

# The Bipolarity of Death

Dead people, in popular Vietnamese culture, can be powerfully sentient and salient beings who entertain emotions, intentions, and historical awareness. The ethnological literature about their mortuary customs and religious imaginations confirms this. Remembering ancestors means, in Vietnam, according to Le Van Dinh, relating to them “as if they were alive.”<sup>1</sup> A French Jesuit missionary to Vietnam and author of classical studies on Vietnamese popular religions, Léopold Cadière, wrote that the Vietnamese perception of the world incorporates the awareness that the life of the dead is intertwined with that of the living, and that the Vietnamese idealize a harmonious relationship between the two forms of life.<sup>2</sup> Their social life consists in both relations among the living and interactions with the dead, according to Nguyen Van Huyen, and it follows that the history of war, for the Vietnamese, can be as much about what to do with the dead here and now as about how to interpret the past events of destruction.<sup>3</sup> In Vietnamese mortuary knowledge, the souls of the dead may refuse to depart from the living world, and their unwillingness is expressed when, for instance, the coffin suddenly crushes the shoulders of the pallbearers with unbearable weight.

In a funeral that I saw in a suburb of Da Nang, the pallbearers complained of the excessive weight of the coffin of an unmarried man when they were passing by a particular house in the community. People speculated that the problem was caused by the young man’s affection for the daughter of the family in the house. The man’s family persuaded the

reluctant young woman to come out to the street and console the deceased so the journey could continue. She was instructed to speak to the coffin, to say she regretted having stolen the man's heart, and her parents supplemented this gesture of apology with gifts of votive objects. Whether the woman knew about or had anything to do with the man's feelings was not an issue. It was the feeling of the dead man, with or without her knowledge, that made the woman culpable for the complication in his fateful journey. The drama about a spirit of the dead with unfulfilled wishes may take on an explicitly political meaning. At the funeral of a young schoolteacher in the city of Quang Ngai, the family was alarmed by the state of the corpse. They believed that the man's corpse refused to close its eyes for an unknown reason. The crisis continued until the school principal arrived at the scene. The principal approached the corpse of his junior colleague and acknowledged publicly that he had bullied the hardworking man for years. Apparently the principal had conspired against the wishes of the schoolteacher, who had wanted to join the Communist Party.

If personal anguish and unfulfilled desires complicate a funeral, death without a funeral complicates even further the deceased's afterlife. The dead who do not benefit from an appropriate burial continue to inhabit the space between *am*, the world of the dead, and *duong*, the world of the living — expressing the Vietnamese concept of the duality of life.<sup>4</sup> The dead whose final moments were violent also have problems in making the mortal transition, and a violent, “unjust” death whose fate is not ritually recognized presents particularly critical problems. Such a tragic death means the deceased does not really leave *duong* nor really move to *am*, a condition that Arnold van Gennep conceptualizes as perpetual liminality.<sup>5</sup> In popular Vietnamese knowledge, the souls of those who died a tragic death roam between the margins of this world and the periphery of the opposite world, and being unsettled in either world, they can be unsettling to the inhabitants of both. The Vietnamese address these unattached and undetached mobile spirits of the dead with the kinship and interpersonal referential term *co bac* (“aunt” and “uncle”; more precisely “[paternal] junior aunt” and “senior aunt/uncle”) in distinction to *ong ba* (“grandfather” and “grandmother”).<sup>6</sup>

The distinction between *co bac* and *ong ba*, or between displaced wandering ghosts and ritually appropriated ancestors and deities located in designated places, approximates the contrast between “bad death” and “good death.” The Vietnamese mortuary culture shares with other agrarian traditions a house-centered morality of death. Dying a good

death is “to die in the house and home,” writes James Fox about an Indonesian society, and “in his hut, lying on his bed, with his brothers and sons around him to hear his last words,” according to John Middleton’s description of the Lugbara in northwestern Uganda.<sup>7</sup> This is called *chet nha* in Vietnamese and contrasts with *chet duong*, which literally means “dying in the street and outside” but has the connotation of “dying accidentally” or “dying in violent circumstances.”<sup>8</sup>

The “house,” which is central to the moral classification of death for the Vietnamese, refers to two separate but interrelated forms of dwelling. The tomb is a house for the dead that shelters the body and demonstrates the deceased’s social identity, and this is made explicit in Vietnamese mortuary art, in which the place of the dead is built in the form of a house. Ideally, people should exhale their last breath under the roof of the living house and move to the roofed tomb to live their life after death. In both places, the dead are not alone but surrounded by relatives, and hence the transition from one to another place is supposed to have elements of continuity. Janet Carsten and Stephan Hugh-Jones argue that the house and the body form a unity in Southeast Asia, and I add that this is particularly the case with the dead body.<sup>9</sup> A dead body without a house of its own is the body of a nonperson, and a physical condition such as this is associated with the imagined state of tragic afterlife. The shallow burial of an unknown soldier in an alien place is one of such tragic conditions of afterlife — as Shaun Malarney points out, “Death on the battlefield was the quintessential bad death,”<sup>10</sup> — but so is the burial in a mass grave of people unrelated in kinship, even if it is in their home village.

Tragic death has many specific forms, and the classical literature and the traditional ritual knowledge of Vietnam list at least seventy-two such categories.<sup>11</sup> All these categories, which constitute a vast spectrum of human destiny stretching from death on the battlefield to death by a mad buffalo, fall under the general notion of tragic or bad death. If a man suffers a violent death while away from home, according to this conceptual scheme, his soul will remember the pain of death and the sorrow of solitude, and it will yearn for opportunities to ease this “physical” pain and spiritual sorrow.

The Vietnamese express this undesirable state of afterlife as “grievous death” (*chet oan*), in which the agony of a violent death and the memory of the terror entrap the soul.<sup>12</sup> The human soul in this condition of self-imprisonment does not remember the terror as we the living normally would, but relives the violent experience repeatedly. Memory of death for

the tragically dead, in other words, is a living memory in its most brutally literal sense. This perpetual reexperiencing is conveyed by the idea of “incarceration” (*nguc*) within the mortal historical drama. The grievance of *oan* and the self-imprisonment of *nguc* describe the same phenomenon, but from opposite sides. Grievance creates the imaginary prison, but once established, the prison arrests the grievance and augments its intensity. Acts of liberating the suffering souls of tragic death are called *giai oan* (to disentangle the grievance) or *giai nguc* (to break the prison). These expressions are used interchangeably, but this does not mean they are identical. Breaking the prison by force and helping the captive free itself from the grievous memory (although the two acts have a common objective of emancipation) can take on different meanings and forms. In Vietnamese ritual tradition, a genuine liberation from the incarceration of grievous memory should be a collaborative work. It ought to involve not only the appropriate intervention of sympathetic outsiders but also the inmate’s strong will for freedom from history. The growth of self-consciousness and self-determination on the part of the prisoners of history is in fact fundamental to a successful process of liberation from grievance.

Tragic death that falls out of the established mortuary order is unwelcome to the commemorative order. In Debbora Battaglia’s account, the Sabarl Islanders of Melanesia conceptualize the spirits of violent death they call *piwapiwa* as “an unintegrated, untamed existence in the bush,” in contrast to those of good death, *baloma*, “which have legitimately severed ties with the living.”<sup>13</sup> For the Merina of Madagascar, Maurice Bloch observes, “there is no worse nightmare than that one’s body will be lost. . . . ‘Bad’ death occurs at the wrong place, away from the ancestral shrines to which the deceased’s soul cannot therefore easily return; and at the wrong time so that the orderly succession of [obituary] speech cannot occur.”<sup>14</sup> In the conventional sociology of death, the presence of fertility symbols marks “good death” as opposed to “bad death.” Good death is a socially constructive and regenerative death: it reinforces corporate solidarity, revitalizes historical continuity, and can renew symbolically the ecological resources. The burial of particular ancestral bodies in the ancestral land is believed to “fertilize” the land in some cultures.<sup>15</sup> The body that experiences a bad death — the untimely death of a child, for instance — takes on the opposite meaning in these cultures and is believed to adversely affect the productivity of the land.<sup>16</sup> Given this background, it is argued that “bad death” signifies not only an absence of regenerative potential but also a threat to social continuity.<sup>17</sup> About the aftermath of a socially negative death, Middleton writes, “Deaths that are considered

as bad lead to a condition of confusion and disorder but without the means for removing and resolving them.”<sup>18</sup> In the words of Robert Hertz, “Death will be eternal [in the sphere of bad death], because society will always maintain towards these accursed individuals the attitude of exclusion.”<sup>19</sup>

What happens to the moral and symbolic order of death, however, if “bad death” becomes a generalized phenomenon rather than an isolated event? Can society still exclude the “accursed individuals” eternally even if virtually everyone in the society is related to their memory? The dual symbolism of death derives from an investigation of social conditions that we may call stable. What happens to the ideal of “good death” and the related principle of “social triumph over death” if the social practice of grieving has to come to terms with a historical reality in which the ideal has become an almost unattainable goal?<sup>20</sup> If the scale and magnitude of tragic death is such that it becomes a universally shared legacy, this historical background may affect the conceptual moral hierarchy of death.<sup>21</sup> Otherwise, what kind of social order can we possibly conceive of?

The war in Vietnam that formally ended in 1975 increased the numbers of displaced, troubled, and ritually “uncontrolled death[s].”<sup>22</sup> The violent mechanical destruction, on the one hand, and a mass-mobilized mobile guerrilla war, on the other, created countless instances of “death in the street,” death with memory of extreme violence, hastily and improperly buried bodies, death without funerary atonement, and dead denied even the possibility of a ritual transformation. In this historical landscape of generalized violence, as a number of observers have noted, people perceive that ghosts of war proliferate. According to Derek Summerfield, “In Vietnam, the 300,000 still missing twenty years after the war ended are considered wandering souls. . . . They have lost their place in the order of things, in the social and historical fabric. There are personal memories of them but no external evidence or sign to embody these memories. Who can show that these people once lived, had values and causes, and thus what their deaths mean?”<sup>23</sup> Malarney states, “The deaths of young soldiers on the battlefield posed serious dangers [to the families and communities] as their prematurely terminated lives created an army of wandering souls.”<sup>24</sup> Lady Borton writes of her experience of meeting war widows in southern Vietnam:

She leaned forward. “If I knew the location of my husband’s grave,” she said, “I would visit it before Tet and invite his spirit to join us. I’d offer food and fruit to nourish his spirit. But where do I go?” She paused, examining

her fingers. “And if I knew the day he died, I would invite neighbors and family to honor my husband’s spirit on the anniversary of his death. But what day should I choose?” She ran her hand across her face, a common Vietnamese gesture. “All that’s left,” she said, “is the Fifteenth Day of the Seventh Lunar Month.”<sup>25</sup>

The idea of “good” regenerative death, as Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch correctly point out, “can only be constructed in antithesis to an image of ‘bad’ death, which it therefore implies. It requires and must even emphasize what it denies, and cannot obliterate that on which it feeds.”<sup>26</sup> In the expression of Louis Dumont, “If uniting through differences is at the same time the aim of anthropology and the characteristic of hierarchy, they are doomed to keep company.”<sup>27</sup> It follows that there is no inherently negative death as such and, as Parry and Bloch mention, that the moral hierarchy of death and the fear of bad death are meaningful only within the specific ideological orientation of a society.<sup>28</sup> This is an important point, and it is unfortunate that Bloch forgets it in his later work, where he launches an ambitious, generalizing argument that the empowerment of collective fertility symbols is necessary because a social order is created through it, and that this is done through the *conquest* of the uncertain, ambiguous vitality.<sup>29</sup>

I find this idea of “symbolic conquest” problematic and the attempt to generalize it as a human religious universal untenable (see chapter 5). Bloch argues that the symbolism of conquest is inherent in the structure of religious ritual, whose purpose, across cultures, is to construct a transcendental ideal in sacrifice of impure vitality. This reduction of ritual to an instrument of social control is empirically unsustainable,<sup>30</sup> and it misrepresents the very idea of symbolic conquest, which means, in its original formulation by Robert Hertz, strictly an ideological phenomenon and hence is itself a subject for analytical scrutiny, not to be confused with the nature of society.

#### MASS DEATH

Robert Hertz, a student of Durkheim and a formidable independent thinker, opened a way to rethink moral symbolic dualism. Whereas Durkheim was mainly concerned with how social solidarity was created and maintained, Hertz “took upon himself the task of studying the responses of society to breaches in that solidarity.”<sup>31</sup> His promising life was cut short in Marchéville, in 1915, in circumstances that would bring about a sea change in the way mass death was viewed — the mass slaugh-

ter of European trench warfare. One of Hertz's central concerns was semantic opposition between two apparently identical objects — such as the right hand and left hand. He questioned why the right side represented, in the French language and beyond, positive values of strength, dexterity, faith, law and purity, whereas the left stood for all the opposite values and meanings — including “bad death,” which is closely associated with the left hand in the ethnographic material Hertz drew upon.<sup>32</sup> Right and left, for Hertz, was often expressed in terms of inside versus outside and, as such, this was both a complementary bipolarity and an asymmetrical relationship, which Dumont later called “hierarchical opposition.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, he inferred from ethnological literature that right and left was “reversible dualism” in archaic or egalitarian societies. Based on this observation, Hertz proceeded to argue that the polarity was universal but not the asymmetry. He wrote, “The evolution of society replaces this reversible dualism with a rigid hierarchical structure.”<sup>34</sup> In the spirit of the time, however, Hertz was fundamentally optimistic about social evolution:

The tendency to level the value of the two hands is not, in our culture, an isolated or abnormal fact. The ancient religious ideas which put unbridgeable distance between things and beings, and which in particular founded the exclusive preponderance of the right hand, are today in full retreat. Neither aesthetics nor morality would suffer from the revolution of supposing that there were weighty physical and technical advantages to mankind in permitting the left hand to reach at least its full development. The distinction of good and evil, which for long was solidary with the antithesis of right and left, will not vanish from our conscience. . . . If the constraint of a mystical ideal has for centuries been able to make man into a unilateral being, physiologically mutilated, [nevertheless,] a liberated and foresighted society will strive to develop the energies dormant in our left side and in our right cerebral hemisphere, and to assure by an appropriate training a more harmonious development of the organism.<sup>35</sup>

As it turned out, Hertz's biopolitical vision partly came true, but not through a peaceful, civilizing progression as he envisaged. The First World War, which claimed Hertz's own young life shortly after he published his works on moral symbolism, killed some ten million men and made bereavement a universal, simultaneous, “democratic” experience in much of western Europe and beyond.<sup>36</sup> The encounter with catastrophic mass death was disseminated far beyond the trenches by means of new communication technologies. It invigorated the traditional belief in martyrdom and resurrection, and it developed the process in which this belief was projected onto the nation as “an all-encompassing civic

religion.”<sup>37</sup> The mechanical mass production of death on the Western Front, however, provoked a contrary awareness and countermovements that questioned the dominant traditional belief and commemorative forms.<sup>38</sup> These movements refused to glorify violent war death, to relegate bereavement to the political-religious symbols of resurrection, or to falsely bless the nation-state that caused the mass violence in the first place.<sup>39</sup>

The meaning of mass war death, in this turbulent and dynamic environment, became de-centered and contestable, shifting and uncertain. After the outbreak of what Stephen Kern calls “the Cubist War,” any previously solid forms — and this includes the permanent structure of the memorial tower or the cenotaph — became flexible and had to be looked at from shifting perspectives to grasp their true shapes.<sup>40</sup> Rilke wrote in 1920 on the mass death of the Great War: “With no figure to draw all this around itself and expand it away from itself — this way tensions and counter-tensions are set up without a central point that first makes them into constellations, into orders, at least orders of destruction.”<sup>41</sup> The moral identity of death was no longer in the right or left hand alone. The correlative categories did not vanish from consciousness or from the landscape, but the moral symbolism of death, mass death in particular, began to pass between two moving hands, like juggling balls.

Since the Great War, a panoramic change of a novel dimension has taken place in the identity of mass war death. Eighty percent of those who died in the First World War were enlisted soldiers; 50 percent in the Second World War. Since 1945, 90 percent of war casualties have been civilian noncombatants.<sup>42</sup> The increasing demilitarization of mass war death has been a product of technological advancement in the weapons of mass destruction, and a product of the globalization of the “total war” theory, which has broken the traditional division of labor and distinction between armed combatants and unarmed civilians within the paradigm of total mobilization of human and material resources for a war of liberation (see chapter 2). The war in Vietnam was a culmination of technologically progressive warfare and philosophical total war, and it was a theater in which these two quintessential aspects of modern war contested each other’s strength. It was a war that imagined the unimaginable ideal of “each inhabitant [is] a soldier, each village a fortress.”<sup>43</sup> It was also a war whose great machinery of destruction was not yet so advanced as to be able to identify mechanically the lawful targets for destruction as opposed to the unlawful varieties.<sup>44</sup>

The ideal of a combat village was meant to be a strictly ethnocentric

concept. It was intended to be relevant to the Vietnamese villagers but not to the foreign combatants. The term *inhabitant-soldier* did not necessarily mean a total fusion of the two identities, but rather the hyphenated identity was expected to be seen differently from two opposite angles. From the perspective of *ben ta*, “this side,” or the revolutionary side, the hyphenated person ideally was a soldier. *Ben ta* anticipated that the same person would appear to be a mere inhabitant in the eyes of *ben kia*, “that side.” Sometimes, “that side” betrayed this anticipation, assimilated the view of “this side,” distorted this view and magnified the distortion, and defined all living persons and all material objects in the village as justifiable military targets for destruction.<sup>45</sup> If this happened, “this side” took on the view that it had originally projected onto the opposite side. The destroyed target then turned into ordinary villagers and civilian victims in the view of “this side,” and the act of wanton destruction of unlawful targets triggered indignation and denunciation. Each side of the war defined the status of civilians from a perspective borrowed from the opposite side, and the mass killing of innocent village inhabitants completed this lethal transaction.

A total political unity was impossible in the violent Cold War and remained pure fiction in the wartime villages of southern and central Vietnam.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, victims of a village massacre, even if the massacre happened in a village that seemed fairly close to the ideal in which “each inhabitant [is] a soldier,” never came close to being identified as war martyrs. A dead revolutionary villager and “inhabitant-soldier” became a mere villager, even if she was killed while fulfilling her active political and military duty “to defend the village” (*tru bam*). The death of an armed soldier and the deaths of his village supporters were clearly differentiated in the official commemoration of the war, and the latter were rarely marked by any of the rich fertility symbols that surround the former.<sup>47</sup> Mass civilian death was “tragic death” (*tham xat*), which offered no generative meanings or positive commemorative possibilities. The official approach to war death in contemporary Vietnam is to preserve heroic death and to transcend tragic death in the nation’s modified march toward a prosperous future. My Lai is an exception, however, as the state hierarchy has intervened to manage this particular site of civilian massacre as a historic monument. (In chapter 7, I compare My Lai and Ha My in terms of politics of monument.)

It has been argued that the appropriation of war death is central to the construction of modern national memory.<sup>48</sup> In Jean Baudrillard’s emphatic words: “The power of the State is based on the management of life

as the objective afterlife.”<sup>49</sup> The equivalent process in Vietnam consisted of conquering the tragic meaning of war death by means of culturally adopted heroic symbols of modern nationalism,<sup>50</sup> and, in southern regions, it also involved ignoring the material traces of civilian sacrifices. The systematic oblivion partly resulted from the imposition of a particular North Vietnamese view of the war (national liberation) on the differential realities of war (civil war/cold war, as well as liberation war) experienced in the southern half. This regional variation in the memory of war ultimately relates to the complexity of parallax visions inherent in the geopolitics of the Cold War.<sup>51</sup> The absence of civilian mass death in the national memory of Vietnam, and the related difficulty in commemorating it, is intelligible only in the context of the Cold War’s global history (see chapter 8).

#### AMBIDEXTERITY

Unlike modern hero worship, traditional ancestor worship in Vietnam is not preoccupied with the military trope of “All Forward!,” and it encompasses opposite symbolic movements. In Vietnamese death ritual, the mourners may wail, roll around on the dusty red soil, grab the legs of the pallbearers, and block the advance of the funeral party. The close relatives of the deceased may prostrate themselves on the ground in front of the funeral procession until they are gently pulled away by distant relatives to make way for the must-be-departed. Some close female relatives choose instead to stand against the funeral car with their arms wide open, reminding the spectators of the painted images of wartime village women defying the advancing enemy’s tanks. Part of this funeral fight is voluntary and genuine, and part of it is theatrical and customary. The idea is to demonstrate publicly the conflict between the fateful separation and the desire to deny it.

To point out this difference, however, is not to deny the similarities and mutually constitutive elements of ancestor and hero worship. Pham Van Bich notes, “Marxism and Confucianism are opposite to each other in many ways. Nonetheless, Confucianism and communism also have something in common. A leading communist intellectual even emphasized the similarities between Confucianism and Marxism.”<sup>52</sup> Vietnamese hero worship places the martyrs of the revolutionary war in a lengthy genealogy of patriotic heroes from ancient times;<sup>53</sup> traditional ancestor worship assigns a high value to the meritorious ancestral heritage of contribution to the feudal state in terms of military duty and courtly service.

The highest form of filial piety in this convention is considered to be the act of honoring family ancestors by the election of a descendant to the imperial bureaucracy.<sup>54</sup> It is understood that the ancestors, who did meritorious service of *cong duc* to the country, bless the descendants with the wealth of *phuc duc* — the genealogically conceptualized idea of consecration specific to ancestral cult. Nevertheless, there are notable differences between ancestor worship and hero worship practices, and some of these differences may be crucial to thinking about the representational crisis in social memory caused by extreme historical events such as the civilian massacres.

War memorials in Vietnam, like their equivalents in the American and European “invented tradition” of war commemoration, follow an egalitarian principle — the commissars and the foot soldiers, or the regular soldiers and the peasant guerillas, lie in humble, identical graves.<sup>55</sup> This internal egalitarianism, or what Thomas Laqueur calls “democracy of death,” is based on a systematic exclusion externally.<sup>56</sup> The fallen soldiers who also fought for national independence, but who happened to have done so on the wrong side of “the puppet regime,” have absolutely no right to the space of the virtuous war dead. In a very suggestive note to her recent work on Vietnamese commemorative practices, the eminent historian Hue-Tam Ho Tai writes, “To be truly comprehensive[,] . . . the study of commemoration would need to include the dead of the South [Vietnam]. To do otherwise risks turning them into the scholarly equivalents of the wandering ghosts of those who, dying unmourned, constantly haunt the living in an attempt to force their way into the consciousness of the community, to be acknowledged as worthy of being remembered if only because they once walked the earth.”<sup>57</sup> Popular ancestor worship, by contrast, follows a fairly hierarchical principle internally based on genealogical order, but, in its broad structure, it demonstrates a growing tendency of social inclusiveness externally. From the domestic ancestral altar, where one worships the immediately preceding generations, to the communal temple that shelters the virtuous founding ancestors of the community, the revived popular ritual practices in central and southern Vietnam strengthen simultaneously a genealogy-based social solidarity and the opposite generalized social relatedness.

The genealogical model of society, according to Tim Ingold, consists of “a dendritic geometry of points and lines,” as in the image of the tree of generations, and “collapses the life of each person into a single point, which is connected to other such points by lines of descent.”<sup>58</sup> What Ingold calls “a relational model” presents an opposite picture. Here,

there are no such points or lines and every “being is instantiated in the world as the line of its own movement and activity: not a movement from point to point, as though the life-course were already laid out as the route between them, but a continual ‘moving around,’ or coming and going.”<sup>59</sup> These modalities of life, according to Ingold, generate different conceptions of the person: in the genealogical model, the person receives the specifications of identity from the preceding generations, whereas the relational model “situates the person in the lifeworld from the very start, as a locus of self-organizing activity.” Thus he concludes, “Whereas in the genealogical model life is encompassed within generations, in the relational model generation is encompassed within the process of life.”<sup>60</sup>

Hy Van Luong argues that patrilineal descent and a broad bilateral model of relatedness constitute “the fundamental parameters” of Vietnamese kinship and worldview.<sup>61</sup> These two structural opposites concern gender relationship primarily, but they do so in “isomorphic relation to other conceptual dichotomies such as center/periphery and spatially bound/spatially unbound.”<sup>62</sup> In support of this idea, which is also raised by other specialists in Southeast Asian cultures, Luong discusses the principle of patrilocal residence in North Vietnam and what happens to the principle of patrilineal descent when the household residential pattern extends to multiple sites.<sup>63</sup> The large landholding families in one North Vietnamese village, according to him, observed a strict patrilineal descent in the main house, where the household head and his first wife resided, whereas this genealogical modality was weak in the peripheral houses of his second and third wives. Luong describes how the dominant rule of descent had to be negotiated with the reality of strong matrilineal ties in the peripheral houses, and he emphasizes the interplay between the two opposite structural principles of genealogical exclusiveness and bilateral inclusiveness for understanding the traditional Vietnamese social organization.<sup>64</sup>

Maurice Halbwachs insists that collective memory can exist only on the basis of a socially specific spatial framework.<sup>65</sup> The ritual actor in the old battlefields of central Vietnam, when engaged in an act of commemoration in the domestic ritual, faces the past in two distinctive ways and according to opposite orientations. One is the enclosed world of genealogical relationship. The other is the unbound world in which being-in-the-world indeed means what Ingold calls “continual ‘moving around,’ or coming and going,” and in which relationships are made proactively rather than retroactively according to a predetermined order. The body of the ritual actor is in motion, and his view shifts between the

two worlds of relationship in coordination with the movement. In the simplest setting, the movement consists of making kowtows and offering incense to one side and then turning to the opposite direction in order to repeat the act. Each of these paired actions may be accompanied by a single beat of the gong followed by three or four strikes of the drum. In a more complex arrangement, the participant may divide the two acts of a single ritual complex and hold them on separate occasions.

Ritual revival in central Vietnam empowers two opposite expressions of relationship simultaneously, and this is done by means of the technique of the body that keeps oscillating between the two points of polarity. The *việc ho* effort gathers the scattered remains of war dead and places them in a common burial ground, promotes a traditional culture of commemoration, and stimulates ritual activities. It contributes to rebuilding the infrastructure of traditional social solidarity and demonstrates this in the form of renovated domestic and communal sites of worship. The ancestral cult — both that of place ancestors and that of lineage ancestors — occupies a prominent place in this general process of renovation, although the details vary from place to place and across regions. These new sites of kinship and place identities rise in parallel with the semantically opposite side of anonymous ghosts, and the two sides are increasingly becoming equal in moral prominence, religious power, and cultural significance. Ritual in this context is “an arena of contradictory and contestable perspectives,” and the ritual actors who work in such a dynamic environment advance the art of decentering the spatial structure of worship and demonstrate the agility of shifting perspectives.<sup>66</sup>

Paul Connerton writes, “[If] there is such a thing as social memory, we are likely to find it in commemorative ceremonies. Commemorative ceremonies prove to be commemorative in so far as they are performative. . . . Performative memory is bodily.”<sup>67</sup> Ritual remembrance, in the revived tradition of central Vietnam, situates the actor within the spatial duality of “house” and “street” and in between the polar identities of *ông bà* (ancestors and gods) and *co bac* (ghosts). It encourages the actor’s body to move between the opposite expressions of relationship and to create intimacy with both modalities of life. In the prerevolutionary tradition, it may be that this bodily movement was mainly a symbolic gesture to draw the territorial boundary of genealogical social order and, following Bloch, to signify its moral dominance over the anonymous exterior world. Gerald Hickey argues that the ritual conducted on behalf of ghosts, in a prewar Vietnamese village, was intended mainly “to pla-

cate the errant spirits” and “to avoid their wrath.”<sup>68</sup> I am not able to judge this statement as I never had an opportunity to study a prewar Vietnamese village, although it should be noted that the negativity of ghosts is a matter of perspective and an aspect of how one is positioned in the structure of worship. Victor Turner states, “The term ‘anti-structure’ is only negative in its connotations when seen from the vantage point or perspective of ‘structure.’”<sup>69</sup> The moral identity of the dead changes, depending on where and how the living interact with them.

What I can say with confidence, however, is that the identity of ghosts in a contemporary Vietnamese village does not always carry such negative associations, and this is partly demonstrated by the fact that the gifts for ghosts and the gifts for ancestors are becoming increasingly indistinguishable. In central Vietnam, people often worship their ancestors who died tragic deaths at the shrine for ghosts, believing that the ancestors prefer this place for their memory. The magical reality that the dead are conscious that they do not merit worship in a pure ancestral place because they experienced a tragic death is an expression of the social reality that the living are actively remembering them and that the tragic dead are undergoing a transformation. As I noted earlier about the notion of grievous death, the symbolic transformation of the dead, according to popular belief, is partly expressed by their becoming self-conscious. Moreover, it is the ritual act that enables this symbolic transformation. The ritual actor’s shifting perspective between the “house” and the “street” is a practical action partly intended to help the dead to cross or move beyond the conceptual boundary. There is no such mysterious drive for symbolic conquest in this practical action of “liberation from grievance.”

The house of worship, as a place for honoring the ordered “death at home,” excludes the violent “death in the street” in a selective redemption of the past. To be an ancestor and to be commemorated as such in this system requires not only an appropriate genealogical background but also a historical background of dying in socially acceptable circumstances. For this reason, death in a mass killing does not fit the criteria for the “house” — the magnitude of the violence alienates the memory of the dead from the place of ancestors. It does not easily meet the criteria for the “street” either. The victims of massacres died violently but did so “at home,” and most of the victims, including the small children, became “ancestors” a generation after the end of the war. Remembering these known and related identities, and so many of them, at the place of anonymous ghosts is a problematic option. Being unsuitable for both

places, remembrance of the village massacre could become associated with either side of the commemorative structure. Indeed, recent social development in Ha My and My Lai points to a growing movement of the memory of the mass death across the entire spatial spectrum of commemoration, and this was certainly related to the process of ritual revival that empowered the “house” and the “street” coactively. In other words, the conceptual polarity of death, against the historical background of mass death, parts company with the moral hierarchy of values and becomes meaningful as an indicator of mobility rather than as a boundary marker.

In my view, this coactive vitalization of the opposite moral symbols, and the bodily movement of the social actor that enables it, relates to what Hertz intended to convey with his idea of ambidexterity — the condition in which the human body, upon which are marked “the opposition of values and the violent contrasts of the world of morality,” reaches its full potential, free from the constraints of mystical ideals.<sup>70</sup> The parallel social development — identity and anonymity, order and disorder, fertility and futility, purity and impurity, and good death and bad death — cannot be properly understood if one assumes social transcendence is a given and unproblematic. Tragic death, as the stories in the following chapters illustrate, is not a disciplined, docile being. The idea that a social order emerges through a symbolic conquest over bad death may not apply at all to a society in which a decent future for the victims of tragic death is everyone’s concern. The history of mass death can change the social order, and this change, as in the European social history, takes place mainly in how people relate to the symbolic structure of the social order, rather than necessarily in the outlook of the structure.

The morality of death, in modern history, cannot be considered independently from the history of mass death, nor can we investigate their interconnectedness while ignoring the arena of social life in which the weight of this history is felt most intimately. In Ha My and My Lai, mass death was a central episode in family and village history. However, its place in village social life has been marginalized, and it is unlikely to become central in the future. What is likely to happen in the future, judging from the present circumstances and trends, is that the political relationship between center and periphery will be reconfigured. “Centrality is movable,” writes Henri Lefebvre. The “centre of the Greek city was forever being moved: from the semicircular area where chiefs and warriors conferred about their expeditions and divided up their booty to the city temple, and from the temple to the agora, a place of political assem-

bly.”<sup>71</sup> This geographical truism is manifested, in contemporary Vietnam, by the shift of attention from the state-administered sites of hero worship to the communal sites of ancestor worship. This great shift, as I mentioned earlier and as other observers have noted, indicates a change in the management of war memories, from the state’s command economy to the family and community,<sup>72</sup> but this describes only the surface of the great migration of memories. Shelly Errington writes, “The center and the periphery . . . structure the shape of ‘space’ and movement in [South-east Asia]. A center is still; its periphery is active.”<sup>73</sup> The centrality in ancestor worship, unlike the exemplary centrality in hero worship, cannot obliterate the peripheral existence of unassimilated deaths, for the social center in this system of values requires the vitality of the periphery in order to manifest its own vitality. When centrality moves elsewhere, the very relationship between center and periphery also moves.

Clifford Geertz argues that, against certain historical backgrounds, the revival of a religious order simultaneously raises moral concerns about the problems in the order and creates practical measures to counter the problems. He calls this process “religious modernization.”<sup>74</sup> This human creativity for cultural invention, according to Turner, “flowed from the margins to the centers more often than the reverse.”<sup>75</sup> The “little tradition” of the troubled, marginal death of village women and children is not the same as the “great tradition” of the ordered, assimilated death of war heroes or prominent ancestors. A place for the former cannot share the same geography with the places for the latter. Finding a place for the memory of tragic death is not the same as giving it a place where good deaths are memorialized. For the latter often means giving it no place at all.

Salvation for the grievous dead, in Vietnamese worldview, means not only rescuing them from the undifferentiated space they are imagined to inhabit but also from the most placelike of all places — the prison — where they are incarcerated. The Vietnamese history of tragic mass death carries with it the radically opposite imagery of disturbing liberty and painful captivity. Therefore, to do justice to this history — the emancipating act of *giai oan* — involves both giving freedom and removing coerced freedom. It is a challenge to understand these two logically opposite acts as a unitary deed, but this is probably a small challenge compared to the challenge of actually creating a place that can promote belonging and freedom at once — that is, a “place of openness” and a “place movement is intrinsic to.”<sup>76</sup> If memory requires cultural vehicles and concrete places in order to be expressed, remembering tragic mass death, in Ha My and

My Lai, happens to require giving it a place but also the freedom to move between places.<sup>77</sup>

If there is no place at all to locate the memory of tragic death in the ideological world, the memory can rest in the movement of the remembering body before this work of the body can change the world. The rest of this book focuses on showing how a simple movement of the human body—in facing opposite directions in turn—can militate against the politics of symbolic conquest and rescue the massive history of “bad death” from the state of coerced oblivion. And the “ambidextrous” human body has far-reaching implications for undoing the Cold War’s bifurcation of left and right, which is in fact the origin of the tragedy in Ha My and My Lai.