____ _____
Chữ ký người tham gia Ngày tháng năm

Tôi chứng nhận người tham gia đã ký tên ở trên đã có đủ thời gian suy nghĩ về các thông tin đã nêu, có cơ hội đặt câu hỏi và đã tự nguyện đồng ý tham gia đồ án nghiên cứu.

_____
Họ tên nghiên cứu sinh

_____ _____
Chữ ký nghiên cứu sinh Ngày tháng năm

VỀ VẤN ĐỀ GHI ÂM

Tôi tự nguyện đồng ý cho nghiên cứu sinh ghi âm tôi cho đồ án này. Tôi đồng ý cho phép việc sử dụng ghi âm của tôi, như trên đã nêu.

_____
Họ tên người tham gia

_____ _____
Chữ ký người tham gia Ngày tháng năm

APPENDIX FOUR

ONLINE DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Introduction

Thank you for considering being a part of this survey! The entire process, from reading the instructions to answering the questions, should take about 20 minutes. The survey has 4 parts.

1. The survey will begin with an informed consent form that explains the survey's purpose and asks your voluntary permission to participate in it. Though this important part is long, please read it carefully.
2. Next, the survey will ask you some basic demographic questions about your age, gender, location, education, income, and religious affiliation. Rest assured that this information will be kept strictly confidential.
3. Following this, the survey will ask about your activities and motivations with regards to ancestral veneration. Please answer honestly.
4. Finally, the survey will ask you if you are willing to be interviewed at a later time by the researcher about your activities and motivations for participating in ancestral veneration. This, too, is completely voluntary.

Again, thanks for taking the time to be a part of the survey!

Demographic information

Ethnicity:

- Kinh
- Ethnic minority

Gender:

- Male
- Female

Age (if you are under 18 years old, you are not eligible to participate):

Location of residence (please list ONLY a city or province):

Education:

- Did not complete high school.
- Completed high school.
- Completed university.
- Completed advanced degree.

Average monthly income. Please include all *regular* sources of income in your calculation, e.g., salary, sale of goods, rental income, remittances from abroad, contributions from family members in other domestic locations, and any other sources.

- Less than $200 per month.

- Less than $600 per month.
- Less than $1,000 per month.
- Less than $2,000 per month.
- More than $2,000 per month.

Religious affiliation:
- Buddhism
- Christian – Catholic
- Christian – Protestant
- Cao Dai
- None
- Other

Understanding ancestral practice
Is there an ancestral altar in your home or in the home of an extended family member? Y/N

How often do you interact with the family altar? An interaction could be arranging the altar, cleaning the altar, bowing at the altar, making food or other offerings at the altar, praying at the altar or gathering purposefully at the altar.
- About weekly.
- About monthly.
- About quarterly.
- About yearly.
- Less than yearly.

What motivates you to interact with your ancestral altar? Check all that apply.
- Filial duty towards ancestor.
- Family obligation.
- Cultural custom.
- Desire to give honor and express gratitude.
- Psychological comfort.
- Achievement of social status.
- Expressing/Promoting family harmony.
- National solidarity.
- Helping the ancestor in the afterlife.
- Fear that an angry ancestor can harm the family.
- Hope that ancestors will bring blessing.
- Other (fill in the blank).

Of those motivations that you identified, please order them according to importance to you.

Further Participation in an Interview
Are you willing to participate in an in-person, 90-minute interview with the researcher, along with a research assistant, in order to better understand your activities and beliefs about your ancestral practice? Y/N

If you are willing, please provide your contact info. (This information is collected solely for the purpose of contacting the participant for purposes related to research only. It will be kept strictly confidential. It will be disassociated from any answers you provide and will not be published or shared in any form.)

- Phone number:
- Email address:

ONLINE DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY (VIETNAMESE)

Giới thiệu

Cảm ơn bạn đã tham gia trả lời khảo sát! Quá trình làm khảo sát từ phần đọc hướng dẫn đến phần trả lời câu hỏi sẽ mất khoảng 20 phút. Bài khảo sát có 4 phần.

1. Phần đầu tiên là Đơn đồng thuận. Đơn này giải thích mục đích của bài khảo sát và yêu cầu bạn tự nguyện tham gia khảo sát. Đơn tương đối dài, tuy nhiên xin bạn hãy đọc kỹ phần quan trọng này.
2. Phần tiếp theo yêu cầu thông tin cá nhân như độ tuổi, giới tính, nơi ở, trình độ học vấn, thu nhập, và tôn giáo của bạn. Bạn hãy yên tâm rằng các thông tin này sẽ được giữ bí mật tuyệt đối.
3. Phần thứ ba sẽ hỏi về các hoạt động thờ cúng tổ tiên, cũng như lý do dẫn đến các hoạt động này. Bạn hãy trả lời một cách trung thực.
4. Cuối cùng, bài khảo sát sẽ hỏi ý kiến bạn về việc tham gia phỏng vấn về phong tục thờ cúng tổ tiên cũng như động cơ của người thực hiện các nghi lễ. Việc tham gia phỏng vấn cũng là hoàn toàn tự nguyện.

Một lần nữa, cảm ơn bạn đã dành thời gian tham gia cuộc khảo sát!

Thông tin đối tượng nghiên cứu

Tôi là:

- Người Kinh
- Người dân tộc

Giới tính:

- Nam
- Nữ

Tuổi tác (người dưới 18 tuổi không đủ tiêu chuẩn tham gia):

Nơi cư trú (vui lòng chỉ đề tên tỉnh hoặc thành phố):

Trình độ học vấn:

- Chưa tốt nghiệp cấp III.
- Tốt nghiệp cấp III.
- Tốt nghiệp đại học.
- Tốt nghiệp thạc sĩ hoặc hơn.

Thu nhập trung bình hàng tháng. Vui lòng cung cấp tổng số từ tất cả các nguồn thu nhập theo tháng, ví dụ như lương tháng, tiền lãi buôn bán, tiền thuê nhà, kiều hối từ nước ngoài, tiền do thành viên khác trong gia đình đang ở xa gửi, và các loại nguồn thu nhập khác.

- Dưới 5 triệu/tháng.
- Dưới 15 triệu/tháng

- Dưới 25 triệu/tháng
- Dưới 50 triệu/tháng
- Trên 50 triệu/tháng

Tín ngưỡng/Tôn giáo:
- Đạo Phật
- Đạo Thiên Chúa - Nhánh Công Giáo
- Đạo Thiên Chúa - Nhánh Tin Lành
- Đạo Cao Đài
- Không
- Tôn giáo khác

Hiểu về phong tục thờ cúng
Trong nhà bạn hoặc nhà người thân họ hàng xa có đặt bàn thờ tổ tiên không? Có/Không

Bạn có thường xuyên tương tác với bàn thờ không? Tương tác có thể hiểu là sắp xếp đồ đạc trên bàn thờ, lau dọn bàn thờ, vái lạy hoặc khấn trước bàn thờ, làm cơm hoặc các đồ cúng khác trên bàn thờ, hoặc tụ họp (có mục đích cụ thể) tại bàn thờ.
- Khoảng một tuần một lần
- Khoảng một tháng một lần
- Khoảng một năm 3-4 lần
- Khoảng một năm một lần
- Hơn một năm một lần

Lý do bạn tương tác với bàn thờ là gì? Chọn tất cả ý đúng.
- Làm tròn chữ hiếu với tổ tiên
- Bổn phận gia đình
- Vì phong tục văn hoá
- Mong muốn bày tỏ sự tôn kính và biết ơn với tổ tiên
- Để xoa dịu nỗi đau mất người thân
- Để được coi là người có địa vị
- Thể hiện/vun đắp tình cảm gia đình (ví dụ như trong ngày giỗ, vân vân)
- Thể hiện sự đoàn kết dân tộc
- Giúp đỡ tổ tiên ở kiếp sau
- Lo sợ tổ tiên nổi giận và làm hại gia đình
- Kỳ vọng tổ tiên phù hộ độ trì
- Lý do khác:

Hãy sắp xếp các lý do bạn đã chọn theo thứ tự từ quan trọng nhất đến ít quan trọng nhất.

Thông tin liên lạc
Nếu nghiên cứu sinh (cùng trợ lý nghiên cứu) muốn phỏng vấn bạn trực tiếp để tìm hiểu thêm về đức tin và các hoạt động thờ cúng của bạn, bạn có sẵn sàng tham gia không? Cuộc phỏng vấn sẽ kéo dài khoảng 90 phút. Có/Không

Nếu có, bạn hãy để lại thông tin liên lạc dưới đây. (Chúng tôi lưu giữ thông tin liên lạc hoàn toàn

vì mục đích nghiên cứu. Mọi thông tin sẽ được bảo mật. Mọi thông tin cá nhân sẽ được tách khỏi phần trả lời khảo sát và không được công khai hoặc chia sẻ dưới bất kỳ hình thức nào.)

- Số điện thoại:
- Địa chỉ email:

APPENDIX FIVE

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interviews have a singular goal: to understand the meaning of the ancestral rites for the interviewee. The numbered questions are the core questions of the interview. The bulleted questions are optional probes if the core question does not yield desirable data. The interviewer will have discretion as to which probes to use and when to use them. The interview should last about 90 minutes.

Welcome Script

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is J.P. Cima, and I am the primary researcher. Also present today is Ms. xxxxxxxxxx, who is here to help in case you cannot understand my Vietnamese or I cannot understand your answers. If there is a problem in communication, we will pause and clarify. The interview should last no more than 90 minutes. You can decide to stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable. Do you understand?

I will be asking you questions about your activities and beliefs related to ancestral veneration. Please answer the questions truthfully and completely. Our goal is to understand what ancestral rites mean to you. There are no wrong or right answers, so you should feel free to answer however you would like.

This interview will be audio recorded so that I can analyze your answers at a later time. Those recordings will be kept strictly confidential and stored securely. Only myself, my advisor, a transcription service, and Ms. xxxxxxxxxx will have access to the recordings. They will not be used for any other purpose without your permission.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Core Questions

1. Tell me about your regular activities at the family altar.
    - Probe: how often do you interact with your ancestral altar?
    - Probe: what are the occasions on which you engage the family altar?
    - Probe: how do you feel if you miss an occasion for ancestral veneration?
    - Probe: are there unexpected times that you interact with the family altar?

2. What are some reasons you interact with the family altar?
    - Probe: what words would you use to describe your motivations for engaging the family altar?
    - Probe: Why is it important to you to spend so much money maintaining a family altar?

3. In what ways do ancestral rites benefit the ancestor?
    - Probe: do you believe ancestors are aware of the rites?
    - Probe: do ancestors hear your prayers?
    - Probe: can these rites affect the afterlife of the ancestors?
    - Probe: do ancestors receive and consume the food and votive offerings?

4. In what ways do ancestral rites benefit you?
    - Probe: what words capture your emotions when you perform them?
    - Probe: how have the ancestral rites contributed to your nuclear and extended family life?
    - Probe: tell me about other times, apart from the family altar, when you think about your ancestors.

5. To what extent do you want your children to participate, and why?
    - Probe: how would you feel if you children did not participate?
    - Probe: what sorts of practices do you hope your children do for you after your death?

<u>Extra Questions (if time allows)</u>

6. Tell me about a time when you had a particularly powerful experience at the ancestral altar.
    - Probe: What sorts of emotions did you feel? How is that similar to or different than normal engagement at the family altar?

7. How would you respond to those who say that ancestor veneration is the only truly Vietnamese religion? Would you agree or disagree?
    - Probe: how is your performance of ancestral rites related to your identity as a Vietnamese citizen?
    - Probe: how do you feel about Vietnamese who refuse to maintain a family altar?

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (VIETNAMESE)

Đề xuất Quy trình Phỏng vấn

Buổi phỏng vấn có mục đích duy nhất là để hiểu ý nghĩa các nghi thức thờ cúng tổ tiên đối với người được phỏng vấn. Các câu hỏi có đánh số là các câu hỏi chính trong buổi phỏng vấn. Các điểm không đánh số là các câu hỏi gợi ý nếu câu hỏi chính không đạt được dữ liệu như ý muốn. Người phỏng vấn tuỳ ý lựa chọn câu hỏi gợi ý và thời điểm hỏi. Buổi phỏng vấn sẽ kéo dài khoảng 90 phút.

Kịch bản lời nói đầu

Xin cảm ơn bạn đã đồng ý tham gia buổi phỏng vấn. Tên tôi là JP Cima, tôi là nghiên cứu sinh chính. Cô xxxxxxxxxx cũng có mặt hôm nay để hỗ trợ trong trường hợp bạn không hiểu tiếng Việt của tôi hoặc tôi không hiểu câu trả lời của bạn. Nếu có vấn đề gì trong lời nói và câu hỏi của tôi, chúng ta sẽ tạm dừng để giải thích. Buổi phỏng vấn sẽ kéo dài không quá 90 phút. Bạn có quyền quyết định dừng phỏng vấn ngay nếu thấy không thoải mái. Bạn có thắc mắc gì không?

Tôi sẽ hỏi bạn một số câu hỏi về các hoạt động và tín ngưỡng liên quan đến tục thờ cúng tổ tiên. Bạn hãy trả lời các câu hỏi một cách thành thật và trọn vẹn. Mục tiêu của chúng tôi là để hiểu tục thờ cúng tổ tiên có ý nghĩa thế nào với bạn, nên bạn có thể tự do trả lời và không sợ sai.

Buổi phỏng vấn sẽ được ghi âm để sau này tôi có thể phân tích các câu trả lời. Bản ghi âm sẽ được bảo mật và lưu trữ an toàn. Những người được nghe bản ghi âm bao gồm tôi, người giám sát nghiên cứu, bên thứ ba cung cấp bản chép lời và cô xxxxxxxxxx. Bản ghi âm sẽ không được sử dụng cho bất kỳ mục đích nào khác nếu không có sự đồng ý của bạn.

Trước khi bắt đầu, bạn có câu hỏi gì không?

Các câu hỏi chính

1. Hãy kể về các việc bạn thường hay làm ở bàn thờ.
    - Gợi ý: bạn có hay động chạm hay làm các công việc thờ cúng ở bàn thờ không? (nếu có, bao lâu một lần?)
    - Gợi ý: bạn tương tác với bàn thờ trong những dịp nào?
    - Gợi ý: nếu chẳng may bỏ lỡ một lần cúng ông bà/tổ tiên, bạn cảm thấy thế nào?
    - Gợi ý: bạn có bao giờ tương tác với bàn thờ vào ngày thường ngoài ngày giỗ, Tết, vân vân… không?
2. Lý do bạn tương tác với bàn thờ là gì?
    - Gợi ý: bạn dùng từ ngữ gì để mô tả động lực khiến bạn tương tác với bàn thờ?
    - Gợi ý: Để gìn giữ phong tục thờ cúng tổ tiên, bạn thường phải tiêu tốn tiền bạc. Tại sao việc đó lại quan trọng?

3. Ông bà, tổ tiên có được hưởng lợi từ các công việc thờ cúng (mà con cháu làm) không?
    - Gợi ý: Bạn có tin ông bà biết được những việc thờ cúng bạn làm không?
    - Gợi ý: ông bà có nghe thấy lời cầu khấn của bạn không?

- Gợi ý: các nghi lễ thờ cúng có ảnh hưởng đến kiếp sau của ông bà không?
- Gợi ý: ông bà có nhận được và ăn uống/sử dụng được đồ con cháu cúng/đốt vàng mã cho không?

4. Bản thân bạn được hưởng lợi gì từ các công việc thờ cúng?
- Gợi ý: hãy mô tả cảm xúc của bạn khi thực hiện công việc thờ cúng.
- Gợi ý: công việc thờ cúng đóng góp thế nào vào gia đình và họ hàng nhà bạn?
- Gợi ý: hãy kể về những lần bạn nhớ về ông bà đã mất ngoài lúc tương tác với bàn thờ

5. Bạn có muốn con cái mình tham gia làm các công việc thờ cúng không? Xin nêu lý do.
- Gợi ý: nếu con cái không tham gia việc thờ cúng, bạn sẽ cảm thấy thế nào?
- Gợi ý: sau khi mình mất đi, bạn kỳ vọng con cái sẽ làm gì cho mình?

<u>Câu hỏi thêm nếu có thời gian</u>

6. Hãy kể về lần bạn có trải nghiệm mạnh mẽ tại bàn thờ.
- Gợi ý: hãy nêu tên những cảm xúc của bạn. Những cảm xúc đó giống hay khác những lúc bình thường ở bàn thờ?

7. Nếu có người cho rằng đạo thờ cúng tổ tiên là đạo chân chính duy nhất của người Việt Nam, bạn sẽ phản hồi thế nào? Bạn có đồng ý với quan điểm này không?
- Gợi ý: Các công việc thờ cúng mà bạn làm có liên quan thế nào đến bản sắc người Việt của bạn?
- Gợi ý: đối với những người Việt từ chối tham gia công việc thờ cúng ở bàn thờ tổ tiên gia đình, bạn cảm thấy thế nào?

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