

Worshipping ancestors in a peri-urban context

Beyond the visible development of its built environment, it is enlightening to read the current socio-spatial evolutions of a place through the lens of domestic and cultural urban practices. For example, the way in which different categories of urban dwellers organise their ancestor worship is a revealing object of study, standing at the crossroads between geographical and anthropological approaches. This perspective offers an intimate understanding of the ways in which urban dwellers – in their growing diversity – negotiate urban mutations on a daily and private basis. Focusing on ancestor worship is also an enlightening way to appreciate the settlement of new populations in the area, both in its reality and symbolically, as both the living and the dead migrate in the process.

Ngô Thị Thu Trang

A heterogeneous district in the making

Bình Tân district is one of the areas that best illustrate the steady pace of urban development and the polymorphous mutations of Ho Chi Minh City today. Still classified as a rural district (*huyện*) until the year 2003, Bình Tân is now the most recent urban district (*quận*) of the Southern Vietnamese metropolis. The area is a strategic gateway between HCMC and the Mekong delta region. Its location is embodied by the presence of major infrastructures such as highways and transportation nodes – in particular *bến xe miền tây*, one of the most important metropolitan bus stations – and rapid industrial development over the last ten years. This urban context involves high migration rates and radical mutations of the district's spatial organisation. The population of Bình Tân district increased by 60% between 2004 and 2012 (today reaching about 630,000 inhabitants), and about 50% of the population growth is linked to rural migrations, mainly from the Southern Vietnamese provinces.¹

Once mainly inhabited by rural families who owned typical low-rise detached houses with small gardens (*nhà vườn*), Bình Tân district today welcomes numerous new housing developments, mainly dedicated to the urban middleclass. Furthermore, the growing industrial zones of the area attract many migrant workers, on a more temporary basis. These dwellers often stay in collective dormitories or rent individual rooms within existing homes. Thus, this migratory trend leads to social stratification and spatial reorganisation in the district. The current inhabitants of a once quite homogenous rural district are becoming progressively more diverse, now experiencing varying attachments to the district. The original dwellers relate Bình Tân to the land of their family ancestors; new inhabitants tend to consider the place as a recent fruitful investment; and migrant workers see this district as nothing more than a temporary and non-specific location. The appropriation of local space is thus quite different from one category of dwellers to another.

The evolution of the most fundamental ritual act in Vietnam²

Ancestor worship is considered to be “the most fundamental ritual act in Vietnam” and its practice transcends the different religious affiliations that exist in the country.³ This practice is not only a domestic ritual dedicated to the dead, but it is also a way to place every individual within a community, through the idea of lineage and kinship. This practice contributes to the production of strong social networks, by connecting places of birth and places of death. It honours not only the family ancestors on a regular basis, but it also stresses and reaffirms the family's links with the so-called ‘ancestor land’ (*quê nhà / đất hương hỏa*).⁴ With the recent urbanisation trend and intensification of migration, the production of such networks faces new challenges, but continues to adapt.

This worship works on different temporalities. On a daily basis, it consists of placing flowers, incense and fruit on the ancestors' altar. This small domestic altar is present in nearly every Vietnamese home. In addition to this daily practice, ancestor worshipping is put on stage on special dates, such as the first, second, fifth and tenth anniversary of a direct (patrilineal) ancestor's death (*ngày giỗ*). On these occasions, a bigger ceremony is organised, to which the family at large, and even neighbours, are invited. This time and money-consuming ceremony is an occasion for the family to reaffirm its anchorage within its neighbourhood and to show its wealth and its material success. Depending on the family religion, these two main temporalities of worship can be complemented by a third, which consists of celebrating the 1st and 15th day of each lunar month. This Buddhist practice is performed inside the house, around the ancestors' altar and does not involve neighbours.⁵

Dealing with ancestor worship in a peri-urban context

Ancestor worship tends to take less time and occupy less space in urban areas today, whatever the category of urban population is concerned. Even indigenous dwellers tend to worship their ancestors in a less conventional manner than before. The most obvious changes with regard to the death anniversaries include the following: the altar has become smaller and simpler, and its votive objects less precious, although its location is still carefully chosen according to *feng shui* (*Phong Thủy*) precepts; while historically celebrated by sons in the context of a patrilineal cultural context, these ceremonies are now equally performed by daughters and daughters-in-law; urban dwellers in Bình Tân district no longer feel it to be appropriate to invite neighbours to the ceremonies; and a lack of space in the urban context means that ceremonies are becoming increasingly modest, and more often than not are held indoors.

Mr. Long, an elderly original inhabitant of Bình Tân district, explained that he sticks to some traditional rules, but tries to adapt others: “Every year we have to organise the *ngày giỗ*, but the way we are doing it is partially disconnected from our previous countryside practices. Only few guests are invited. We maintain the worship just to make sure that our kids do not forget our custom within the family”. The *ngày giỗ* is still considered an occasion for a family gathering, where adults can teach children how to worship the ancestors, but it is less and less a broader social and neighbourhood event. Only close neighbours are invited, those who have been family friends for a long while. Mr. Long revealed that he would be reluctant to invite his new neighbours, those who recently moved to the area. The sense of collectiveness in an increasingly socially diverse area is challenged and thus gradually recomposed. The family cell has become the more appropriate unit with whom to perform worshipping rituals, reflecting the diminishing effect of the neighbourly community as a social and cultural structuring factor.

Not only the old, but also the new inhabitants and owners of Bình Tân's tube houses display a high degree of simplification in their worshipping practices, and most of the families never invite their neighbours. They wouldn't want to ‘bother’ them and think it inappropriate in an urban context. Mrs. Dau, a new dweller, of an advanced age: “I usually worship the anniversary of my husband's death and my parents-in-laws' anniversary. However, next year, I will organise these celebrations together on one single day and I am not sure I will invite a lot of people. My children are too busy to help, and so are my neighbours. Here it is not like in the countryside; if we do a celebration party, it will disturb the neighbours.” The organisation of a single worship day for all the family ancestors has become a matter of convenience and appropriate social behaviour in an urban context.

A lack of space in the urban context may also play a role in the simplification of the worshipping practices. Without gardens or courtyards, and legal permits required for making use of public spaces, death anniversary ceremonies are increasingly often kept indoors, and thus celebrated with a reduced number of guests.

Migrant workers, who have recently settled in Bình Tân, generally continue to participate in ceremonies held in their rural hometowns, where worshipping remains quite a traditional practice. For celebrations, notably death anniversaries, large numbers of kin including those living in town are invited, together with people from the neighbourhood. Mrs. Nga explained: “For every anniversary of one of my husband's ancestors, we travel back to his hometown. It is very tiring because it involves inviting our kin, and the neighbours also. We have to prepare the celebration a few days in advance. This means baking cakes, preparing the chicken and all the others dishes for the guests. Very demanding and tiring! Especially because we come from far away now ... it requires a great deal of organisation and leaving our workplace for a few days as well.” Despite her complaints, Mrs. Nga still cares a lot about the proper organisation of her family's ancestor worship and she explained that Bình Tân district is in no way her ‘heartland’; to worship her ancestors in HCMC would make no sense. Even though some migrants have now been settled in Bình Tân district for many years they still don't embody their ‘sense of belonging’ through a too meaningful ancestor worship.

As a result, peri-urban areas such as Bình Tân district can be seen as a laboratory of transitional practices in the Vietnamese urban context. Family celebrations are still organised, but in a simplified manner because of the practical lack of space in an urban environment, an overall decrease in the links between the place of abode and the so-called ancestor lands, and a diminishing significance of belonging to a neighbourhood in an urban context.

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References

- 1 Statistical Office of Bình Tân District, 2012.
- 2 Our study of the specific evolution of ancestor worshipping in a peri-urban area is based on a large survey conducted between 2011 and 2012 in Bình Tân district, consisting of around 45 in-depth interviews and 300 questionnaires. We mainly focused on death anniversaries (*ngày giỗ*), which have the strongest social significance. See Thu Trang Ngô Thị. 2014. “La modernité dans l'espace périurbain à Ho Chi Minh Ville. Cas d'étude: l'arrondissement Bình Tân”. PhD Thesis in Geography, University of Pau and Pays de l'Adour.
- 3 Jellema, K. 2007. “Everywhere Incense Burning: Remembering Ancestors in *Đổi Mới* Vietnam”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38(3):467-92.
- 4 Hardy, A. 2011. “Les dynamiques sociales des migrations vietnamiennes et le faux paradoxe du ‘pays natal’ (*quê hương*)”, BEFEO 97-98:151-186.
- 5 Jellema, K. 2007. “Returning Home: Ancestor Veneration and the Nationalism of *Đổi Mới* Vietnam”, in Philip Taylor (ed.) 2007. *Modernity and Re-enchantment: Religion in Post-revolutionary Vietnam*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Publishing.

Below:
Worshipping ancestors in the home of a new dweller in Bình Tân District (HCMC). Located on the third floor, the ancestors' room is dedicated to ceremonies, but is also used as a temporary storage room (courtesy of Clément Musil).

