Hue Re-examined
History, Memory, Heritage

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all my family and friends.
DECLARATION

I, Tôn Thất Quỳnh Du, declare that the thesis entitled *Huế, Re-examined – History, Memory, Heritage* is no more than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of references. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis re-examines the history and heritage of Huế, a city of special significance to the Vietnamese. For four centuries, Huế was at the heart of developments that shaped the course of Vietnam. In modern times, commencing with the French occupation of Vietnam in the mid-nineteenth century, and lasting until well after the end of the Vietnam wars, Huế’s position in the nation’s cultural agenda dimmed. And it gained international attention when UNESCO inscribed its complex of monuments on the World Heritage List in 1993. Despite its importance in Vietnamese history and heritage, political and scholarly literature tend to feature Huế’s past as irrelevant and inconsequential.

This thesis revisits the history of Huế to demonstrate that this locality has a long and dynamic history of self-assertion and reinvention. As the imperial center of Vietnam, Huế created and left an enduring political and cultural heritage. Even the decline of monarchy rule, in turn, left a legacy that facilitated the radicalization of a generation of Vietnamese leaders who dominated modern Vietnamese political life. During the turbulent years of the Vietnam War, the war’s ideological fault-lines found expression in the city and the resulting violence had its agency in the people of Huế as much as in outside forces. Huế was not only the political centre but also embodies spiritual heritage. The complex of monuments built by the Nguyễn kings has been of great spiritual significance until today and it reveals the enduring power of Huế’s heritage. The re-examination appraisal of Huế’s history and cultural legacy is essential in order to achieve a balanced and nuanced understanding of Huế’s significance in modern Vietnamese history, and of its war legacy.
INTRODUCTION

My thesis focuses on Huế, a city of special significance to the Vietnamese. For four centuries it was at the heart of developments that shaped the course of Vietnam. Huế was the capital city for the southern half of Vietnam under the Nguyễn Lords (1558-1777), and the Imperial capital of the entire kingdom during the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1945). During the Vietnam War (1954-1975), it was the epicenter of the Buddhist crisis which destabilized South Vietnam, and where grim battles took place during the Tet Offensive of 1968, the most destructive and psychologically important battle of the Vietnam War. After the end of the war, Huế’s position in the nation’s cultural agenda dimmed, but it regained international attention when UNESCO inscribed its complex of monuments on the World Heritage List in 1993.

In political discourse and scholarly literature on Vietnam, Huế features in four broad themes: Huế as the former Imperial center; as a bastion of conservatism in colonial times when the country was undergoing a process of great change; as a site of destruction and suffering during the Vietnam War; and as present custodian of its imperial heritage. Each of these themes impacts on our understanding of Huế’s heritage from a different angle: what Huế’s heritage represents, what came out of the changes that brought about Huế’s heritage, how that process of change has influenced our view on Huế’s heritage, and what explains the continuing relevance of Huế’s heritage in contemporary Vietnam.

With respect to the first theme, since the French occupied Vietnam in the mid nineteenth century, much Vietnamese writing about Huế has focused on the decline
and failure of the former imperial center rather than its rise and achievements. What comes in for great scrutiny in the writings of twentieth century Vietnamese nationalists, progressive reformists and socialist radicals is how the Huế-based court failed to respond to foreign aggression, precipitating the loss of Vietnam’s sovereignty and the end of imperial rule.¹ Beginning with Orientalist and Social Darwinist-inspired depictions of a civilization in decline, and continuing into Vietnamese Marxist criticisms of its feudal obsolescence, Huế is portrayed as weak, insular, and impotent. The prevailing tone towards the former capital in these writings is judgmental, and in sympathy with the political orthodoxy at the time.² However, more recently an alternative approach has emerged that emphasizes Huế’s role in Vietnam’s southward expansion, its military strength, social organisation, and political legacy. First advanced by southern-based Vietnamese scholars, this perspective on Huế as a dynamic centre has become increasingly prominent in foreign scholarship although it is far from being fully accepted as historical orthodoxy within Vietnam.³

During the colonial period the political landscape of Vietnam changed greatly as a generation of Vietnamese was radicalised and propelled into leadership of the nation.


Hanoi and Saigon often have been regarded as the crucibles for radicalisation, due to the emergence in these two colonial metropoles of new social classes, linkages and ideas.  

Huế, on the other hand, has been portrayed as the capital of feudalism and symbol of a compact between an effete royalty and colonialism, a representation of what the anti-feudal and anti-colonial project of the radicals struggled against. These influential constructions combine to provide a grand narrative which ignores the crucial role played by Huế as a node where revolutionaries were radicalised, where ideas were transmitted through scholars and schools with links to Huế’s imperial identity and past. Without investigating this context, one cannot fully understand how the revolutionary movement emerged out of the pre-existing socio-political context, how revolutionaries absorbed their ideas and developed bonds between themselves.

The third theme covers the Buddhist protests in the 1960s, which grew into a complex and formidable movement of dissent, and the terrible battles of the Tet Offensive of 1968. The prime interests of scholars are military and political in nature, with a great deal of analysis devoted to internal political intrigues of South Vietnam, strategic and tactical manoeuvres, political impact on American perception of and support for the war. Existing literature paints a picture of Huế as a victim of Ngô Đình Diệm era.

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suppression, and of the Tet Offensive massacre and post-war oppression by Hanoi; in short, as a casualty of history, victim of outsiders, devastated by powers far greater than itself. But Huế people were active participants, and provided leadership in these powerful assertive movements. They exerted agency in the process. They had their reasons, articulated through the leading cultural icons of the movement such as the songwriter Trịnh Công Sơn. Investigating the role played by the movement’s principal leaders, and the cultural landscape shaping it, would give voice to the local participants and rescue it from a victim narrative. By the same token, without elucidating the nature and genesis of the legacy of this turbulent period, its linkage to the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, discourse on Huế’s will remain incomplete, partially buried beneath layers of convenient reluctance and official whitewash.

In the fourth theme, the focus is on the paradox of a modern socialist government, antagonistic towards the nation’s “feudal” past, being the custodian of its imperial heritage. The World Heritage listing itself did not challenge the core perception of Huế’s imperial heritage as the faded glory of the defunct, but leans towards that very view. UNESCO’s International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)


recommended its inscription on the World Heritage List, for being an ‘outstanding demonstration of the power of the vanished Vietnamese feudal empire at its apogee in the early 19th century’. The two key semantic components, ‘feudal’ and ‘vanished’, fit snugly with the view endorsed by the state party to the World Heritage listing, the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. But in the context of pre-modern Vietnam, the label feudal, derived from Marxist historiography, has been thoroughly challenged by the preeminent historian Alexander Woodside. And ‘vanished’ suggests a sense of extinction, a total severance, a denial of continuing relevance, despite the short temporal distance and demonstrable links between Huế’s past as a centre of Vietnamese imperial power and the present. In practical terms, however, the World Heritage listing stimulated international interest in Huế’s imperial heritage, and provided the impetus for the restoration of its cultural assets. Most of the scholarly works in this theme frame the revival of Huế’s heritage in terms of factors that are external to Huế’s heritage innate values: international support and economic imperatives. Missing from the narrative is an analysis of how Huế’s heritage has maintained its appeal in contemporary Vietnam, its intrinsic values, and its spiritual potency that provides a connection to the past and sustains a sense of common identity in the people.

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1. Aim

My thesis re-examines Huế's place in contemporary political discourse, addressing deficiencies in scholarly literature on Vietnam along the major themes identified above. First, it challenges the characterisation of Huế's imperial past as that of a weak and impotent imperial centre. Second, it draws Huế into the picture of Vietnamese radicalisation to supplement existing literature which so far completely ignores Huế's critical roles and regards Huế as a symbol of a compact between colonial interests and an insular royalty. Third, it re-investigates the deaths and destruction wreaked on Huế during the Vietnam War and locates agency with Huế's participants, thus debunking the victim narrative that has dominated our understanding of that period of Huế's history. Fourth, it studies the spiritual significance of three World Heritage Listed monuments to provide an explanation of their enduring appeal.

The overall aim is to enable a fuller understanding of Huế's past, from which a more nuanced reading can be achieved on its war legacy and its imperial heritage.

2. Conceptual discussion

My thesis will examine the connection between heritage and history, and explore the nexus between heritage, society and national politics, placing heritage within the broader canvas of memory as a contested, shifting, but socially mediated frame that helps interpret a common past, which in turn informs and sustains the society. To cover the terrain outlined above, my thesis will encounter a number of conceptual issues, canvassed below and resonating throughout the thesis body.
History, politics, heritage

In common usage of contemporary English, the term heritage is semantically unproblematic at the first glance; everybody knows, and nearly everybody agrees on what it means. Heritage is what one inherits. At the personal level, heritage is identity and origin rolled into one, one's origin an anchor for one's identity to root in, without which one's own sense of self may be swarmed by the others, a concern very much associated with modernity. At the other end of scale, at global level, say within the context of the UNESCO's World Heritage Convention, heritage carries a certain meaning in the tightly defined guidelines provided by the bodies of experts that advise UNESCO on what kinds of heritage should be inscribed on the World Heritage List. Somewhere in between, in academia, heritage is a term that increasingly finds its way into conversations across a number of disciplines such as history, geography and archaeology.

Whereas scholars in these fields can talk with confidence about a theory in their own field, the shape of a theory of heritage is still not so clear. Instead, heritage tends to be viewed in contrast to something else, such as history, archaeology or geography. Hence the titles of four prominent books in which heritage is discussed extensively: 'Archaeological Theory and the Politics of Heritage' by Laurajane Smith – note that archaeology is underpinned by theory, heritage by politics; 'The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History' by David Lowenthal – note that while history is already well established at the banquet table, heritage is still waging a crusade; Brian Graham's 'A Geography of Heritage. Power, Culture and Economy' – heritage is
sprouting up everywhere, across all cultures, borders and languages, thus raising the central concern of the fourth book; 'Heritage and Identity' by Brian Graham and Peter Howard: at the core of the myriad ways heritage is perceived lies the notion of identity.

Laurajane Smith characterises heritage as politics of identity, and it is true that heritage can drive politics in a wider sense. David Lowenthal has pointed to several examples of how heritage helped forge a sense of national identity which then drove national politics of several European nations. In the Australian context, heritage has also served as the mechanism to empower the voice of indigenous people of Australia for their heritage to be treated differently which led to archaeology, a well-established discipline, to reconsider the way it sees itself in its theory. Graham and Howard, on the other hand, see heritage as knowledge, negotiated and set within specific social and intellectual circumstances, giving rise to a complex and evolving multiplicity of heritage perceptions necessitating the need for an inclusive interdisciplinary approach.

The conversation between heritage practitioners and historians has been loud at times, often revolving around the question of how the state views and uses heritage. David Lowenthal, for example, accuses heritage of a plethora of sins, including that heritage goes hand in hand with extreme nationalism, 'bellicose xenophobia is a heritage


But the most serious charge he makes is that whereas historians strive for historical truths, heritage practitioners tolerate, make use of historical untruths, and even create them for other purposes, 'History is the past that actually happened, heritage a partisan perversion, the past manipulated for some present aim.' Brian Graham et. al. also discuss state roles in uses of heritage in similarly vigorous terms but in wider contexts, including economy, tourism and sustainable development. Truth, history, politics and heritage make good conversations on matters related to the past and memories of the past. Dragged into these conversations are a number of important key concepts of the past, memories, management of memories, and the politics of commemorations and of obliterations.

Heritage interacts with history in ways that are fundamental. Heritage is what one inherits, but one must have inherited it from someone who had created it in the first place. Their identity can have a crucial impact on how that heritage is valued. Huế’s cultural heritage is associated with the Nguyễn dynasty, regarded by the present communist regime as feudalistic and reactionary, as the traitors that sold the nation into slavery to the French. In short, it is a bit like a legacy left by a well-known uncle who was regarded as a criminal by history books. When the monuments around Huế were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1993 for their outstanding universal heritage value, it was as if the same uncle has been awarded the Nobel Prize for his artistic output. In practical terms, the World Heritage listing offered the local community an opportunity to reap material benefits from the recognition of his

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legacy. At the same time, it opened up a space through which history’s judgment can be questioned and challenged. An expedient course of action that celebrates his legacy without disturbing history’s judgment would have to negotiate this delicate nexus between heritage and history. The resulting tensions between heritage values, politics and history can be acute, destructive, and run deeper than what David Lowenthal’s dismissive remark suggests – that winners get to write history, losers have heritage.\(^{18}\)

My thesis adopts a reflexive approach to heritage interpretation. At the societal levels, it sees heritage as a dynamic construct, an active rather than a passive model for heritage interpretation. It accepts Stuart Hall’s view that heritage is a discursive practice, in which societies weave their high points of achievements into a shared national story.\(^{19}\) This approach allows for a multiple viewpoints: heritage meanings can be varied and re-read in new contexts. My thesis takes this approach a little further, arguing that heritage meanings can be revealed in an investigation of how society makes use of heritage, how heritage responds to changing societal needs, and how it appeals to people at the private personal levels.

In the Preface to Karl Mannheim’s classic *Ideology and Utopia*, the sociologist Louis Wirth noted that ‘a society is possible in the final analysis only because the individuals in it carry around in their heads some sort of picture of that society, and of their role in it’.\(^{20}\) What that picture of the society ought to be may be driven by the agenda of state, negotiated through political consensus, or fought over in conflicts, but

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is often underpinned by a sense of sharing a common past. In this sense, heritage can play a central and crucial role in the construction of the symbolic domains at the very heart of social life of a community living in the present by providing symbolic links to certain eras of the past.\textsuperscript{21}

In the case of Vietnam, the conflicts in the early decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century were contests over what that picture of the society ought to be.\textsuperscript{22} The intensity with which Vietnamese intellectuals fought over the representation of Vietnamese society in the literature of the 1930s and 1940s demonstrated the deep fissures that existed between Vietnamese of different ideas. As polemics turned into politics, then war, the original fault-lines over ideas shaped the contours of the trenches of the participants in the ensuing war. In the early years after the war ended, ideological perspectives of the victorious side shaped the post-war cultural agenda of the nation, both its forward vision and its retrospective assessment. It was this retrospective assessment that provided the frame within with Huế’s heritage was seen, leading to its neglect.

The World Heritage listing itself did not challenge the core of this assessment. Nevertheless, it helped to renew interest in a heritage that had been neglected as a politically inconvenient legacy, and in the process transformed the way Huế’s heritage is presented, accommodated by some changes in the nationalist discourse.\textsuperscript{23}

At the personal level, heritage is something one was born with, or born into. For many

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Vietnamese it goes directly to the core of their identity. Vietnamese biographies usually begin with where and when the person was born and into what kind of family, framing identity of the person within a larger canvas of familial legacy. Prestige and legitimacy of the person are derived from notable high points in the family history, often associated with an official position of note – a mandarin in the family tree, or I should say, a mandarin in the ancestry.

While the sense of belonging to one’s familial roots is universal, it is accentuated and reinforced by the practice of ancestor veneration, which requires regular rites to honour the ancestors, and maintenance of the heritage of the family. Especially in Huế, not only the ancestral tombs are regularly attended to, but in some families such as mine, also the family’s own place of ancestor worship, called Phú or tứ đ榈. Usually former residences of an aristocratic ancestor, these Phú serve as focal points for networks of familial, social and spiritual needs. They form a network of varied architectures that provides the texture and the background upon which the World Heritage listed monuments stand, without which the larger monuments would seem out of place.

But it is in some of the World Heritage listed monuments that we can discern the essence of the spiritual life of the Nguyễn dynasty. The royal burial complexes bear testimony to the person of the kings, and reflect an essential element of ancestor veneration. The ancestral temples inside the Imperial City are chiefly the sites of familial worship, used exclusively by members of the royal families to connect with their ancestors on occasions of importance to the family and the state. The Đàn Nam Giao, where the Nguyễn kings used to conduct yearly sacrificial rites to pray for the
nation's well-being, was in essence a site that connected the king to an array of cosmological spirits. Together, these monuments and their associated ritual practices provide a composite insight into the spiritual life of Huế at different levels, cosmos, state, family and the person.

3. Thesis structure in detail

My thesis sets out in a broadly chronological order and ends with a discursive chapter.

Chapter One, *The Rise and Fall of Huế as the Imperial Center*, provides a Huế centric narrative of its past, from the time this area became a part of Vietnam’s territory to the end of the Nguyệ̃n Dynasty. This chapter takes issue with the still-prevalent depiction of this pre-colonial political centre as stagnant, impotent or in decline. It supports the position that a new sense of identity emerged from Huế during the Nguyệ̃n Lords (1558-1778) in opposition from the traditional imperial center, Thăng Long. It charts the rise and fall of Huế as the Imperial center of the Nguyệ̃n dynasty (1802-1945) through the creation and degradation of its cultural expressions – the monuments built by the Nguyệ̃n kings.

Chapter Two, *Huế and the radicals*, aims to supplement existing accounts of twentieth century Vietnamese radicalisation which tend to marginalise Huế’s importance as a locus of radical political activity. It examines the role Huế played in the radicalisation of a generation of future leaders. By tracing personal elements in the lives of the young radicals, it points out that the experience, contact and friendships formed during their formative years in Huế were crucial to their political orientation.
and chosen paths. It argues that what made Hué a crucible for their radicalisation was a combination of a critical mass of influential thinkers, good educational institutions, and accessible cultural platforms, a legacy of having been the Imperial center of the nation.

Continuing on the same theme, the chapter goes on to study the Buddhist crisis and the student movement in the 1960s and views their radicalisation as part of a wider contestation of ideas. It shows a younger generation of Hué leading the charge in the cultural political front, then taking sides as the violence escalated and the choices narrowed. This reinforces the argument that the people of Hué acted with agency and in doing so debunks the myth of the victim narrative.

Chapter Three, Hué’s war legacy: Forgotten history, enduring memory, looks at the human cost of the upheavals that followed the actions of the younger generation of Hué’s radicals. It examines the psychic injuries sustained during the Buddhist crisis, worsened during the Tet Offensive, and remained largely unhealed after the war ended. It draws the link between the socio-political tensions in Hué of the sixties to the brutalities in the Tet Offensive, and their consequent simmering of tension, by examining the recollections of some leading figures at the time. It provides a personal recollection of the sea changes that have taken place to render in concrete detail the overall impact these violent convulsions have had on ordinary lives.

In giving a detailed account of these troubling events from the perspectives of Hué’s participants, this chapter brings out into open academic discourse for the first time the complex links between belief and action, division and violence. Academic discussion
on the violence inflicted on Huế’s civilian population during the Tet Offensive has been woefully scant, comprising an extremely polemical exchange between Douglas Pike’s accusation that these deaths were the result of planned, co-ordinated, and politically motivated action by the communist forces, and a strong rebuttal of Pike’s claim by D. Gareth Porter that Pike’s account was the propaganda work of U.S. Information Services, and seriously questioning the accuracy of Pike’s account. This subject has continued to occupy a great deal of heart space of the Vietnamese diaspora and regularly flares up in bitter contestations over the responsibility for these deaths. The government of Vietnam, however, has maintained a strict wall of silence over the subject. This chapter discusses this painful legacy not from a political standpoint, but from that of agency and legacy.

Chapter Four, *Spiritual Huế, through its monuments*, seeks answers as to what elements of Huế’s heritage can help hold society together, given the rending of its social fabric described in the previous chapters. It pursues two avenues of inquiries, the public, social and the private personal. It looks at the way Huế’s heritage, through sacred rituals, played a key role in conferring political legitimacy on Huế’s Imperial government. It notes that in modern times the connection between Huế’s heritage and the needs of the society remains, even though the socio-political imperatives of the society have changed greatly. It looks at the way certain aspects of the past have been co-opted to serve society’s needs, and frames the heritage values of Huế within the cultural settings of the post-1975 period. It studies three monuments of great significance – the burial complex of king Tự Đức, the ancestral temple Thế Tổ Miếu, and the Đàn Nam Giao. Together, they provide a composite picture of the spiritual

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Huế the core of which is deeply embedded in the ancestor veneration belief system. This chapter argues that this spiritual value, that shares a common well-spring with the practice of ancestor veneration, is what gives Huế’s heritage its enduring relevance to contemporary society.

The final chapter, Conclusion, draws on the material presented in the thesis body to point out that in the case of Vietnam, heritage, history and politics have always closely intertwined, but for differing reasons in Imperial time, in times of war and of peace. In relation to Huế’s cultural heritage, it argues that the utilitarian use of Huế’s heritage has shifted with the changing politico-economic needs of society, with the legacy of the more troubling times in the 1960s being glossed over – Huế’s new inconvenient legacy. In relation to the monuments left by the Nguyễn, it argues that their enduring heritage values lie in what they represent – a link and reminder to the customs and practices of a dynamic imperial centre, the emergence of which signified a new sense of identity, and their spiritual significance which continues to be of relevance to contemporary society.

4. Notes on sources used

The sources used for this thesis are predominantly in Vietnamese. For the period of the Nguyễn dynasty, I primarily relied on two sets of official records of the Nguyễn dynasty, the Đại Nam Thục Lục [Veritable Records of Đại Nam] and the Khâm Định Đại Nam Hội Diện St Lê [The Imperially Ordered Compendium of Protocols and Precedents of Đại Nam].
The *Dai Nam Thục Luc* is the largest and most important official historical record of the Nguyễn dynasty, compiled by the Office of National History. It took 88 years to complete, starting in 1821, with the final volumes completed in 1909. It consists of two parts, the *Dai Nam Thục Luc Tiên Biên* covering the Nguyễn lords, and the *Dai Nam Thục Luc Chinh Biên*, covering the Nguyễn Kings, from Gia Long to Đồng Khánh. As such, the *Dai Nam Thục Luc* ‘is the true historical records of the entire Vietnamese history in the nineteenth century under the rule of the Nguyễn dynasty, as well as over two hundred years of the history of the Dàng Trong of the Nguyễn lords’.

The *T iên Biên* section is much less voluminous compared to the *Chính Biên*, which runs to almost fourteen thousand pages, divided into periods corresponding to the reign of each successive king. Its translation into Vietnamese took a long time; the first volume being published by the History Institute in 1962 and the final volume in 1978. The translation project outlived most of the original translators, and its official publisher. Some volumes have since been republished by other publishers in Vietnam in the early years of the 2000s.

Written in a formal style, each period of *Dai Nam Thục Luc* begins with the royal decree that commissioned its writing, followed by the progress report submitted to the King by the mandarins in charge at its completion, noting the primary sources used, and the conventions followed, usually to do with dates, names and dynastic names. Although the time lag between the compilation of *Dai Nam Thục Luc* and the events it covers is great, the primary sources used for its compilation are contemporaneous,

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25 *Dai Nam Thục Luc Tiên Biên*, (hereafter DNTL Tiên Biên) (2004), Volume One, History Institute, Social Science Academy, Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục, p. 5.
especially for the relatively peaceful times of the Nguyễn Kings, covered by the *Chinh Biên*. The compilation of the *Tiên Biên* section, however, was much more complicated due to the losses of official records due to the turbulent years after the defeat of the Nguyễn by the Tây Sơn uprising.

The *Dai Nam Thục Lục* has been used by historians such as Keith Taylor and Li Tana, and numerous Vietnamese researchers. It contains reports from provincial mandarins, discussions held at the royal court, the decrees issued by the kings, covering administrative system, the economy, and also offers glimpses of other aspects of court life at the time.26

The *Khâm Định Đại Nam Hội Diện Sư Lệ* [The Imperially Ordered Compendium of the Protocol and Antecedents of Đại Nam] is just as voluminous. The main section, spanning the period from 1802 to 1851, translated into Vietnamese and published in 1993, runs to over five thousand pages. The continuing section, covering the period after 1851, is currently being translated into Vietnamese and progressively published.

Compiled by the Office of the Cabinet, the *Khâm Định Đại Nam Hội Diện Sư Lệ* provides a richly detailed record of the workings of the entire administrative system of the Nguyễn court. Of direct relevance to my thesis are the two volumes Six and Seven, covering the Ministry of Rites – *Bộ Lễ*. As it turned out, the Ministry of Rites

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26 The *DNTL* sheds light on many important aspects of social organisation, such as how the dyke system along the Red river was overhauled during the Minh Mạng reign, and how the central government regulated the price of rice in the provinces to prevent undue hardship induced by fluctuating prices. It also reveals other aspects of ordinary life of the court: in 1922 king Minh Mạng issued a paper notebook made in France to each of his senior mandarin to use it to note down his instructions instead of writing them on the inside of their mandarin robes; and identifies Tôn Thất Huy as the reputed person who designed the monochord Đàn Bầu, the musical instrument with one string, most commonly used in the music of southern Vietnam.
was in fact more like a super Ministry which oversaw not only matters of spiritual, cultural import, but also education, training, foreign relations. The information contained in these two volumes on the operation of the Ministry of Rites has been of essential value to my research on the spiritual life of the Nguyễn dynasty.

For the more recent periods of Huế of the twentieth century, I am fortunate that by the time my research began, biographical materials on some key participants had become available, not only in the form of standard biographies or memoirs, but also in personal recollections published in newspapers and magazines, especially those appearing in Sông Hương, the well-respected quarterly literary magazine of Thừa Thiên – Huế. On my trips to Vietnam in 1991, 1995, 1998-99, and 2001, especially for the four month Asialink literature residency in 1998-99, I was able to collect copies of Sông Hương published in the mid nineteen eighties and early nineties, a period of relative relaxed press control, including commemorative issues which contained many personal recollections of political activists of Huế during the sixties. I was also able to collect magazines published in the South in the sixties, such as Văn and Bách Khoa, creative outlets and forums for leading intellectuals of South Vietnam to express their views. Altogether these auto-biographical writings provide the means to reconstruct the role the people of Huế played in the period and shed light on their motivation and belief.

Thanks to a vibrant publishing scene in the Vietnamese diaspora, I have been able to access memoirs written by former senior political and military figures of South Vietnam who played important roles in the suppression of the Buddhist protest and

27 These publications have remained on the banned list in Vietnam since 1975.
the Tranh Đâu [Struggle] movement in Huế in the mid-sixties. Many of these memoirs suffer from personal biases and a preoccupation with justifying or embellishing their author’s role in the war. Similar shortcomings are found in recollections penned by those on the other side, with a bias towards highlighting their contribution to the cause, and a tendency to remain silent on their role in the more ignoble actions. Former leaders of the Tranh Đâu movement who joined the communist side in 1966 and returned in 1968 during the Tet Offensive with the communist troops remain silent of their roles in the fateful days when the city was under the control of the communist forces. After the city was retaken by the South Vietnamese and Allied forces, mass graves were discovered, inside the city and along the retreating route of the communist forces, containing the bodies of civilians and soldiers of South Vietnamese army captured by the communist forces during their 25 days of occupation. Nevertheless, these auto-biographical writings provide first-hand recollections of events by the persons concerned. In using these sources, I have been mindful of the need to treat them with some caution.

In addition, there exists a sizeable corpus of literature written by authors of Huế, set in the sixties and framed by the war. Together with other contemporary forms of artistic expressions such as song lyrics, they provide a sense for an understanding of the cultural texture of the time. The works of the poet and writer Nhã Ca, the writer Hoàng Phú Ngọc Trường, and the song writer Trịnh Công Sơn form the main ridges of that texture. For this thesis, I have translated a substantial part of their highly literary works, making them available in English for the first time.

28 With the exception of Nguyễn Dác Xuân, former leaders of the Struggle movement who tied to the communist side in the crackdown of 1966 and returned in 1968 during the Tet Offensive with the communist troops have largely remained silent of their roles in those fateful 25 days.
In dealing with the period of time when I actually lived in Huế, I also draw on my memory and on my mother’s memoirs. Published posthumously in 2011, her memoir is most remarkable for the way it captured daily events, big and small, with sharp and lively details.
CHAPTER ONE

The rise and fall of Huế as an imperial center

As foreshadowed in the Introduction, this chapter provides a Huế-centric narrative of its past, from the early Vietnamese settlement in the area to the official end of the Nguyễn Dynasty in 1945. This chapter takes issues with the dominant views of Huế as an impotent and culturally regressive imperial centre and the concomitant view of the heritage of Huế as representation of a feudal empire that no longer has relevance to contemporary discourse, except for its failures and faults. It responds to this overwhelming imbalance by focussing on Huế’s role in creating a new political and cultural reality in the south. It counters the dominant characterisation of Huế’s heritage by providing a study of the construction of the imperial city to show that these monuments represent the essence of the tradition and customs at the time.

This chapter is organised in three sections. First, setting out Huế in context: its geography, landscape, cultural influences, and early history developments. It covers the period of the Nguyễn Lords (1558-1778) who established their base in this region, fought the Trịnh Lords who ruled the north, and at the same time extended their territory southward reaching the Mekong delta. During this period, Huế became an important cultural and political centre that rivalled the capital Thăng Long in the north. In this section, the split between the Nguyễn in the south and the Trịnh in the north is presented as a development far more fundamental than simply a fracture between the two powerful families. Instead, it argues that the move south by Nguyễn Hoàng in 1558 culminated in the emergence of Huế as a dynamic centre in control of its own destiny, underpinned by a new sense of identity.
Second, providing a summary of the construction of the imperial capital during the first four Nguyễn kings, Gia Long (1802-1819), Minh Mạng (1820-1841), Thiệu Trị (1841-1847) and Tự Đức (1847-1884). The focus is on the key monuments that formed the complex, later inscribed on the World Heritage List: the Citadel which housed the administrative organs of the imperial government, the Imperial City within it, and the royal burial complexes situated along the Hương river, to the west of the city. In this section, these monuments are presented as an architectural, artistic, and spiritual expression of this new imperial centre; their design reflecting the essence of the philosophical and cultural ideals of the time.

Third, linking the key turning points in the history of the imperial centre to the destruction and desecration of its heritage, identifying the events that inflicted the most serious damage to the city: the 1885 French assault on the city, the 1945-46 occupation by the Viet Minh and the scorched earth tactics employed in their retreat. An account of the damage to the city in the Tet Offensive of 1968 is provided in Chapter Three.

1. The rise of Huế as an imperial center

a. Early Vietnamese settlement around Huế

The city of Huế is situated in the Thừa Thiên – Huế province of the central region of Vietnam, in a narrow strip of land hemmed in by the rugged Trường Sơn mountain range to the West and the South. To the north lies the province Quảng Trị, to the
south lies the Hải Vân pass ‘winding like a dragon coiling itself around the slopes of
the interconnecting mountains to provide a link to Quang Nam province.’29 The
author Nguyễn Hữu Thông describes the natural settings of the areas around Huế in
the following terms, quoted at length for the evocative style, its beautiful and vivid
descriptions as well as its content.

The Trường Sơn Mountain range, Huế’s point of reference, spreads gently
westward and plateaus to form the relatively flat highland of Tahoi in Laos,
but the Eastern side drops precipitously, forming a wall of richly varied
sceneries with sheer cliffs and steep slopes reminiscent of ink brush paintings,
creating a climate that is at once ‘difficult’ and ‘character building’. The
Eastern slopes contrive with the gathering rains to form the many streams and
rivers cutting through the landscape. To the East, the lagoons and estuaries
form the meeting points of all the rivers of Thừa Thiên – Huế. Lagoons and
estuaries form a unique aspect of nature, a place where all the rivers of Huế
meet. From their source in the Trường Sơn range, each river contributes in its
own way to the natural landscape of Huế, and then joining together here in a
massive re-union, before blending into nature’s homogenising landscape. […]
Nature has given Huế the gentle, clear water, Hương river. Recognising this,
the people of Huế have breathed human life into the river’s course. Many
architecturally beautiful buildings have been constructed along its banks. The
river lends itself naturally to defence, transportation, and irrigation for farming
communities. It provides living space for its water-born residents, a meeting
point for writers, poets and creative artists, a place for young men to display

29 Nguyễn Hữu Thông (1992), Mỹ Thuật Triều Nguyễn Trên Đất Huế [Fine Arts of the Nguyen
Dynasty in Huế], Huế: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, p 14. All translations in this thesis are mine, unless
indicated otherwise.
their strength and skills during festive times, and a sparkling foundation for those wonderful lantern floating nights.\textsuperscript{30}

The same author notes also, soberly, that this area is one that is 'without much promise for agriculture, without a concentration of major industries, and without the hustle and bustle of modern commerce'.\textsuperscript{31}

Hué’s geographical location has been an important factor in shaping its cultural heritage. The area that is now Thừa Thiên-Huế lies within the cultural influences of the indigenous Sa Huỳnh civilization;\textsuperscript{32} and, as the northern-most area of the later Champa kingdom, it marks the point of the uppermost reach of direct influences of Indian culture.\textsuperscript{33} Further to its north, over the Ngang Pass and across the Gianh river, lies the southern-most edge of the indigenous Đồng Sơn civilization.

With the destruction of the Âu Lạc kingdom by Chinese forces in early 2\textsuperscript{nd} century BC, the territory covering the Red River delta was annexed into the Chinese empire, directly administered by China as its colony. In the process of colonization that followed, ‘the fate of the brilliant prehistoric Đồng Sơn civilization in Vietnam was sealed in a peculiarly brutal and tragic manner. [T]he new conquest was transformed in the space of a few centuries into a very different region that remained in political

\textsuperscript{30} Nguyễn Hữu Thông (1992), ibid. pp. 15-17

\textsuperscript{31} Nguyễn Hữu Thông (1992), ibid. p. 13

\textsuperscript{32} Nguyễn Hữu Thông cites the findings of vestiges of Sa Huỳnh civilization in the areas of Cồn Rằng Hương Chữ by Vietnamese archeologists in the late 1980s and early 1990s to support this view. Nguyễn Hữu Thông, (1992), ibid. p. 21

subjugation for a thousand years. During this long period of Chinese rule, although
the Vietnamese fiercely resisted total assimilation, Chinese cultural values and
intellectual traditions permeated and became embraced by the Vietnamese, especially
by those in the upper strata of their society – the ruling class. After gaining its
political independence from China in 937, the kingdom of Đại Việt steadily expanded
its territorial control southwards, at the expense of its southern neighbors.

In 1306 the area around Huế became a part of Đại Việt kingdom, when King Chế
Mân (Jaya Sinhavarman III) of Champa married the Vietnamese princess Huyền Trân
and offered the two northern most counties Ô and Lý as a betrothal gift. Thus, as
observed by Nguyễn Hữu Thông, 'history has arranged for this narrow strip of land in
the Middle region [of Vietnam] to become a point of confluence of the two greatest
Eastern civilizations, those of India and China.'

Although the marriage was short (King Chế Mân fell ill and died) and ended bitterly,
the agreement was kept. The mandarin Doàn Nhữ Hai was dispatched to receive the
lands ceded by the Cham king. He renamed the Ô region Thuận and the Lý region
Hoa. From the fourteenth to the eighteenth century, the Thuận and Hoa areas were
combined into a single administrative unit under Đại Việt’s control, called Thuận
Hoa. Thuận Hoa extended from the Hiệu river in Quảng Trị to the districts south of
the Hải Vân Pass, present day Đà Nẵng. Some scholars have postulated that the name
Huế came from the Chinese character Hoa which can be pronounced as either Hòa or
Huế. However, others have questioned this line of etymological analysis, arguing

34 Maud Girard-Geslan et al., (1998) ibid. p. 311
35 Nguyễn Hữu Thông (1992), ibid. p. 20

26
that the name of Huế had existed independently from the name Thuận Hóa.⁷

Vietnamese history books tend to depict the extension of Đại Việt’s territory at the expense of the Champa as largely free of major trauma, constituting a narrative that masks over the voice of the conquered. The story of the princess has also found its expressions in Vietnamese folklore, literature, music and even inspired a rare example of xenophobia in children rhyme. ³⁸ In a version of popular folklore, the Princess, broken-hearted as she was deeply in love with a famous general of the Trần court, nevertheless accepted the marriage, putting the interests of the nation ahead of her own; her name a synonym of heroic self-sacrifice. For an extra wringing of the heart, the Trần general who was the subject of her love was given the task of leading the troops escorting her to Champa, and after King Chế Mân died, leading the raids to bring her back to save her from the Champa’s customs of burning all the King’s wives after his death.

The next few hundred years saw a steady increase in Vietnamese presence and influence in this area as newly arrived Vietnamese began to mix with the local Cham residents. After some 150 years, the militarily brilliant Trần dynasty of the Đại Việt went into decline and was supplanted by the reformist but brief Hồ Dynasty who succumbed to the Ming forces from China. After a short period of Chinese rule, Lê Lợi led Vietnamese forces to victory after a ten-year (1408-1418) resistance,

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Introduction to Vietnam and Hue, Huế : Hue University and Thế Giới Publisher, pp. 337-8.


³⁸ Tiếc thay cây quê giã rừng, đê cho thằng mần thằng mường nó leo.
   Pity the cinnamon tree in the jungle. There for the savages to climb over.
establishing a long lasting and culturally vibrant Lê dynasty to lead the Đại Việt kingdom. Towards the end of the 15th Century, the Lê dynasty went into decline mostly through internal rife within the royal court, leading to the usurper Mac Dang Dung crowning himself in 1527. The forces loyal to the Lê gathered together under the leadership of Nguyên Kim and fought against the Mac to restore the Lê. In 1545 Nguyên Kim led his forces towards Thăng Long, but was killed by a Mac supporter.

39 His son-in-law Trịnh Kiém took his place to lead the southern forces in what became known as the conflict between the Mac’s Northern Court (Bắc Triều) and the Lê-Trịnh’s Southern Court (Nam Triều).

After Trịnh Kiém assumed the power to lead the Southern Court, he killed Nguyên Kim’s oldest son, Nguyên Uông. Nguyên Kim’s younger son, Nguyên Hoàng, grew fearful for his life and sought counsel from the legendary Nguyên Bình Khíêm, who advised him ‘Hoành Sơn nhất đại, van đại dũng thần – A mountain range of Hoành Sơn, ten thousand generations of safe haven’. Nguyên Hoàng took the advice, applied for and was granted a position commanding the forces at the southern frontier, the Thuận Hóa area, beyond the Hoành Sơn mountain range. 40 There he began to lay the foundations for a separate sphere of influence of his own, while remaining notionally loyal to the Lê kings through the Trịnh lords. In 1558 Nguyên Hoàng chose Ai Tứ, in present day Quảng Trị, north of Huế, as the base for his forces. From then on, Nguyên Hoàng defied all odds and established a long period of semi-autonomy. 41

39 According to the Đại Nam Thúc Lục Tien Bien, Nguyên Kim was poisoned by a Mac commander who had pretended to switch sides. DNTL Tien Bien, p. 26
40 DNTL Tien Bien, pp. 27-28
41 DNTL Tien Bien, pp. 28-37; Li Tana (1998), Southern Vietnam in the 17th and 18th Centuries, SEAP, Ithaca : Cornell University, p. 11.
b. Huế and the Nguyễn lords – A new version of being Vietnamese

Stationed in the south in charge of the Thuận Hóa area, Nguyễn Hoàng continued to support the Lê-Trịnh’s forces against the Mạc. After almost 50 years of fighting between the Lê-Trịnh’s Southern Court and the Mạc’s Northern Court forces, which took place mostly in the north, and during which Nguyễn Hoàng sometimes fought alongside the Lê-Trịnh forces, the Mạc forces were defeated in 1592 and the Trịnh lord re-instated a Lê King in Thăng Long as a figurehead. Real power in the north remained in the hands of the Trịnh Lords. Remnants of the defeated Mạc’s forces fled to and retained control of several strongholds in outlying areas for a number of years.

In 1600 Nguyễn Hoàng, using a ruse, returned to his well-established south, and continued to pay taxes to the Lê-Trịnh court. But he refused to acknowledge the new king, Lê Kính Tông, and thus a new era of conflict began, the civil war Trịnh Nguyễn Phán Tranh between the Trịnh forces in the north, and the Nguyễn forces in the south. The break by Nguyễn Hoàng in 1600 marked a shift more fundamental than simply a fracture between two powerful families. The historian Keith Taylor noted that the tone and content of the letter from Trịnh Tùng to Nguyễn Hoàng, within one month of his departure, were similar to those delivered to the Vietnamese rulers by an angry Chinese emperor, an implicit acknowledgment that the recipient represented an entity that was distinct and capable of controlling their own affairs. A new version of being Vietnamese was emerging in the south in direct opposition to the traditional center of

42 For example, from 1592 to 1600 Nguyễn Hoàng was physically in Thăng Long commanding a part of Lê-Trịnh forces. DNTL Tiên Biên, pp. 33-34

43 Phan Khoang (1967), Xí Đặng Trong, 1558-1777. Cuộc Nam-tien Của Dân Tộc Việt Nam, [Dàng Trong, 1558-1777, Saigon: Khai Tri, pp. 149-150.

29
Conflict broke out into open warfare after Nguyễn Hoàng’s son, Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên, refused to pay taxes to the Trịnh court, accusing the Trịnh forces of ‘unprovoked military aggression’. For nearly fifty years, from 1627 to 1672, the Trịnh forces waged several campaigns to attack the Nguyễn forces, without a decisive victory to either side. The military stalemate resulted in the country being divided into two halves, with the Gianh River being the demarcation line. The Trịnh ruled the areas north of the Gianh river, called Dàng Ngoài – the Outer Region. The Nguyễn ruled the southern areas, called Dàng Trong – the Inner Region. This division lasted almost two centuries, from early 17th century to late 18th century.

During this long period of division, the Nguyễn Lords consolidated their military strength and expanded the territory under their control southward at the expense of the Champa and the Khmer, reaching the Mekong delta in late 17th century. While the process of Vietnamese southward expansion, Nam Tien in Vietnamese, had begun earlier, it was during the Nguyễn rule that the political and cultural landscapes of this area of Southeast Asia underwent fundamental changes. In essential agreement with Keith Taylor in this respect, Li Tana has noted that the move by Nguyễn Hoàng eventually brought Vietnam almost three-fifth of its present area and started a chain of events which changed the whole of Vietnamese history in particular and Southeast

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45 *DNTL Tiên Biên*, p. 40.

46 *DNTL Tiên Biên*, pp. 42-88. See also Li Tana (1998), *Southern Vietnam in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, Ithaca: SEAP, Cornell University, pp. 15-16.

Asia in general.\textsuperscript{48}

The southward expansion by the Vietnamese was a long drawn-out process, involving protracted contestations over the physical control of land. The resultant large scale migration brought fundamental changes in economic, social and cultural terms, and the development of a southern sense of an identity that was separate yet equal to that of the North. Thus from the seventeenth century onward, the Red River delta ceased to be the only centre of Vietnamese civilization. Another area, Thuận Hóa, emerged as its counterpoint. The new names given to these two regions, Dàng Trong for the southern region, and Dàng Ngoài the north, signified two different ways of being Vietnamese. The difference between the two terms indicated clearly that while the two regions were distinct, for southerners they were also equal.

Not only do these two terms Dàng Trong and Dàng Ngoài indicate distinction and equality, they also differ from the terms used to indicate opposing sides during the previous division, Bắc Triệu for the Mạc and Nam Triệu for the Lê-Trịnh, in one important way. The terms Bắc Triệu and Nam Triệu (Northern Court and Southern Court) refer to the seats of power, the royal courts, whereas Dàng Trong and Dàng Ngoài are far broader and more inclusive, suggesting that the difference between them ran much deeper than simple control of political and military power. Not only was Dàng Trong politically and militarily autonomous, it represented an emerging distinct identity, something that signified deeper cultural roots.

These two terms have been translated into English as The Inner Region (Dàng Trong)

\textsuperscript{48} Li Tana (1998), \textit{Southern Vietnam in the 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} Centuries}, Ithaca: SEAP, Cornell University, p. 11.
and The Outer Region (Đàng Ngoài). While the primary meaning of Trọng is inside, and ngoài outside, they are also words of direction. While in Huế, one would say Trọng Sài Gòn người ta giàu làm. – In Saigon people are so rich – but Ngoài Hà Nội người ta làm việc vất vả làm – In Hanoi people work so hard. The rule here is Trọng for a southern referent, ngoài for northern. The word Đàng is also a word of direction: Nó đi đâu nào? – Which way did he go?, Đàng kia – That way, Đàng này – This way. Thus the terms Đàng Trọng and Đàng Ngoài are primarily expressions of relative direction. If you are người Đàng Trọng, you are a person from the south, and người Đàng Ngoài are people from the north.

Also, in English, the terms inner and outer have resonances with the notions of center and periphery, whereas Đàng Trọng and Đàng Ngoài do not. The Nguyễn and the populace in frontier land would not have regarded themselves as at the center, but away from it. After all, seeking a safe haven away from the center – the Lê-Trịnh court in the north – was the main motive for Nguyễn Hoàng to move south, the periphery. In addition, both these expressions – Đàng Trọng and Đàng Ngoài – originated from the local vernacular, not the more sinicised higher register of Vietnamese, making them unlikely to have semantic connections to concepts of being at the center or at the periphery of power. Thus, Đàng Trọng and Đàng Ngoài must be seen in this context as political geographical references. Therefore, The Southern Region would be a better translation for Đàng Trọng, and The Northern Region for Đàng Ngoài.

Linguistics aspects aside, there are indications that the split was more significant than simply a fight for power that usually erupted at the end of a great dynasty. Keith
Taylor saw similarities in tone between the letter from Trịnh Tùng to Nguyễn Hoàng and those from Chinese emperors and Vietnamese kings. Li Tana saw some parallels between the formation of Dàng Trong and the defining time of Vietnamese history, when Đại Nam secured its independence from China, as ‘it involved the flourishing of a new state system and a new culture.’

The capital city, the centre of this new emerging identity of Dàng Trong, was moved several times. Nguyễn Hoàng first chose Ái Tử as the capital, then moved to Trà Bát, then Dinh Cát, all situated in what is now Quảng Trị province. In 1626, his son, Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên, moved the capital to Phước Yên, on the banks of the Bò river, a tributary of the Hương river, some nine kilometres north of the present Huế. In 1636, the third Nguyễn Lord, Nguyễn Phúc Lan moved the capital to Kim Long, a well-populated and thriving city on the banks of the Hương river, some two kilometres upstream from the present Huế. Kim Long remained the capital for the Dàng Trong for 51 years, serving two of the Nguyễn Lords, Nguyễn Phúc Lan and Nguyễn Phúc Tân. In 1687 the capital again was moved a short distance downstream to Phú Xuân, the site of present day Huế. Except for the 16 year period from 1712 to 1738, when the capital was moved to Bác Vọng, Phú Xuân (as the area of Huế was then called) remained the capital for the Nguyễn Lords until 1775.

The southern expansion continued under the Nguyễn lords, reaching the Mekong delta in mid 18th century. Its fast rate of growth strained the capacity of its

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administrative system, its newly gained economic resources tilted the centre of
gavity further south, and the control extended from distant Huế became more
tenuous. It was against this weakened state of the later Nguyễn lords, whose rule
collapsed largely due to internal court strife, that the Tây Sơn brothers Nguyễn Nhác,
Nguyễn Huệ, and Nguyễn Lữ led a rebellion from the Binh Đính area against the
Nguyễn forces. Nguyễn Huệ, a brilliant military commander, led the Tây Sơn forces
to defeat the Nguyễn in the south, conquered the Trịnh in the north, and installed a Lê
king on the throne. The disaffected Lê king, Lê Chiêu Thông, asked China for
assistance to remove Nguyễn Huệ, and Chinese forces arrived and occupied the north.
In 1789 Nguyễn Huệ proclaimed himself king Quang Trung in Phú Xuân (as Huế was
then called) and led a lightning attack that defeated the numerically superior Chinese
forces and united the nation of Vietnam. After king Quang Trung died in 1792, the
Tây Sơn court went into decline and was unable to hold off the challenge by Nguyễn
Phúc Ánh, the sole surviving nephew of the last Nguyễn lord, who re-built his forces
from the south and eventually united the country in 1802 and re-named it Việt Nam,
crowning himself king Gia Long, thus beginning the Nguyễn dynasty.

2. Consolidation of power and the construction of the Imperial Center

The Nguyễn dynasty lasted 143 years through 13 reigns, from king Gia Long [1802-
1819] to king Bảo Đại [1926-1945]. These included the first three kings, king Gia
Long, king Minh Mạng [1820-1841] and king Thiệu Trị [1841-1847], under whose
reigns Vietnam’s sovereignty remained intact; king Tự Đức [1847-1884], whose reign
witnessed the military defeats of the Vietnamese at the hands of the French, the

In Eighteenth-century Vietnam, Honolulu : University of Hawai’i Press.
decline of power and gradual loss of territorial control; and the last eight kings, Đức Đức, Hiệp Hòa, Kiên Phúc, Hấm Nghi [1884-1885], Đống Khánh [1885-1889], Thanh Thái [1889-1907], Duy Tân [1907-1916], Khải Định [1916-1925] and Bảo Đại [1925-1945], who were largely ineffective and powerless, some lasting just days, some removed from the throne by internal court politics, some by the French.

Construction projects creating and adding to the royal architecture of Huế were undertaken throughout the period. The design of the capital city of Huế was based on an Asian architectural style with Chinese influence, and on traditions that were particularly Vietnamese. On the north side of the Hương river lies the Citadel which used to house the most important organs of the Imperial government, but nowadays a mostly residential district. Also, during the period of French rule, from 1875 to 1945, a western quarter was built on the south side of the Hương river, on the opposite bank, facing the citadel across the river.

a. The Citadel

In 1803, King Gia Long himself, together with his senior mandarins, surveyed the area, selected the site for the capital city, drew up its plan, and decided the scale and method of construction. The walled citadel, constructed between 1805 and 1832, formed the frame for everything else.

It was located and laid out in accordance with geomancy principles, but its

construction followed modern concepts of military science guided the design of the famous French military engineer Vauban. The outer wall had 24 strong points and was surrounded by a moat. Sluice gates controlled the upstream and downstream ends of the canal system where it flowed out of and into the citadel. The entire citadel was almost square, with a perimeter of 11 kilometers and an area of 5.2 square kilometers. The outer wall was 21 meters thick and 6.6 metres high. Inside the citadel were buildings for various offices and the activities of the court, the Six Ministries [Lục Bố], the National History Institute [Quốc Sử Quán], the National School [Quốc Tử Giám], the Archive [Tàng Thọ Cắc], the Museum [Viện Bảo Tàng], the State Security Office [Cơ Mật Viên], the Office of the Imperial Household [Tôn Nhơn Phú], the Arsenal and the soldiers’ quarters. Originally, a sizable area within the Citadel was reserved for cultivation of staple crops, ensuring the Citadel’s self sufficiency in case of a long siege. During its construction, up to 30 thousand soldiers and workers were stationed in and around the Citadel.54

The most important part of the Citadel is the Imperial City – Hoàng Thành, and the Forbidden City – Tự Cấm Thành within it. The Imperial City, often locally referred to as Đại Nội – Great Enclosure, is also square, laid out along the same principal axis as the citadel. Each side is 600 metres. Its walls, surrounded by a moat, are 4 metres high and one metre thick, built of brick. Each side of the Great Enclosure has one gate, the most important was the South-facing Ngô Môn. The Ngô Môn Gate has five entrances under an observation pavilion. The central entrance was reserved for the Emperor only, but this rule was deliberately flaunted by the French in an attempt to humiliate the Vietnamese. The Ngô Môn gate leads directly to the Palace of Supreme

Harmony [Diên Thái Hòa], where the king received audience when the court was in full attendance, and housed five ancestral temples, dedicated to the worship of the Nguyễn Kings and their predecessors the Nguyễn Lords. The most imposing and important is the Thé Tô Miếu,\textsuperscript{55} dedicated to the worship of King Gia Long and the Nguyễn kings who succeeded him. The inclusion of temples dedicated to the worship of previous kings inside the Imperial City was a departure from past practice of other dynasties and reflected the great respect the Nguyễn Kings showed to their ancestors.\textsuperscript{56}

The innermost walled enclosure, the Forbidden City, is also square, measured 300 metres each side, and provided the living quarters for the king and his family, including the Cân Thành Palace where the king lived, the Cân Chánh Palace where he worked, and the Royal Office.

Originally intended for those directly connected to the royal court and its administration, over the years, large areas inside the Citadel have now become residential quarters for a large portion of the population, forming a District of the city of Huế. The Imperial City, however, has remained a non-residential area, although several of its buildings have been used for public purposes. In the nineteen fifties and sixties, for example, Huế’s School of Fine Arts [Trường Cao Đẳng Mỹ Thuật] and the National Conservatoire [Trường Quốc Gia Âm Nhạc] operated from two complexes inside the Imperial City.

\textsuperscript{55} Chapter 4 of this thesis provides a close study of this important ancestral temple.

\textsuperscript{56} Phan Thuận An (1995), ibid. p 37.
Figure 1 A basic map of the Citadel

Figure 2 The Ngo Môn gate


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Since its construction, the passage of time has brought wars and much destruction to the city and only a small number of the original buildings are still standing. It suffered tremendous damage on three occasions: in 1885 when the French forces sacked the city by force and razed the city to the ground; in 1946 when the Viet Minh withdrew from the city after taking its control from the abdicating king Bảo Đại and applied scorched earth tactics in their retreat; and most recently in 1968 when the city was taken by the Communist forces and held it for 25 days during which the combined American and South Vietnamese forces used modern heavy weapons in an intensive battle to retake the city.
Figure 4 A damaged wall behind an ancestral temple inside the Imperial City. Photo taken 1995

Figure 5 Side view of an ancestral temple inside the Imperial City in a state of disrepairs. Photo taken 1995
Outside the Citadel there are associated monuments of importance. These include the burial complexes of the Nguyễn kings and other buildings related to the spiritual life of the dynasty, including Vân Miếu, the Temple of Literature, dedicated to the worship of Confucius and to honour Confucian scholarship; Đàn Nam Giao, the Esplanade of the Sacrifice to the Sun and Earth, where the kings conducted complex rituals on important occasions; 57 Chiếu Thiên Mụ or Chiếu Linh Mụ, the Celestial Lady Pagoda, one of the most important Buddhist pagodas of the region; Diên Hòn Chén, the Temple of the Jade Cup, where the Champa used to worship the goddess Po Nagar, whom the Vietnamese continue to worship as Thien Y A Na goddess, with a later addition, Liễu Hạnh Princess,58 the Royal Arena – Hồ Quyên, and the Temple of the Roaring Elephant, Đền Voi Rê.

b. The royal burial complexes of the early Nguyễn kings

Of the thirteen Nguyễn kings, seven were buried in the royal burial complexes around Huế: Gia Long, Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, Tự Đức, Dư Đức, and the two compliant kings Đông Khánh and Khải Định. The Nguyễn kings who were not buried in a burial complex of their own included King Hâm Nghi who led the Cần Vương resistance movement and was exiled to Reunion Island when the movement eventually failed in 1885, the fiercely anti-French Thành Thái who the French removed from the throne on the pretext that he was insane, his son Duy Tân who took part in a failed uprising against the French – both father and son were exiled by the French. The two kings

57 The Đàn Nam Giao is studied closely in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

58 Nguyễn Thế Anh sees the integration of this Champa goddess into the Vietnamese pantheon as an indication of the depth of the spiritual imprint of the Champa civilisation, and that the cultural interactions between the Viets and the Chams were ‘deeper than has ever been thought’. Nguyễn Thế Anh (1995), ‘The Vietnamisation of Po Nagar’, in Essays Into Vietnamese Pasts, K.W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore, Ithaca, New York : SEAP, Cornell University, pp. 42-50.
Hiệp Hòa and Kiên Phúc, whose reigns lasted less than three months, also did not have a burial complex of their own, as was the case with the last King, Bảo Đại.

All these seven burial complexes were situated in a secluded area west of Huế, as part of its general plan, devised in early 19th century. They are all situated to the west of the capital city, because the sun symbolises the king in his life and the setting sun symbolises the passing of the king. Most of these burial complexes were built when the king was still alive, taking many years to complete, consuming much manpower and resources. The king himself provided the intellectual and artistic guiding principles, approved the architectural planning details, and often inspected the building sites. The aesthetics of the burial complexes incorporate the topology of the much wider surrounding space.

When visiting or studying the royal tombs of Hue, one should not simply concentrate on the architectural works in front of one's eyes, within the confines of the walls surrounding an area of tens of hectares. Instead, one should cast one's eyes further out – tens of kilometres – to take in the natural geographical features associated with it, and to enjoy the imposing scale of its totality – the hundreds or even thousands of hectares of the surrounding nature that artistically shape the construction of these tombs. [...] Not many people realise that Gia Long’s burial complex takes up an area of 2875 hectares,

59 Dáng Ngọc Quành (1916), Lê Truy Phong Vua Khải Định [The Coronation of King Khải Định], BAVH Vol. 3, p. 7.
60 For example, king Gia Long personally inspected the recommended site before he gave approval to it being used for his burial complex in 1814, DNTL Chinh Biên, pp. 879-880.
dotted with 42 mountains standing guard, the focal point of which is the burial site itself.\textsuperscript{61}

Underpinning the design of the royal burial complexes of Huế is a philosophy that regarded death not as the final end. The Vietnamese compound word for these burial complexes is \textit{Lăng tăm}, and the layout of the overall landscape consists of two separate areas, the \textit{Lăng} area and the \textit{Tâm} area. The \textit{Lăng} area is where the king is buried and the \textit{Tâm} area is where many palaces and pavilions, halls, theatres and libraries were built so that the king, when alive, would sometimes spend time there, away from the Royal Court. Only after the king had passed away would the complex be referred to as \textit{Lăng}. As a result, the burial complexes of the Nguyễn Kings are not melancholic burial places. Instead, they feel like ‘beautiful parks set in a vast expanse of mountains and forests, where the birds sing, the flowers bloom, the creeks burble and the wind whistle through the pines’.\textsuperscript{62}

The burial complexes of the Nguyễn kings can reveal some personal qualities about the kings themselves. King Gia Long’s burial complex, sparsely built and nestled among nature, expresses the wish to be at one with his cosmos after leading battles for over a quarter of century. King Minh Mạng’s, well-defined from its surrounds, orderly in its symmetry, reflects authority and his centrist thinking. King Thiệu Trị’s, modest in scale, open to its surrounds, and simple in design, suggests a sense of frugal modesty. In contrast, King Tự Đức’s burial complex expresses the creative pulses of a poet; its construction history tells of a period of turmoil for the country and the King.

\textsuperscript{61} Phan Thuận An (1995), ibid. p. 70.

\textsuperscript{62} Phan Thuận An (1995), ibid. p 72.
himself; and its usage after the construction by the King reveals a great deal about the customs and practices of the time.

The burial complex of King Gia Long (1802-1819)

Of all the tombs of the Nguyễn kings, King Gia Long’s is the furthest from the city, about 20 kilometres west of the city centre. The construction began in 1814 after the death of Gia Long’s principal wife, Thừa Thiên Hoàng Hậu, and was mostly completed by 1820, the year after his death.

The whole complex does not have a surrounding wall and blends in with the surrounding nature in ways that suggest an acceptance of the insignificance of man in nature, with an emphasis of being at peace with one’s cosmos. Phan Thuận An interprets this as reflecting the ‘ambition to reach out and embrace the whole universe by the founding king of the Nguyễn dynasty who spent a quarter of a century in
battles and finally united the nation."\textsuperscript{63} Compared to the burial complexes of the later Nguyễn kings, Gia Long’s burial complex is sparsely built, comparatively unadorned. Nevertheless, as the first of the burial complexes of the Nguyễn kings, it set an example for the later kings to consult and to follow.

Also buried here is Gia Long’s principal wife, whose tomb lies next to his. His second wife was buried a discrete distance away, with her own ancestral temple. Many other members of his family are also buried within the complex as well. Being a long way from the city has its price. During the Vietnam War, this area was out of the control of either side, was much damaged by battles taking place in the area, and was too far out of the way for regular maintenance. Although some of the more important structures of the complex, such as the ancestral temple, have been restored, the burial complex is in an overall state of neglect.

**The burial complex of King Minh Mạng (1820-1841)**

In contrast with the austerity of king Gia Long’s burial complex, king Minh Mạng’s is more imposing, its ground defined from the surroundings by a wall, its halls and palaces organised in an almost symmetrical pattern, along an axis that runs from the welcoming gate to the tomb site. Site selection began in 1826, but it wasn’t until 1840 that an appropriate site was found and construction began. In early 1841 king Minh Mạng passed away and his successor king Thiệu Trị oversaw most of the construction.

\textsuperscript{63} Phan Thuận An (1995) ibid. p. 83.
The overall design blends in with the surrounding nature, but the organised layout and the resplendent halls and palaces inside the enclosure tend to emphasise man-made elements. For its construction, King Thiệu Trị mobilised almost 10 thousands soldiers and workers, working in two-month rotation, and the whole complex was completed in 1843. Situated some 10 kilometres west of the city, king Minh Mạng’s burial complex is more accessible than that of king Gia Long and its buildings are in much better condition.

The burial complex of King Thiệu Trị (1841-1847)

Having supervised the physical construction of King Minh Mạng’s burial complex to its conclusion in 1843, three years later King Thiệu Trị passed away, and left general

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instructions for site selection with an emphasis on the need to be economical in the construction of his tomb. King Thiệu Trị’s burial complex blends certain aspects of the designs of Gia Long’s and Minh Mạng’s. Like Gia Long’s, it did not have a walled enclosure to define the complex from its surrounding, and like Minh Mạng’s, the halls and palaces are built in symmetrical groups, around two parallel axes. Simple in design, modest in size, it reflects the mindset of a king who was practical and frugal in his reign. The construction of King Thiệu Trị’s took less than a year to complete.65

![Image of King Thiệu Trị’s burial complex]

Figure 8. King Thiệu Trị’s burial complex, much of it in ruins

c. The burial complex of King Tự Đức

The reign of Tự Đức (1847-1883) was the longest of all the Nguyễn kings. The construction of king Tự Đức’s burial complex took place at a turbulent time for the

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nation and an extremely difficult time for the king himself. When he ascended the throne at the age of 20, Vietnam was at peace with its sovereignty intact, but by the time the construction of his burial complex began in 1864 the nation was at war with France and three provinces in the south had already been conceded to the French.

Initially planned to take 6 years to complete, with 3000 soldiers and workers on three month rotation, the construction was accelerated to be completed within 3 years. In 1866 the disaffected workers and soldiers, led by Đoàn Trung and Đoàn Trực, staged a mutiny that almost toppled king Tự Đức, being stopped at the last minute inside the Forbidden City by the Royal Guard. For weapons, many of the mutineers took up the pestles used at the construction to crush lime, and the mutiny is referred to as **Giảc Chìa Või** – the Lime Pestle Rebellion. Variously regarded as an uprising by the oppressed masses against the tyranny of feudalism or a combination of disaffected soldiers and intricate court politics, the Lime Pestle Rebellion undermined the authority of the King and highlighted the fact that his reign faced not only external threats from France but also internal unrest.

Possibly the most aesthetically appealing and certainly the most popular with tourists as well as local visitors, king Tự Đức’s burial complex is defined from its surrounds by a walled enclosure occupying some 12 hectares of land. Water from a

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67 For a full and detailed account of the Lime Pestle Rebellion, see *Đại Nam Thực Lục Chính Biên*, 4th Period, Volume XXXV pp. 53-57

small creek that flowed through the area was diverted to create a man-made lake with a small islet in the middle. Curved paths meander around the ground, halls and palaces are grouped together without an axis of symmetry. In the words of the writer Anh Đức, 'the burial complex of Tự Đức reveals itself in a manner that's unexpected and discreet. Its beauty gradually unfolds as you walk along. [...] Like a poem which changes it rhythm midway. Like a piece of music that flows along smoothly then suddenly improvised into a crescendo.'

The burial complex of King Tự Đức merits a study on its own for a number of reasons. The reign of Tự Đức (1847-1883) was the longest of all the Nguyễn kings, the pivotal reign that had to directly deal with military aggression from France. The construction of the burial complex tells a story of a king beset by problems both

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external and internal. The complex itself reveals the personal character of the king, and its usage reflected the tradition and customary practices of the time. Given this significance, a full study of king Tự Đức and his burial complex is given in Chapter Four, with two other important monuments, the Đàn Nam Giao and the ancestral temple Thế Tổ Miếu. Altogether they provide a composite picture of the spiritual significance underpinning the relevance of Huế’s heritage to contemporary society.

3. Decline of power and damage to the Imperial Center

a. Three Kings in Four Months

As king Tự Đức was childless, he adopted three nephews as his sons. On his deathbed, he chose the eldest, Ưng Chân, as his successor, although with reservations, which he discussed with his most trusted mandarins and expressed in his will. Due to an intricate web of court politics involving all three Regents appointed by king Tự Đức – Tôn Thất Thuyết, Nguyễn Văn Tượng and Trần Tiến Thành – the new king lasted only three days on the throne, not long enough to have chosen a title for his reign. The removal of king.CL Hip C from the throne has been subject to various interpretations, with most scholars regarding it as reflecting the ascendancy of the hawkish mandarins who wanted to fight the French over those who advocated suing for peace.

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70 The title Tự Đức came from the name of the Palace where Ưng Chân lived while king Tự Đức was alive.

Shortly after being removed from the throne, king Đúc Đức was starved to death in prison, his body was buried in a makeshift unadorned grave, neglected for years. Five years and four kings later, one of king Đúc Đức’s sons, Bửu Lân, ascended the throne, with approval by the French, as King Thành Thái (1889-1907). Naturally, king Thành Thái made sure his father was decently buried, and built the burial complex for king Đúc Đức, situated not far from the burial complex of king Tự Đức.\(^{72}\)

King Thành Thái turned out to be fiercely anti-French and secretly plotted against them. The French removed him from the throne and sent him into exile in Reunion Island, claiming that he was insane. King Thành Thái’s son succeeded him as king Duy Tân, who in 1916 plotted with Trần Cao Văn to rise up against the French but the plot failed and king Duy Tân was captured and was exiled to Reunion Island also. In 1948 king Thành Thái returned to Saigon, where he died and was buried in 1954. King Duy Tân died in a plane crash in 1945, and his remains were brought back to Vietnam in 1987 to be interred in the same burial complex,\(^{73}\) which now is the burial place for king Đúc Đức, his son king Thành Thái, and his grandson king Duy Tân. The complex is also the burial place for many of descendants of king Đúc Đức. Its main ancestral temple, the Long Ân Temple, is regarded as one of the finest examples of the artistic design and skilful craftsmanship of the time.

King Đúc Đức’s burial complex is the closest to the city centre. Originally occupying a very large area, it was taken over by French troops who quartered themselves there

\(^{72}\) Nguyễn Đức Xuan, (1996), *Chín Đế Chúa Mười Ba Đế Vua Nguyễn* [The Nine Nguyen Lords and Thirteen Nguyen Kings], Huế : NXB Thuan Hoa.

\(^{73}\) Hoàng Hien (1996), *Vua Duy Tân* [King Duy Tân], Huế : NXB Thuan Hoa.
in 1947, and in 1975 much of it was turned into communal housing quarters by the communist government. It is now a part of the listed World Heritage site.74

![Image of King Due Dire's burial complex](image)

**Figure 10** King Due Dire’s burial complex

After removing king Đức Đức, the regents regarded king Tự Đức’s other two adopted sons as too young to handle matters of the nation, given the parlous state that Vietnam was in. The regent Tôn Thất Thuyết, who was holding the post of Thương Thu Bố Binh (Minister of Defence), quoted from king Tự Đức’s will that ‘the nation needs a king of mature age’ in support of anointing king Tự Đức’s youngest brother Hồng Đạt as the next king.75 Hồng Đạt was reluctant to accept, but the regents Tôn Thất Thuyết and Nguyễn Văn Trường persuaded him to ascend the throne as King Hiệp Hòa. The new king had to deal with urgent matters at once, and showed a tendency towards

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negotiation. When the French forces attacked Thuận An, threatening Huế, king Hiếp Hào agreed to the peace treaty of 1883, known as the Harmand Treaty, that allowed the French to have a strong military presence in and around Huế. Nguyễn Thế Anh regards the Harmand Treaty of 1883 as the most damaging to Vietnam, as it gave the French much power in the areas of appointment of key senior Vietnamese mandarins, including the post of Governor (Kinh Lược) to North Vietnam.76 Four months later, the two regents accused Hiếp Hào of secretly plotting with the French and forced him to abdicate, then killed him with poison. The other regent, Trần Tiến Thành, a believer in negotiating with the French, was also killed.77

This period of bloody turmoil has been the subject of attention by several Vietnamese scholars, and the roles of the two regents have been much discussed with a variety of interpretation. The general consensus seems to be that the internal strife that engulfed the Huế court after the death of Tự Đức was essentially a power play between those who advocated military action against the French, led by Tôn That Thuyết and Nguyễn Văn Tuông, against those who advocated negotiation, led by Trần Tiến Thành and favoured by king Hiếp Hào.78

After the death of king Hiếp Hào, king Tự Đức’s third and youngest adopted son,


Ung Dang, was chosen by the two regents to become the next king. At the age of fourteen, and still living at Khiem Lang, the burial complex of his recently departed father king Tu Duc, Ung Dang was brought to Hue and installed on the throne as king Kien Phuc.79 King Kien Phuc died six months later of illness. During his very short reign the French made many inroads in their quest to conquer all of Vietnam, making the most out of the misfortunes and instability of the Nguyen court after the death of king Tu Duc. A period of four months, from the time of his death (19-7-1883) to the date of king Kien Phuc’s coronation (2-12-1883), saw the deaths and impeachment of three kings.80

As king Hiep Hoa was an impeached king, he did not have a burial complex named after his own reign and neither is he worshipped in the Thế Tổ Mieu ancestral temple in the Citadel. King Kien Phuc, on the other hand, was buried in a small, but appropriately designed burial complex inside king Tu Duc’s, reflecting the fact that he, bright and scholarly, was king Tu Duc’s favourite adopted son. King Kien Phuc is also worshipped in the Thế Tổ Mieu ancestral temple inside the Great Enclosure of the Citadel.81

79 The Dai Nam Thuc Luc Chinh Bien notes that Ung Dang, at the time 14 years of age, was living at king Tu Duc’s burial complex Khiem Lang. DNTL Chinh Bien, Fourth period, Volume LXX p. 260.

80 For a good summary of the developments of this period, see Nguyen The Anh’s The Withering Days of the Nguyen Dynasty, Singapore: Institute Of Southeast Asian Studies, 1978.

b. Resistance, destruction and desecration

On the same day that king Kiên Phúc died, his younger brother Ứng Lích was invited by the regents to succeed as King Hắm Nghi, at the age of twelve. King Hắm Nghi’s coronation went ahead without the French being informed, amid tense negotiations and threats by the French. King Hắm Nghi’s reign saw the final push by the French for total domination of the rest of Vietnam and the most determined resistance by the Vietnamese royal court establishment.

Having taken control of the Vietnamese court, the two regents Tôn Thất Thuyết and Nguyễn Văn Trường prepared for war, secretly building bases in the mountainous areas of Quảng Trị, especially in Tân Sỗ, stocking up supplies and war materials. Matters came to a head when the new French commander, De Courcy, demanded a meeting...
with the king and his regents, ostensibly to present his own appointment papers, but the Vietnamese regents suspected a trap and Tôn Thất Thuyết ordered a surprise attack on the French forces stationed around Huế on the 4-7-1885. The surprise attack failed and eventually the French forces took over the entire city of Huế. The resulting loss of lives was so large that every year, on the day of the fall of the city, the 23rd day of the Fifth month in the lunar calendar, the people of Huế conduct a semi-religious rite for the souls of those who perished, the Lê Âm Hồn – the Rites for the Perished Souls. A major street inside the Citadel was named Đường Âm Hồn, the Street of the Perished Souls, now Lê Thánh Tôn Street. Many small shrines dedicated to those who lost their lives on this occasion, Miếu Âm Hồn, were still being maintained when I grew up in Huế in late 1960s to early 1970s.82

The French forces razed the Royal City to the ground. Many palaces and public buildings inside the Citadel were damaged or destroyed in the looting that ensued. The extent of the damage inflicted upon the Royal City is reflected in folklore, and revealed by the references in the Đại Nam Thịch Luc to the occupation by the French forces and the subsequent need to restore them to an acceptable state.

The thousand line long Vế Thất Thủ Kinh Đô, [Ditty on the Fall of the Capital], which tells of the French attack of Thuận An just after the death of king Tự Đức in 1883 and the fall of Huế in 1885, describes the destruction, the looting and the chaos as people fled the capital as follows.

897 In the hour of the Dragon the enemy position stabilised

82 While the practice of annual rite for the wandering souls, Lê Âm Hồn, is common, after the fall of the city in 1885, the people of Huế have conducted the rite on this date of great loss of life.
And in the hour of the Rat they came over and raised their flag

Inside the city, loss and bewilderment reigned

Four hours of battle, everything collapsed and deteriorated

Starting from the Cho Mới market, they burnt

Both sides of every street caught in the cross fires, nobody knew what to do

Taking over the Royal city, again they burnt, area by area

They burnt the Long Vô barrack and then the Tuyên Phong camp

Everyone was in great gut-wrenching pain

It’s our homes that they burnt, our lives that they destroyed

From the Ministry of Civics to the Ministry of War

Along the streets, rows and rows of houses razed to the ground

All the possessions, all the gold and silver

What wasn’t looted was burnt to ashes [...] 

Everyone was scared by the guns of the French

With one loud bang, the bullets could reach the sky

Everywhere, everyone was reeling

The capital was lost; it was time to flee to the countryside

With tears flowing in copious volumes

Homes were abandoned, everyone fled empty-handed

The rich, their silver and coins

Brocade and silk, all abandoned as lost. 83

Tôn Thất Thuyết took king Hảm Nghi, then aged fifteen, and his entourage to Tân Sở,

83 Trần Thùy Mai (2003), Dân ca Thừa Thiên – Huế, Huế : NXB Thuận Hóa.
from where the king issued the Càn Vụng Edict calling on the population to come to the aid of the King and rise up against the French. Nguyễn Văn Trường was entrusted with the more difficult task of staying back in Huế to negotiate with the victorious French troops and to take care of the capital city. The French exiled him to Côn Đảo, then Tahiti where he died a few months later.  

To counter the calls by king Hạm Nghi to take up arms in aid of the king, the French installed king Hạm Nghi’s brother, Ưng Thị, as king Đồng Khánh, who was for all intent and purposes a powerless figure.

The Càn Vụng Edict started a serious and widespread movement of armed resistance around the country that lasted for years until king Hạm Nghi was betrayed and captured by the French in 1888, and sent into exile. Tôn Thất Thuyết, who had gone to China to request military aid, remained there and died in 1913. Even after the capture of king Hạm Nghi, the Càn Vụng movement continued in the many regional local resistances. Phan Đình Phùng, the second most senior mandarin after Tôn Thất Thuyết, led an armed resistance, quite successfully at times, until Phan died of dysentery in 1896. The French dug up his grave, burnt his bones to ashes and fired it out of a canon.

The Càn Vụng movement proved to be the longest lasting and the fiercest armed resistance against the French. It marked the first time a Nguyễn king and his highest mandarins moved out of the capital city to lead a struggle to throw out the foreign aggressors. The Càn Vụng Royal Edict on Resistance issued by King Hạm Nghi,

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written in highly emotive terms, not only gave heart to those scholar-gentry and local resistance leaders, but also had a long-lasting influence on the next generation to come.

c. Capitulation and the compliant kings

While king Häm Nghi became the rallying point for the Càn Vương movement of armed resistance, the French took total control of Huế and appointed Ứng Thị, Häm Nghi’s brother, as king Đồng Khánh. Under increasing pressure from the French, the Vietnamese royal court lost the grip over real power, becoming totally dependent on the French.

The French appointed two trusted collaborators, Nguyễn Hữu Độ and Phan Đình Binh, as regents, and king Đồng Khánh signed a number of decrees disbanding Vietnamese troops, placing the training of Vietnamese troops in the hand of French officers, giving numerous concession to the French, and even participated in an excursion with French-led troops to Quảng Trị into battle against the Càn Vương forces who rallied around in aid of king Häm Nghi. Thus the three brothers Ứng Đăng, Ứng Lích, and Ứng Thị became, respectively, a king who died shortly after assuming the throne – Kiến Phúc, one who fought the French and went bush leading a resistance – Häm Nghi, and one who collaborated with the French – Đồng Khánh.

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86 DNTL Chính Biên, Sixth period, volume II, p. 52; Quốc Sử Quân Triệu Nguyên, Đồng Khánh Khai Dinh Chính Yêu, (Nguyễn văn Nguyễn trans.) Hà Nội : Trung Tâm Văn Hóa Đông Tày, pp. 161-167
In the aftermath of the battle for the control of the capital on 4-7-1885, the victorious French officers quartered in the Noon Gate – Ngo Môn Quan, the main gate of the citadel, taking over numerous palaces and ancestral temples, including the Quốc Sử Quán [National History Institute], where the most senior historians worked and where the dynastic records were kept, and subjecting the new king Đồng Khánh and senior members of the royal family to much humiliation.87

The extent of the damage caused by the looting and the occupation by the French forces is underscored in the following report from Nguyễn Hữu Đỗ and Phan Đình Binh to king Đồng Khánh on the state of the two temples of Long An and Hiếu Tử after being returned from the French troops who had occupied them

The two sacred temples of Hiếu Tử and Long An were occupied by the French officers, who turned the central section into a sitting area, or rearranged the altars settees in a row to sit on. If we now conduct repairs for the purpose of immediately restoring them to be a place of worship, we are afraid that the desecration remains, its purity is compromised, and therefore we suggest that the task of restoration be given to the Ministry of Rites, that troops are assigned to keep watch over these temples pending further deliberation. In the meantime, on the anniversaries of deaths and births, the main altars and the secondary altars are to be temporarily installed at the Phùng Tiên temple where the rites are to be conducted, which would be appropriate to the circumstances but maintaining the due respect.88

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88 DNTL Chinh Biên, Sixth period, volume II, p 47.
The *Dại Nam Thư Luc* of the same year also contains several other reports on the repairs or restoration of major palaces and temples inside the citadel, indicating the damage was on a large scale, which would accord with the accounts passed on through the oral tradition in the form of folkloric verses and in people’s memories.

Of the last five kings of the Nguyễn dynasty, Đồng Khánh, Thành Thái, Duy Tân, Khải Định and Bảo Đại, only king Đồng Khánh and king Khải Định had a burial complex of their own reign. King Đồng Khánh died unexpectedly, quite young at 25, after being on the throne for three years. There was no prior planning for his burial complex, and as a result, contingencies and necessities combined to give a compromise. He was buried temporarily in a place near the under-construction burial complex intended for his father, who was at the time buried elsewhere. And when the complex was semi-completed king Đồng Khánh was interred there, while the rest of it was being finished. In other words, he was buried in the burial complex intended for his father, a breath-taking compromise; but there was no alternative. The bulk of the construction took place during the reign of Khải Định, and was not completed until 1917.89

Architecturally, its design was in the same mould of the previous kings, but construction techniques and materials used differed – concrete replacing stone, coloured glass used in the panels of windows – signs of a changing time. Its main palace, Diên Ngung Hy, much admired for its beautiful decoration and warmth of colour, is regarded as an excellent example of early influence of Western aesthetics

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which showcases the best of Vietnamese traditional art forms such as lacquer.

After the death of king Đông Khanh in 1889, the French installed Bùi Lân, a son of king Đức Đức, as King Thành Thái (1889-1907). King Thành Thái turned out to be fiercely anti-French and secretly plotted against them. The French removed him from the throne and sent him into exile in Reunion Island, claiming that he was insane. King Thành Thái's son succeeded him as king Duy Tân. In 1916 king Duy Tân plotted with Trần Cao Văn to rise up against the French, but the plot failed and king Duy Tân was captured and was exiled to Reunion Island also. The role of the last two kings, king Khải Định and king Bảo Đại, was entirely ceremonious, with both serving as powerless figures entirely within the control of the French.

King Khải Định’s burial complex

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Nguyễn Đức Xuân (1996), Chín Đôi Chúa Mười Ba Đài Vua Nguyễn, Huế: NXB Thuận Hòa.
King Khải Định’s burial complex is one of the most visually striking of the burial complexes around Huế. It is situated on a hill, its design follows geomancy principles, with the Châu E Rivulet flowing from left to right then coiling back; the burial site being flanked by Mount Chợp Vy and Mount Kim Sơn on both sides; and a long flight of steps leading directly to the main temple from the front gate. But the palaces and their interior decoration reflect a very bold mix of Western art influences and Eastern symbolism.91

The contrast between the aesthetics of the two last-built burial complexes of king Đòng Khánh and king Khải Định, and those of the earliest built, king Gia Long’s or king Minh Mạng’s is quite striking. Vĩnh Phơi, a professor of Fine Arts at Huế University, notes the difference through of the use of the portraits of the latter kings

Probably due to the fear of offending an all-powerful superior, no portraits were made of the kings from Gia Long to Tự Đức. Only a few special people were allowed to see the face of the king, and no painter was allowed to draw his portrait. King Đòng Khánh, who ruled in the 1880s, was the first king to have his portrait painted, and now it is worshipped in Ngụng Hy Palace. Along with the compulsory Royal dress of yellow robe, crown, shoes, and belt, this portrait reflects a gentle though not very resolute man. This means it was close to a real portrait, free from the conventions of painting a king with thick eyebrows, phoenix eyes, and dragon’s beard.92

Vinh Phôi also points out that the buildings within king Khải Định’s burial complex represent an Asian–European blend of architectural values. The paintings that decorated the ceilings were of a style developed by Vietnamese painters, and the bronze statue of king Khải Định were made by the French sculptor Doucing and cast by the French foundry Barbedienne.93

Figure 13 The interior of king Khải Định’s burial complex, its colours bright and bold, with a bronze statue of the king

d. The end of monarchy

After a long, difficult, and complex anti-colonial struggle, French colonial rule came to an end in 1945. In the same year Huế witnessed the abdication of Bảo Đại, the last Nguyễn King, just days before Hồ Chí Minh grabbed an opportune moment and declared Vietnam an independent nation, spelling the end of not just the Nguyễn dynasty but the entire monarchic rule of the history of Vietnam. The abdication of

king Bảo Đại represents a significant point of departure, marking the time when the custodial control of the imperial heritage of Huế, or at least its symbol, the monuments of Huế, passed from the private sphere to the public. In his book, *Vietnam 1945*, the historian David Marr reconstructs the event.

On the afternoon of 30th of August a crowd gathered in front of the Zenith gate to witness the last act of a thousand year drama of Vietnamese monarchy. Once again, the cars went through the middle entrance, this time stopping at the foot of the gate, where Pham Khac Hoe and Prince Vinh Can greeted the Viet Minh’s delegation. At the head of the steps, Bảo Đại received them solemnly, wearing embroidered imperial robes, a golden turban and glass-bead shoes. With the aid of loudspeakers, Trần Huy Lieu introduced himself and read a just-received cable, announcing that Chairman Ho Chi Minh would read the Declaration of Independence three days hence in Hà Nội. Then Bảo Đại read his abdication edict with a great deal of emotion, getting a big ovation when he expressed his happiness to be a citizen in an independent country.94

The day before, the 29th of August 1945, Bảo Đại’s representatives had met those of the advancing revolutionary forces encircling Huế and negotiated the terms of his abdication, the first of which being that the revolutionary government was to treat the burial complexes and ancestral temples of the Nguyễn kings with proper respect. The revolutionary delegation accepted Bảo Đại’s terms, and added that the burial complexes and ancestral temples of the Nguyễn Kings would be protected by the revolutionary government, and their access for the purpose of worship would be

guaranteed. Other terms guaranteed the safety of the members of the Royal family, fair treatment of the court’s mandarins, but required Bảo Đại to leave the Royal citadel, and, except the private property that belonged directly to Bảo Đại, his wife the queen Nam Phuong, and his mother Từ Cung, ‘all other property and asset of the king and the royal court now belong to the revolutionary government.’

From Phạm Khắc Hòe and Trần Huy Liệu’s recollections, the right of access to the royal tombs and ancestral temples by members of the Royal family was recommended by the representatives of the supposedly atheistic revolutionary delegation, and not requested by the abdicating monarch himself. In his memoir *The Dragon of Vietnam* Bảo Đại offers no recollections of his own on the specific question of continued access to the burial complexes and ancestral temples. He may have thought that access to ancestral temples as an automatic right, and such assurance unnecessary.

Nevertheless, given that the burial complexes and the ancestral temples represented a spiritual significance widely understood and respected by the people of Vietnam, such a recommendation by members of the delegation was not all that surprising. In fact, in underscored the respect for ancestors, which is shared by Vietnamese people across the political divide. Even in present day Vietnam, and especially in areas around Huế, ancestor veneration manifests itself in the form of regular rites on important days such as the anniversaries of their deaths, and maintenance of their burial places.

Respect for ancestors manifested itself in very personal ways for Bảo Đại. One of his

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final acts before abdicating was a final rite at the Thế Tổ Miếu to inform the ancestors of the impending end of the dynasty. In his memoir, titled *From The Royal Court to the Viet Bac Resistance*, Phạm Khắc Hôe, then Bảo Đại’s Private Secretary and Head of the Imperial Office, who later joined the Revolution, recalled the occasion:97

At two o’clock on the 26th (of August 1945) Bảo Đại conducted the rites to report the abdication to his ancestors at the Thế Tổ Miếu which is the ancestral temple for Gia Long and the succeeding kings. This ceremony was broadcast widely to all mandarins, civilian and military, to attend, but in the end only Bảo Đại and the four of us mandarins 98 attended.

In any case, for the period that followed, the physical control of the city of Huế, and by extension the custody and its associated responsibility for the Royal City and the burial complexes of the Nguyễn kings changed hands at various times, but the direct descendants of the Nguyễn kings continued to have access to the tombs and the temples, those that remained standing, for the purpose of worshipping their ancestors.

For the rest of 1945 and almost the entire year of 1946, the control of the city of Huế was in the hand of the revolutionary forces who used the palaces and temples inside the Citadel for their own needs. But post-World War arrangements for the disarming of the Japanese troops allowed the French to return to the southern part of Vietnam, and in December 1946 conflicts between the French and Vietminh broke out, starting

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97 Phạm Khắc Hôe (1996), ibid., p.94.

98 Here the terms that Phạm Khắc Hôe used – bôn quan văn võ [four mandarins] – is a sneering wordplay on the terms ba quan văn võ – [the full assembly of mandarins, civil and military].
the First Indochina War that lasted nine years. Trần Hoàn, then a student with the Students for National Salvation of Thuận Hóa, recalls the developments in Huế when the French forces returned.

The French forces, replacing Chiang’s Chinese troops, gradually took over Huế. The Quốc Học school building was used by the French troops as their base, and our school had to move to the Greater Enclosure of the Royal city. Most of the first months of the school year of 46 - 47 were used essentially for the preparations for battle. ... On the night of 19th of December, the guns of our armed resistance rang out in Huế. [...] Sometime after Tet, French forces landed at Tư Hiên river mouth, and began to encircle Huế. Together with the regular troops, we received orders to retreat from the city, spreading thinly into the countryside.¹⁰⁰

Accounts vary as to of what happened. The author Võ Huong An, the son of King Khải Định’s Chief of the Royal Guard, claims that the palaces inside the Great Enclosure were burnt to the grounds by the Việt Minh as part of their scorched earth policy.¹⁰¹ The History of the Party Branch at Thừa Thiên Huế, Lịch Sử Đảng Bộ Thừa Thiên Huế, confirms the fact, although using standard socialist=speak wording, ‘In order to implement the scorched earth policy, the people themselves destroyed the buildings, communal halls and pagodas, ... all the places that could be used by the

⁹⁹ Trần Hoàn, real name Nguyễn Tăng Hích, became an important figure in the Nhân Văn Giai Phạm crack down of writers and artists, and after 1975 held many important positions, including Minister for Culture.
enemy as barracks for their troops. But one thing is clear: the city suffered a great deal of damage during this period. Most of the complexes of palaces inside the Great Enclosure were razed to the ground by fire, including the Cân Chánh and Cân Thành complexes, where the kings worked and lived, and some of the ancestral temples of the Nguyễn kings, including Hùng Miếu, the temple dedicated to the worship of King Gia Long’s parents.

Fighting between the French forces and the Vietnamese resistance lasted a further nine years. In May 1954 the French forces suffered a decisive defeat at Điện Biên Phủ, and the Geneva Treaty of 21st of July 1954 temporarily divided Vietnam into two halves, with provisions for a general election for a re-united country within two years. These provisions never eventuated, culminating in further division between the North, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, governed by the Việt Minh and headed by President Hồ Chí Minh, and the South, the Republic of Vietnam, initially governed by Prime Minister Ngô Đình Diệm with Bảo Đại as the titular Head of State. A referendum held in October 1956 in the South created The Republic of Vietnam with Ngô Đình Diệm as its President. Bảo Đại went to live in France and had no further significant involvement with politics. He died in 1997 in France.

In summary, the relationship between Huế and the Vietnamese who migrated south into the area has been one of an organic and gradual evolution. This frontier land of the 15th and 16th centuries slowly morphed into an area capable of providing safe haven and new opportunities, especially in times of dangerous instability at the centre.

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And when Nguyễn Hoàng saw the possibilities of the area, he brought with him considerable military skills and administrative nous to develop the area to consolidate it into the center of a new political reality in the south, dynamic, assertive, different yet equal to Thăng Long in the north. The division and the fighting between the Dàng Trong and Dàng Ngoai for much of the 17th and 18th centuries fuelled this sense of separateness, and when the south prevailed it decided to move the capital from Thăng Long to Huế, a confident and assertive move, and one that celebrates its deep bonds with this area.

That is the context within which Huế, as the imperial centre, should be seen and how its monuments should be appreciated. They reflected the new imperial status of the city and embraced the standards and ideals at the core of its culture, and the beauty of their architecture aspiring to the finest artistic pulses within that tradition. As the power of the Huế court declined during the colonial period, Huế suffered a great deal of destruction and degradation but much the imperial projects continued, especially those with a spiritual element such as the burial complexes of the Nguyễn kings.

In other words, the connection between Huế’s heritage and the Nguyễn dynasty runs deep. This strong identification with the Nguyễn dynasty has meant that in public discourse on the colonial period, Huế is often seen through the prism of the politics of the Nguyễn kings, which represent a bastion of anti-revolutionary feudalism in the eyes of the revolutionaries. Yet, as the next chapter will show, during the colonial period, notwithstanding the political impotence of Huế’s court, Huế was in fact a place that nurtured a generation of young radicals who later became leaders of the revolutionary forces.
CHAPTER TWO

Huế and the radicals

This chapter contests the image of Huế as irrelevant to the nation’s struggle for independence during the colonial period, and debunks the myths of victimhood that pervades much of the writing on Huế during the Vietnam War.

Huế’s influence on the nation’s history is not limited to that of the royal court; its legacy more than the architecture left behind. Of greater importance is the intellectual milieu and social educational structure that developed in Huế in the centuries of it being the seat of power. An approach that totally equates Huế with the royal court risks not fully seeing Huế’s role in shaping the nation’s affairs. This blind spot is evident in the way Huế is depicted in the colonial period, when the monarchy had capitulated to the French.

This chapter argues that even after the royal court had ceased to play any significant role in the national struggle for independence, Huế continued to influence the path of a generation of future revolutionary leaders; and that the radical movements in Huế decisively influenced the course of the nation. To support my arguments, I trace the career paths of some radical leaders and their connections to Huế; and re-examine the radical movements emanating from Huế in the 1960s, which so far have been analysed mostly from political and military perspectives. The role Huế’s participants played in this critical period of South Vietnam is reassessed to demonstrate that a younger generation of Huế’s radicals led the charge in the cultural political front of these assertive movements, and actively took sides as the war and violence escalated.
1. Out of the ashes: Huế and the radicalisation of a generation

Although at present an administratively unimportant city, Huế remains a city of enormous importance to the Vietnamese. While Hà Nội is the political capital city of Vietnam, Saigon the economic powerhouse, Huế is regarded by many as the cultural heart and soul of the nation.

The generalization about Huế being the cultural heart and soul of the nation, although broad-sweeping and subjective, has strong echoes in literature and the mind of many Vietnamese artists and writers. Huế has a reputation as the place that deeply influences people who live there over a period of time. The poet Huy Cận, for example, told me at a chance but substantial discussion at the Literature Institute [Viện Văn Học], Hanoi, in late 1998, that Huế was the place that brought out the poet in him. He said that he was known as a revolutionary and a poet, but if it wasn’t for the fourteen years in Huế he would have been known only as a revolutionary, thus clearly attributing the experience of his time in Huế with the creative well-springs that nourished his poetry, although during his time in Huế he published little. His first collection, Lira Thiêng, was published in 1940, one year after he left Huế to live in Hà Nội with fellow poet Xuân Diệu. Huy Cận spent twelve formative years in Huế, from 1927 as an eight years old primary school student, to 1939 as a twenty year old man, holding a Full Baccalaureate. In 1936 Huy Cận met fellow poet Xuân Diệu at the Quốc Học School with whom he struck a close friendship that deeply influenced his

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104 The poet Huy Cận (b.1919 d.2005) was one of the most significant cultural figures of Vietnam, both as a poet and a revolutionary. He joined the Vietminh in 1942 and rose to several important positions with the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, including Vice-Minister for Culture and Minister for Culture and Information.
poetry.¹⁰⁶

At the Quốc Học school in Huế, where Hồ Chí Minh had been a student, a generation of students grew up, cut their teeth in organizational matters, and later became influential members of the leadership of Vietnam’s Communist Party, such as Võ Nguyên Giáp, Phạm Văn Đồng, Nguyễn Chí Diệu, Tạ Quang Bửu. A long list of prominent intellectuals, including literary figures such as Tố Hữu, Nguyễn Tuân, Chế Lan Viên, Hải Triều Nguyễn Khôa Văn,¹⁰⁷ and other prominent intellectuals such as the scholar Hoàng Xuân Hãn, the literary critic Hoài Thanh, the poet Lưu Trọng Lục, the scholar Đào Duy Anh, were either born in, or spent substantial periods of time in Huế. In fact, Ngô Đình Nhu, who later became the ideologue and theoretician advising his brother, President Ngô Đình Diệm, taught at Quốc Học School in the same year, 1945, with Tạ Quang Bửu, who was later to become a serious thinking influence in the Communist Party of Vietnam, the opposite side.¹⁰⁸

It was at the population centres with a high concentration of intellectuals and education facilities, such as Hà Nội, Huế and Sài Gòn, that contestations of ideas for a future Vietnam were played out through writings published in books and newspapers, and through teaching at schools. Two of the most influential thinkers who pushed for a modern independent Vietnam, Phan Bội Châu and Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, spent considerable time in Huế.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Here his recollection was slightly faulty. He in fact spent twelve, not fourteen, years in Huế.
¹⁰⁹ The life and work of Phan Bội Châu have been studied in detail by prominent historians such as
Phan Bội Châu, universally acknowledged as a pioneer of Vietnamese twentieth Century nationalism, was a brilliant scholar strongly inspired by the Cân Vương movement of 1885, and a key figure in the creation of several movements aimed at modernizing Vietnam, such as the Vietnam Modernisation Association [Duy Tân Hội] and the Eastern Travel [Đông Du] movement. Initially he believed that the path to the emancipation of Vietnam was through a union of the scholar gentry, the bureaucracy and the more progressive members of the imperial family. He stayed in Huế for five years, left Vietnam in 1905 for Japan, and continued working towards an independent Vietnam from abroad, unable to return to Vietnam as he had been put on trial *in absentia* and sentenced to death for anti-French activities. In exile he swung to the view that the emancipation of Vietnam required raising the level of national consciousness of the people. His writings are regarded as of critical importance to the radicalization of Vietnamese. In 1925 he was captured by the French in Shanghai and extradited to Hà Nội where he was again put on trial and sentenced to death. Massive protests by Vietnamese people forced the French authorities to commute his sentence to life imprisonment.\(^{110}\) Further protests won further concession: Phan Bội Châu was transferred to Huế to live under house arrest,\(^{111}\) possibly because the French authorities believed his influence would be limited there. But in Huế he was able to receive visitors and conduct discussions with students in an open, yet private, capacity.\(^{112}\)

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David Marr, Hue Tam Ho Tai, and Vĩnh Sinh but Huỳnh Thúc Kháng’s life and work remain relatively neglected.


\(^{112}\) Võ Nguyên Giáp (1986), ‘Hội ước về trường Quốc Học’, *Sông Hương*, volume 20, pp. 1-4, Tánh
The life, work, and influence of Phan Bội Châu have been studied in detail by prominent historians such as David Marr, Huế Tam Ho Tai, and Vĩnh Sinh but Huỳnh Thúc Kháng’s life and work remain relatively neglected. Huỳnh Thúc Kháng was an accomplished scholar who, together with Phan Bội Châu, Phan Châu Trinh and Trần Quý Cáp, led the anti-colonial movement of modernization Duy Tân, for which he was arrested in 1908 and was imprisoned in Côn Đảo for 13 years. But so high was Huỳnh Thúc Kháng’s reputation and public standing, so large his following, that five years after his release, he was able to win a post as a member of the House of Representatives of the People [Viện Dân Biểu] and became its chief representative for the middle region. In 1927 he started publishing the newspaper Voice of the People [Tiếng Dân], which operated in Huế for sixteen years until the French government closed it down in 1943. "Tiếng Dân"s editorial secretary and Phan Bội Châu’s private secretary, Vũ Dình Quang, recalled in 1987 that ‘the first political newspaper that came into being at the capital city Huế over fifty years ago, created by a great scholar with a penitentiary record of 13 years, marked an event of great consequences that would be hard for the young generation of today to imagine.’ The paper, he said, ‘attempted to raise alarm – to awaken people. Sometimes advising, sometimes hectoring, sometimes screaming, Tiếng Dân constantly played the role of educating the people.’

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114 Đào Duy Anh (1984), ‘Huế với bước đầu vào đời của tôi’, Sông Huong, volume 6, pp. 9, 10.
And newspapers did have an impact on their readers. In 1923, a young Đào Duy Anh, then a recent graduate from the Quốc Học School in Huế, was a primary teacher in Đồng Hới, a ‘quiet and lethargic’ township in Quảng Bình, where ‘not until 1925 that newspapers published in Sài Gòn and Hà Nội occasionally brought news that were vaguely political, [but after] the news about Phan Châu Trinh’s return and of Phan Bội Châu’s arrest and trial, the newspapers from Hà Nội and Sài Gòn changed their direction towards a focus on political commentary’.116

Spurred on by the rhetoric of Phan Bội Châu’s defence at his trial in Hà Nội, and the strength of the public protest at Phan’s death sentence, Đào Duy Anh decided to meet Phan Bội Châu on his route from the prison in Hà Nội to his house arrest in Huế, after which Đào Duy Anh decided to move to Sài Gòn to work for the newspapers there. En route, in Đà Nẵng, Đào Duy Anh met Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, who had created a newspaper to use as a vehicle to protect the rights of the people, and to provide support for the activities of the House of People’s Representatives – Viên Dân Biểu, and Đào Duy Anh was encouraged to play a key role in its formation.117 After three months in Saigon, Đào Duy Anh ended up working closely with Huỳnh Thúc Kháng in Huế and Đà Nẵng. In Huế Đào Duy Anh built up a library for the Tiếng Dân paper, which included books in French and Chinese on history, philosophy, sociology, economics, including books on Marxism.118 Đào Duy Anh himself became an influential scholar, compiling major reference works, translating and writing

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117 Đào Duy Anh, ibid. p. 10.
118 Đào Duy Anh, ibid. p. 12
important books on history and culture.\textsuperscript{119}

At the time, Huế was where much networking took place amongst young people ‘keenly in search of the truth’.\textsuperscript{120} Many of the friendships and comradeships forged here influenced the development of the revolutionary paths of many, and lasted for years. Take the case of the extremely bright and studious Võ Nguyên Giáp, for example. From a Nghệ An scholar-gentry family, Võ Nguyên Giáp came to Huế as a student at the age of fourteen to attend the Quốc Học School in 1925. Founded in 1909 with Ngô Đình Khả as the first Principal – Chuông Giáo, and for several years named after King Khải Định, by then the Quốc Học School was ‘a seedbed of revolution’.\textsuperscript{121} During Võ Nguyên Giáp’s time in Huế, he came under the influence of the nationalist Phan Bội Châu, at the time held under house arrest in Huế by the French. Võ Nguyên Giáp went to the home of Phan Bội Châu weekly to listen to discussions on the situation of the world and of the nation, and it was in Huế that he was introduced to revolutionary writings of Nguyễn Ái Quốc (one of Hồ Chí Minh’s many aliases), through Hải Triệu Nguyễn Khoa Văn.\textsuperscript{122} It was in Huế that Võ Nguyên Giáp participated in his first political action, a ‘boycott of the class’ protest in 1927 with fellow student Nguyễn Chí Diệu,\textsuperscript{123} which earned him an expulsion from the school and being returned to his home village. In 1986, writing in Sông Hương to mark the 90\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Quốc Học School, Võ Nguyên Giáp recalled his time

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{120}] Võ Nguyên Giáp (1964), Từ Nhân Dân Mà Ra [Emerging From the People] Hanoi: NXB Quân Đối Nhân Dân, p. 20.
\item[\textsuperscript{122}] Võ Nguyên Giáp (1964), op.cit. p 21; Currey, Cecil B. (1997), op.cit., p. 16.
\item[\textsuperscript{123}] Nguyễn Chí Diệu rose to a high rank in the Tân Việt Party, and became a member of the Communist Party in 1927.
\end{itemize}
at Quốc Học, and concluded that what remained deepest and clearest in his memory was that at Quốc Học, 'the years of my youth coincided with the dawn of an era, a period when our entire people rose up in our struggles – successful struggles for freedom and independence, and for socialism.'

Like Đào Duy Anh and Nguyễn Chí Diêu, Võ Nguyên Giáp first joined the Tân Việt party in 1927, but the friendships formed from his time in Huế, such as those with Phạm Văn Đồng and Hải Triệu Nguyễn Khoa Văn, were influential in his decision to join the Communist Party later in 1936. Some of the contacts he formed in Huế developed close personal dimensions, such as his relationship with his teacher Đặng Thái Mai, whose daughter became his second wife in later years. Võ Nguyên Giáp's first wife, Nguyễn Thị Quang Thái, was also a student at the nearby Đông Khánh school for girls, although he did not meet her until 1932, when both were imprisoned by the French. The skills and contact that he developed when working for Huynh Thúc Kháng's paper Tiếng Đàn in Huế proved useful later in Hà Nội, when he taught at the Thăng Long Lycee, also operated by Huynh Thúc Kháng, and worked tirelessly to publish Le Travail, where he was joined by two other key leaders of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Trương Chinh and Phạm Văn Đồng.

The cases of Đào Duy Anh and Võ Nguyên Giáp illustrate how the radicalization of this generation of students, the experience, the contact and friendships formed during their formative years in Huế, were of crucial importance in their political orientation

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125 Cecil B. Currey (1997), ibid, p 25. Note that some Vietnamese sources say they had met earlier, when she was a student at the Đồng Khánh School and he the Quốc Học.

and chosen paths. Naturally, not everyone who lived in Huế through this period ended up as radical left-wing revolutionaries. Phạm Quỳnh, Trần Trọng Kim, Ngô Đình Nhu, and Ngô Đình Diệm were passionate believers in other paths leading to the emancipation of Vietnam.

It is not suggested here that Huế was a place possessing special energy that inspired people to great things. More likely, it was the combination of a critical mass of influential thinkers, bright young people whose minds were open to new ideas, good educational institutions, accessible platforms such as newspapers that formed the crucible for the radicalisation of this generation.

In fact, in the 1920s, in the other major cities of Vietnam, Hà Nội and Sài Gòn, similar pre-conditions also existed for the radicalisation of young Vietnamese. In her book, Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution, Hue Tam Ho Tai examined the "intellectual and social forces that spurred Vietnamese young people on their odyssey and turned them from rebels into revolutionaries."127 Tracing the life experiences and widely divergent political developments of major political activists such as Phan Bội Châu, Nguyễn Ái Quốc, Nguyễn An Ninh, Phan Chu Trinh, Bùi Quang Chiêu, Phạm Quỳnh, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, Hue Tam Ho Tai analysed the interplay between cultural discourse and political action of young Vietnamese living in Cochinchina in the 1920s, and identified new ideas, influential activists, education facilities, and newspapers, as the major factors that combined to produce the radicals in the south.128

128 Hue Tam Ho Tai, (1992), ibid.
Because each region of Vietnam came under French control at different times, Cochinchina in the south was under a different administrative regime which evolved and operated differently from the rest of Vietnam – the protectorates of Tonkin in the north and Annam in the middle. Education reforms initiated by the French colonial authorities took hold in Cochinchina first, followed by Tonkin, whereas 'in Annam, imperial mandarins, clinging to the tattered remnants of their authority, refused to allow the creation of either French lycees or Franco-Annamite schools'. As a result, according to Hue Tam Ho Tai's, young students of Cochinchina were more at home with western tradition of thought made accessible through school curriculum, thus sowing the seeds for a break from the past. In addition, 'the journalistic scene in Cochinchina was much livelier than in Tonkin and Annam, where a Vietnamese press was virtually nonexistent until 1927. [...] The press regulations which prevailed in Tonkin and Annam made it impossible to use journalism as a tool for political discourse there.' Coupled with the crisis of authority that came with the decreasing influence of the previous generation of reformists such as Phan Chu Trinh, Nguyễn An Ninh and Phan Bội Châu, an empowering sense prevailed of having to face with the legacy inherited. Thus, in essence, Ho Tai Hue Tam’s places an emphasis on socio-cultural conditions existing in Cochichina as the main driver for the emergence of Vietnamese radicalism in this period.

In contrast, Huế, in the middle region of Annam, remained under notional control of the royal authority, and was generally regarded as the area most resistant to radical ideas. There was no industrial base to foster the development of a working class, and no concentration of organised peasants to form a solid base for rural radicalism

129 Hue Tam Ho Tai (1992), ibid. pp. 32-36
130 Hue Tam Ho Tai (1992), ibid. pp. 120-121.
around Huế. Nevertheless, as shown above, it was the hotbed of radical activity that decisively influenced the path of many future revolutionary leaders. This apparent paradox can be better understood if one considers Vietnamese radicalisation of this period as the result of contests over the future of Vietnam, in which different ideas were argued over by the intelligentsia through newspapers and at schools.

As mentioned above, Hue Tam Ho Tai’s work identifies a number of pre-conditions, namely the arrival of new ideas, the presence of influential activists, education facilities, and newspapers, as the major factors that combined to produce the radicals in the south. My work here has identified the same pre-conditions existing in Huế, enabling the radicalisation of a generation of young students to lead the Vietnamese revolution. In the context of the origins of Vietnamese revolution, this leans towards the continuity of socio-cultural factors, rather than ruptures. Ideologically, the path to the Vietnamese revolution may well be full of ruptures; evidenced by the quantum leap in ideology within one generation, and culminating in the August 1945 revolution as a ‘mass voluntarist surge of power’. But, the analyses on how the revolutionary movement emerged out of pre-existing cultural, socio-political context, such as those advanced in this chapter and by Hue Tam Ho Tai, tend to indicate a strong element of continuity at work.

In the case of Huế, the sense of continuity goes back further. Intellectuals, scholars, students, and artists had been drawn to Huế for a long time. When Nguyễn Hoàng moved south in 1558, although well supported by a group of loyal and capable followers from the same district Tống Sơn, one of his top priorities was to recruit

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talented men to his court, treating them fairly and rewarding them justly, a policy that served him and his successors well. The star recruit, Đào Duy Tự, was a well-known case. Đào Duy Tự was ineligible to sit for examinations in the north – Dàng Ngoài – because his mother was a singer. Her career as an entertainer, a tainted occupation in the mores of the time, automatically disqualified her son from sitting examinations according to the rules of the time in the North. Đào Duy Tự moved south, met the Nguyên lord Nguyên Phúc Nguyên who greatly valued his wise counsel, and became one of the most, if not the most, important contributor to the running of the state.

Throughout the periods of the Nguyên Lords, and later on during the Nguyên Kings, a long tradition had developed where bright young scholars came to the capital city to study and to sit for examinations, the highest level of which took place in the capital, and sometimes involved an audience with the king; and established scholars were drawn to senior appointments in the court. The concentration of students, scholars and intellectuals in Huế in the early decades of the twentieth century was a result of this tradition. Being one of the most important centres of intellectual, artistic, and educational life of Vietnam, as a result of being the seat of power for a long time, Huế was the place that nourished many of the early political leaders and cultural figures of Vietnam on both sides of the political divide. In other words, from the ashes of monarchy rule and into the vacuum of leadership, in stepped a younger generation who formed the next generation of leadership.

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132 Phan Khoang (1967), Xưa Đàng Trong, 1558-1777. Cuộc Nam-tiên Của Dân Tộc Việt Nam, Saigon: Khai Trí

133 A detailed discussion on the contributions made by Đào Duy Tự can be found in Phan Khoang (1967), op. cit. pp. 173-188
Hồ Chí Minh went on to lead the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) till he died in 1969, highly respected and genuinely loved by his followers, despised and genuinely hated by his opponents. Võ Nguyên Giáp went on to become the celebrated military hero who assumed the leadership of a fledgling army in 1945 and led it to the defeat of the French army at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and the final victory over the America-backed Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) in 1975. Phạm Văn Đồng became Prime Minister, well respected for his frugal modesty; Huy Căn worked closely with Hồ Chí Minh, became Minister for Culture and had great influence over the cultural agenda of the arts; Đào Duy Anh continued his scholarly work and became an important intellectual on matters of culture.

Ngô Đình Diệm, on the other hand, assumed the leadership role of the southern half of the country, South Vietnam, or the Republic of Vietnam. In the role of Special Advisor to the President, his brother Ngô Đình Nhu wielded a great deal of influence on the direction of Vietnamese politics until they were both killed in a military coup d'état in 1963, an event that was precipitated by Buddhist movement of dissent emanating from Huế.

2. The Buddhist crisis and the Tranh Đấu movement

a. The Buddhist crisis and its impact on South Vietnam

In the immediate years after the division of Vietnam, the government of President Ngô Đình Diệm was very much preoccupied with the resettlement of refugees, mostly Catholics who chose to move south from the north, and the pacifying of the Bình
Xuyên and Hòa Hao forces in the southern provinces. Apart from an unsuccessful attempted coup by Colonel Nguyễn Chánh Thi in 1960, the political situation in the Republic of Vietnam remained generally stable. Militarily, the war grew from low intensity clashes with the insurgents of the Mặt Trận Dân Tộc Giải Phóng Miền Nam [The People’s Front for the Liberation of the South] to larger battles, and American presence in the Republic of Vietnam became more visible as the USA invested more and more resources into the country.

But the outward appearance of political stability began to crack, beginning with waves of dissent emanating from Huế. In the early 1960s, Huế became the centre of Buddhist dissension, beginning with dis-satisfaction born out of the perception that the policies of the government of President Ngô Đình Diệm, a Catholic, discriminated against Buddhists, who dominated the population of Huế. The deep connection between Buddhism and Huế is evidenced in the vast network of pagodas serving not only the spiritual needs of the population but also had close personal connections to the Nguyễn lords and kings. The authoritative book Famous Ancient Pagodas of Vietnam [Việt Nam Danh Lam Cổ Tự] lists sixteen most important pagodas in Huế, including the Thien Mu pagoda, established by Lord Nguyễn Hoàng in 1601, the Sắc Tứ Quốc Ân, the Sắc Tứ Tứ Hiếu, Tứ Đậm, Điều Đế pagodas, all having deep

134 In early 1962, the Venerable Thích Thiện Minh petitioned to the government of president Ngô Đình Diệm, handing over a dossier detailing ‘the oppression of Buddhists in South Vietnam, from 1959 to 1962 in the middle region to the central highlands’, but this petition was not actioned upon. Hoàng Nguyễn Nhuan (real name Hoàng Văn Giáp), interview with Quán Như, http://www.giaodiem.com/doithoai/phongvanhvg.htm accessed 9-March-2009

135 According to folklore, Nguyễn Hoàng experienced a special supernatural spiritual moment at this location on the banks of the Huong River and decided to choose the surrounding area as his base. The pagoda was built in recognition of this, and was continually upgraded and maintained by the Nguyễn lords and kings throughout the centuries. It is regarded as the nation’s most important Buddhist pagoda.
spiritual ties with the Nguyễn. These pagodas form a crucial network of spiritual and social support for the population, and as such an integral part of Huế’s imperial past.

The perception of an anti-Buddhist bias in government policies was a legacy of a long history of French colonial governments favouring Catholics. This perception was reinforced by several practices of the government of president Ngô Đình Diệm, such as the retention of Decree 10 of 1950, which placed limitations on the status and activities of religious organizations except for the Catholics, and the appointments of members of the Cần Lao Party to government bodies at all levels.

The incident that sparked the initial protest was a presidential order in 1963 banning the display at public institutions of symbols other than the national flags, during religious festivals, presumably to stress the non-religious nature of the state. Its timing, however, meant that Buddhists were banned from publicly displaying Buddhist flags on the Lễ Phật Đản (Vesak) festival, whereas some Catholics had done so to when celebrating the 25th anniversary of the consecration of Archbishop Ngô Đình Thực, a brother of President Ngô Đình Diệm. On the day of Vesak, the militant but influential monk Thích Trí Quang delivered a sermon critical of the government at the Từ Đảm pagoda in Huế, and led a large crowd of Buddhist demonstrators to protest, demanding his recorded sermon be broadcast on the local official radio station, as was the usual practice. In the chaotic stand-off between demonstrators and

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137 The Cần Lao Party was headed by President Diệm’s brother Ngô Đình Nhu and its members were dominantly Catholics. The appointment of another brother of president Diệm, Ngô Đình Cần, as the Advisor overseeing the middle region was also seen as evidence of a tendency to concentrate power in the hands of the few trusted members of his family.
the soldiers guarding the radio station, an explosion amongst the crowd killed seven demonstrators and sparked a prolonged and debilitating crisis, pitching Buddhist supporters against a government adamant that there was no religious discrimination in its policies.\(^{138}\)

Within months, anti-government protests began to spread to other cities, including Saigon, galvanising a broader spectrum of supporters – especially young students, and attracting international concern. The grounds for discontent with the government also broadened to include allegations that president Ngô Đình Diệm was running the country in an autocratic manner, and that power resided in the hands of the trusted few, members of his family. The reaction from the government was firm and brutal. As demonstrations and their suppression by riot police grew in intensity and violence,\(^{139}\) international support for the Ngô Đình Diệm government began to wane, especially after the self-immolations of a number of monks, the most prominent and shocking was that of the venerable Thích Quảng Đức.\(^{140}\)

The political situation in the Republic of Vietnam deteriorated, and the government of president Ngô Đình Diệm was overthrown by a military coup d’état in November 1963, during which president Ngô Đình Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu were killed. After the fall of president Diệm, an interim government, led by General Đặng


\(^{140}\) One of the most enduring images of the Buddhist crisis was the self-immolation of the venerable Thích Quảng Đức, captured by camera and broadcast widely.
Van Minh with the civilian Prime Minister Nguyen Ngoc Tho, came to power.\textsuperscript{141} The new government removed those connected to the previous government from power. Connections with the Can Lao party became a liability, and some were severely punished. The person held responsible for the Vesak incident, the then head of police of Hue, Phan Quang Dong, and Ngo Dinh Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Can, who had been his adviser for the middle region, were tried in separate trials, found guilty and executed in 1964.\textsuperscript{142} The interim government of General Duong Van Minh was conciliatory toward Buddhists, but lasted only three months, being replaced by military rule by General Nguyen Khanh, who alleged that Duong Van Minh was sympathetic to a neutralist stance for South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{143} Then came a period of great instability with a succession of military-dominated governments with varying composition of representatives from political groups,\textsuperscript{144} each promising to save the nation, but none of which could save themselves from the next \textit{coup d'etat}.

During this period of political chaos, a coalition of student organizations and Buddhist followers emerged to form an eclectic but powerful political movement of opposition – generally termed \textit{Phong Trào Tránh Đầu} [The Struggle Movement] – which exerted influence, and sometimes even control, over several coastal cities of the middle region, including Hue and Da Nang. Hue was the hotbed of several civil disobedience campaigns in open challenge to the authority of the generals from Saigon, such as the

\begin{footnotes}
\item Nguyen Ngoc Tho was the Vice President of South Vietnam under president Ngo Dinh Diem. A nominal Buddhist, he had supported president Ngo Dinh Diem's policies fully.
\item Duong Van Minh remained involved in the politics of South Vietnam in various roles, and became its president in the last days of South Vietnam.
\end{footnotes}
one that demanded, successfully, the repeal of General Nguyễn Khánh’s Constitution and state of emergency measures in 1964.  

Although initially motivated by Buddhists’ concern, the movement panned out in later stages to embrace issues other than religious freedom. As the war intensified, some leading Buddhist monks began to advocate suing for peace through negotiation with the communists to end the war, and the movement gained a clear anti-war stance in direct contradiction to the Saigon government. And as American involvement in the war deepened, with the presence of American troops more visible, the protests gained a strong nationalistic anti-American flavour. At the height of anti-American feelings in 1966, protesters invaded the grounds of the American Consulate in Huế and burned the American flag in protest.  

In February 1965 General Nguyễn Khánh was removed from power, and the Council of the Armed Forces [Hội Đồng Quân Lực] appointed Air Marshal Nguyễn Cao Kỳ as Chairman of the Central Executive Committee [Chủ Tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp Trung Ương], holding real power, and General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu as Chairman of the Committee for National Leadership [Chủ Tịch Ủy Ban Lãnh Dạo Quốc Gia]. Dr

146 In an interview with a Japanese journalist, the venerable Thích Trí Quang openly advocated suing for peace through negotiation with the communists. At the time, it was against the law of South Vietnam to advocate such a position. Mark Moyar (2006), Triumph forsaken: the Vietnam war, 1954-1965 Cambridge University Press, p. 366.  
148 The Council of The Armed Forces, Hội đồng Quân lực, formed in 1964 by General Nguyễn Khánh with himself as its head, consisting of a number of generals of the Armed Forces of the Republic of South Vietnam, was the body holding power in the country during the period of military rule. After General Nguyễn Khánh was removed from power, Air Marshal Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s position within the Council of The Armed Forces was Chairman of the Central Executive Committee [Chủ Tịch Ủy...
Phan Huy Quát was appointed as Prime Minister, and the veteran politician Phan Khắc Sửu as Head of State, to form a civilian government. When he came to Huế, Dr Phan Huy Quát was greeted with a large rally demanding the restoration of a constitutional Parliament, an end to military rule, and more efforts to find peace. Prime Minister Phan Huy Quát proposed to restore constitutional parliament through nationwide election, but his plan was postponed under pressure. Instead, nation-wide elections were held for positions at province and city levels [Hội Đồng Tỉnh Thị], in which candidates endorsed by Buddhists won resoundingly in Huế and other cities of the middle region.149

In May 1965, before elections for a national parliament could be held, Dr. Phan Huy Quát and Phan Khắc Sửu resigned under pressure and the Council of the Armed Forces appointed General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu as Head of State, and Air Marshal Nguyễn Cao Kỳ as Prime Minister.150 The hardliner Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, in the position of effective control of the nation, decided to suppress the protest movement by military might, which was met with more protests, especially in Huế and Đà Nẵng.

As the protests spread, anti-Saigon sentiments began to affect even members of the Armed Forces. Those who were aligned with the Tranh Đấu movement organized themselves into semi-autonomous units, such as the Buddhist Nguyễn Đại Thúc Brigade151 in open defiance of the authority. The new Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ

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151 Named after a Buddhist captain who tried to assassinate General Huỳnh Văn Cao, appointed by General Nguyễn Cao Kỳ to be Commander in Chief of the First Infantry Division, when General
took a tougher stance in his handling of the spreading protests, which was affecting morale and even the loyalty of regional commanders, threatening the chain of command. In response, the militants of the student movement armed themselves, forming the Student Martyr Brigade [Doàn Sinh Viên Quyết Tự]. With the support of troops sympathetic to their cause, they began to take charge of key points, including the radio stations of Huế and Đà Nẵng, from where ‘anti-Saigon and anti-American messages were broadcast daily’.\(^1\) Nguyễn Dác Xuân, one of the leaders of the Student Martyr Brigade, recalled:

> From the end of 1965, the people’s spirit rose to very high levels. The Struggle movement shifted our objectives from fighting against military fascism to fighting against Americans. Modes of struggles were no more restricted to those of non-violent nature, but preparations must be made to arm ourselves. I was elected by the students of Huế to be the leader of the Student Martyr Brigade, the beginning of which gave rise to an armed movement which spread from schools to other mass organisations.\(^2\)

Hoàng Văn Giâu, a key figure in the Buddhist student movement, offers another view as to the purpose of creating the Student Martyr Brigade.

> [A]nother worrying matter was that firearms were in the hands of students. They had been at the forefront of demonstrations, and now they had access to

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weapons and ammunition. [...] Some were plants working for Thiệu-Ky; some were agents of the Liberation Front. [...] In the end, we came to the conclusion that they had to be organized in order to be controlled, that was how the Student Martyr Brigade came into being. A number of Buddhist army and police officers were given the task of organizing students into groups, keeping check on the weapons they held, providing them with basic military training.154

In 1966, faced with open civil disobedience from Huế and Đà Nẵng, uncertain of loyalty from regional commanders, and even a slim possibility of secession, Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ dismissed General Nguyễn Thành Thi, the commander in charge of the 1st Corps and Thi’s immediate subordinates. Kỳ then sent his crack troops, a combination of marines, paratroopers, riot police, and tanks, to Đà Nẵng and Huế to restore order. Although armed clashes occurred in Đà Nẵng, and hundreds of people reportedly died,155 in Huế the student brigade did not open fire on the troops. Instead, they quietly handed in their weapons and surrendered, or went into hiding. Despite meeting with strong passive resistance, especially in Huế where some Buddhist leaders called for their followers to barricade the streets with their sacred Buddhist altars to block the troops’ movements, the Saigon troops managed to quell the protest movement within months.156

Many militant student leaders of the Tranh Đâu movement were arrested and


155 Nguyễn Thành Thi (1987), ibid. pp. 348-355

imprisoned, especially those who were suspected to be working for the communists. Some went to 'liberated areas' to join the communist side. Some continued to live in Huế, and some moved to live in other areas, often with the assistance and protection of local Buddhist followers. The leading monks of the movement, including the venerable Thích Trí Quang, were kept under house arrest. The year after the crackdown, 1967, saw a transition from military rule to elected government, with Presidential and Parliament elections. Supported by the military, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu stood for and won the office of President, with Nguyễn Cao Kỳ his Vice-President in the same presidential ticket. President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu held on to the presidency until the end of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975.

b. The Tranh Đấu Movement

In existing literature dealing with political developments in Huế in the sixties the opposition to military rule from Saigon and American involvement in the Vietnam War, in all its various forms is usually lumped together under one term of description, the Phong Trào Tranh Đấu, or the Struggle Movement.

It would be wrong to assume that Phong Trào Tranh Đấu was a monolithic or even united movement, both in terms of the political alliances of its leadership figures and in terms of what the movement aimed to achieve. As it derived its strength from the young, its power rested upon the capacity to influence student organizations at the four universities in Vietnam at the time, Huế, Saigon, Đa Lạt and the Buddhist university Văn Hiến. According to the recollections of those involved, different interests, including the political parties operating in South Vietnam such as the anti-
communist parties Đài Việt and Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, and the communists, all actively tried to influence the direction of the movement, or to subvert its aims, through elections of representatives of student bodies.¹⁵⁷

As David Marr noted in 1966, election of representatives at peak student organizations brought with it considerable opportunities to have a say in political direction of the organizations.

All registered students are considered members of their university’s union, although the degree to which students will affiliate themselves has varied greatly. Normally, the top three or four union officers are elected, but subordinate committees may have chairmen appointed by the winning slate of candidates. It appears that much important political business is carried on without institutionalized reference to broader group attitudes. Disputes over systems of representation have plagued the student unions, particularly at the University of Saigon.¹⁵⁸

Not only were elections closely contested, student politics at the time were sometimes dangerous. Nguyễn Đức Xuân recalled in 2003 the intricate struggles for control, including an incident when a rival activist from Đài Việt party, identified by his initial T. only,¹⁵⁹ pulled a pistol and threatened to kill him over an argument. That the movement was infiltrated by operators from the communist side is confirmed in


¹⁵⁹ Most likely to have been the student activist Trần Mẫu Tý, who was captured by the communist forces during the Tet Offensive and later found killed.
several autobiographical writings by the people concerned.\textsuperscript{160}

In terms of its goals, the movement started with a Buddhist spark, but it went on to draw its fuel from a combination of many sources: dissatisfaction with military rule and its corruption, anti-colonialist fervor and its associated anti-American attitude, a desire for peace born out of suffering from the destructive war, and a belief that a third way was possible.\textsuperscript{161} In terms of support, it tapped into a rising tide of anti-war feelings held by the young generation who had the most to lose in times of war, and by those who believed in neither side of a war not of their own making. And in geographical terms, it enjoyed strongest following in Huế. Although its overall direction was very much anti-Saigon and anti-American, the movement attracted a broad coalition of young students in most major cities in South Vietnam with a wide range of personal political views, as reported by David Marr in 1966 of student politics in Vietnam at the time.

Viewed from Saigon, intellectuals in Hue seem paradoxically to both fulminate social radicalism and to harken nostalgically to the royalist anti-foreignism of the past. Viewed from Huế, intellectuals from Saigon seem overly attracted to “westernism” and lacking in revolutionary determination. […] Saigon youth leaders are not happy with the fact that Hue has often served to initiate political crisis, securing a ‘vanguard’ role, so to speak, while Saigon groups have then been faced with the uncomfortable tactical decision

\textsuperscript{160} See, for example, Nguyễn Đức Xuân (1979), ‘Kỷ Niệm Tết Mậu Thân’, in Huế Những Ngày Nhà Động, NXB Tác Phạm Mới, Hội Nhà Văn, p. 80. See also Trần Thúc and Hoàng Đopérationg (1985), ibid, p. 70. See also the memoirs by the Chief of Special Police of Huế, Liên Thành (2008), Biên Đopérationg Mien Trung, Biệt Đopérationg Quân publisher, USA.

of either following Hue’s initiative or standing pat and facing charges of “impeding the revolution” and frustrating “national youth solidarity”.  

In ways that were similar to the contestation of the early decades of the twentieth century, discussed in the previous section, the Tranh Đấu movement took place within a wider contestation involving battles of ideas, fought over the traditional means such as books, newspapers, and teaching at schools and universities. Despite military rule, the cultural climate of South Vietnam was relatively free, allowing sufficient room for debates to flourish. Censorship existed, but scholars, writers and poets could express views contrary to the policies of the state in the numerous privately owned newspapers and scholarly, literary magazines that thrived in South Vietnam.  

In addition, with new audio technology arriving in South Vietnam in the 1960s, recorded music on cassettes became a popular and affordable commodity. Coupled with the wide reach of radio broadcasting, music formed a new cultural platform capable of reaching the people directly and widely. It was in this cultural social climate that popular song writers such as Phạm Duy and Trịnh Công Sơn were able to reach a large following amongst the young with lyrics that brought home the stark realities of war.

Phạm Duy, who had earlier joined the anti-French resistance Việt Minh as a cultural cadre, left the Việt Minh after 6 years and chose to move South in 1954 to live in

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162 David G. Marr (1966), ibid, pp. 251-252.
Saigon. Pham Duy’s personal politics was slightly to the right of center. An ardent artist, he valued personal creative freedom, and his decision to move South in 1954 was underpinned by his belief that had he stayed, his creative expressions would have been prescribed. Living in Saigon, Pham Duy became one of the most influential and prolific song writers of Vietnam. Greatly admired generally, he also enjoyed the respect and acceptance of the artistic and intellectual circles of Saigon.¹⁶⁴

His early music, composed during his time with the resistance, included spirited compositions such as Song of Youth [Nhạc Tuổi Xanh], glorifying the young who joined the revolution ‘in the autumn of a year past / when the revolution arrived / the land of Viet roared with the sounds / of thousands of youth / throwing off their shackles and chains’ to build a future of freedom and prosperity, where ‘on our roads we walk / our houses we build / our land we till / however we like / and wait for the day / when abundance returns / when the French has been crushed / when we laugh the ringing laughter of freedom’.¹⁶⁵

But in the sixties Pham Duy’s compositions began to reflect much of the sadness of war, as in the lyrics of Kỳ Vật Cho Em [A Souvenir for My Beloved], one of the most commonly heard song at the time, both on government run radio and in private homes. First broadcast in 1970, its lyrics, derived from a poem penned by a relatively unknown soldier poet,¹⁶⁶ take the form of an internal monologue by a soldier on


¹⁶⁵ Pham Duy (1947), Nhạc Tuổi Xanh.

¹⁶⁶ The authorship, and the exact form, of this poem has been the subject of some debate. Its authorship has been ascribed to either the poet Linh Phuong, or a young soldier poet Nguyen Duc Nghj. See the Vietnamese language Wikipedia’s page on this song and the poem at its source. http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%E1%BB%B7_v%E1%BA%ADt_cho_em
point of leaving for battle, in response to the pleadings for reassurance from his beloved, with all possible answers absolutely bleak.

You ask me, you’re asking me, when I’ll be back
And plead with me, ‘please say you’ll be back soon.’
I’ll be back, maybe through victory
at Pleime, or Đức Co, Đồng Xoài, Bình Giã, 167
I’ll be back, amid wind-blasted trees, I’ll be back, maybe in a decorated box
I’ll be back, on a stretcher / In a helicopter / painted a funereal white [...]
I’ll be back one empty sunless evening / A sad poncho embalming my soul
I’ll be back, but over your youthful hair / is hastily draped a mourning cloth
[...]
I’ll be back, on a pair of crutches / I’ll be back, a defeated amputee
An evening in spring / you’ll stroll down the streets /
Next to your lover / a cripple, bitter and callused / ...

The younger Trịnh Công Sơn, mostly living in Huế, was closely identified with the Tranh Đấu movement, although his personal politics were somewhat ambiguous. His lyrics resonated with thousands of young people as they captured the essence of what a sad legacy their generation had inherited, ‘Twenty years of daily civil war / Motherland’s legacy, a forest of dry bones / Motherland’s legacy, a mountain full of tombs.’168 Famous for his deeply philosophical and poetic lyrics, Trịnh Công Sơn painted the bleak landscape of the war, ‘The nightly booms of the cannons / echo in

167 Names of major battles in the early years of full-scale Vietnam War.
168 Trịnh Công Sơn (1967), ‘Gia Tài Của Mẹ’, in Ca Khúc Da Vàng; Nhân Bán Publisher.
the city / A street sweeper listens / his broom paused in mid-stroke", but also dreamt of peace and foresaw the wounds of war with spine-chilling perspicacious clarity,

'When peace comes to my country / I will go and visit / the sad cemeteries / Tombstones as numerous as mushrooms / When the killings in my country cease / Old mothers go up the mountains / in search of their sons’ remains'. Through his music, the reality of war hits home hard. ‘Come and sit closer / Closer together / Sit next to each other / Don’t abandon me / Over twenty years now / .. And what remains? / Nothing remains / nothing remains / What remains is war.’ The immediate prospects are dim, with all paths pointing to futility: ‘The path of my brothers / So far as unreachable / the path of civilisation / piles of bones as tall as mountains.

This strand of Trịnh Công Sơn’s music spoke for a generation caught in a war not of their own making, squeezed between the positions of the opposing sides. The proximity of the war induced anti-war feelings based in fear and disgust, but at the same time it forced people to take shelter in one camp or the other. The morality of the war was never in black and white, but moral comfort, illusory as it might be, somehow belonged to the extremes. People caught in the middle simply had nowhere to go; and as the war intensified, it became more difficult not to take sides.

But another strand of Trịnh Công Sơn’s lyrics seemed to lean towards the basic tenets of the revolutionary side, expressing a strong affinity with the cause of national

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169 Trịnh Công Sơn (1967), ‘Đại Bác Ru Đêm’, in Ca Khúc Da Vàng, Nhà Bèn Publisher.
independence, using terminology clearly adopted from the revolutionary discourse emanating from the north. In this strand, Vietnam’s predicament is seen as a legacy of colonialism that reduces its people to the status of a slave, ‘The yellow skinned slave nods off / in his dimly lit home / a slumber that lasts for years / a slumber that blinds him from seeing his country ... the yellow skinned slave sits still / in his little home / sitting still and forgets his country / sitting still begging for food and clothes ...’

Throwing off the shackles required, a priori, an awakening of the proud tradition of their history, and unity amongst all Vietnamese in a common struggle for emancipation towards a future where ‘the roads that now lead to prisons / will be lined with schools and markets / our people return to tend the fields / and live in self-sufficiency.’

Trịnh Công Sơn’s lyrics – pacifist and idealistic – underlined how the Tranh Đấu movement did not take place in a vacuum. Instead, it grew in a politically questioning atmosphere, where the future direction of Vietnam was fiercely contested, acutely framed by an escalating war. Then, when the war had a direct impact on the society, beliefs turned into actions, and contestations over ideas manifested themselves into violent conflicts, as happened in Huế during the most destructive battles of the Vietnam War, the Tết Offensive in 1968.

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CHAPTER THREE

Huế’s war legacy: Forgotten history, enduring memory

This chapter addresses the consequences of the developments in Huế, outlined in the previous chapter, in three major respects.

First, the war violence inflicted on Huế’s civilian population during the battle of the Tet Offensive is investigated. This subject is woefully neglected in existing literature on Huế, and my work here brings this difficult and troubling episode into open academic discourse for the first time. It draws the link between the pre-existing tension between the Tranh Đâu movement and its detractors to prior to the violence that occurred during the Tet Offensive through the autobiographical writings of those concerned, and the literary and artistic expressions of Huế’s authors.

Second, after the Vietnam War came to an end in 1975, with the radicals in charge, Huế’s imperial past and its war legacy presented special difficulties for a government unwilling to deal with the war legacy in any meaningful way. Here my work dissects the intricate inter-relationships between post-war commemorative politics and the divisive nature of Huế’s war legacy to argue that the reason Huế’s radical history is being officially forgotten lies in its attendant distressing memory of the losses of innocent lives, which would have serious implications for those responsible, including allegations of war-crimes.

Third, it provides a personal account of the sea changes that engulfed Huế in the period from the 1960s to the present to render in concrete detail how they have
affected the lives of ordinary people of Huế and destroyed the social fabric that had once held its society together.

1. The Tet Offensive and its aftermath

The Tet Offensive was a military campaign, launched on January 30, 1968, the first day of that Lunar New Year (Tết Mậu Thân), by forces of the North Vietnamese army against the South, taking advantage of an element of surprise. Prior to the attack, both sides had agreed to a temporary ceasefire to celebrate the Lunar New Year, Tết, hence the name Tet Offensive. The offensive was the most significant battle of the Vietnam War up to that point. It was aimed at many provinces and cities throughout South Vietnam, including Huế and Saigon. In Huế, the communist forces took the city easily and controlled it for 25 days, holding off the South Vietnamese and allied forces from behind the impenetrable walls of the Citadel and the Imperial city. The city was retaken by South Vietnamese forces and their allies after intense house to house combat involving the use of heavy modern weapons.

a. A dangerous environment

During the Tết Offensive in 1968, in addition to the devastating fire power used in such an intense battle, another source of danger existed for those who worked for the government of South Vietnam. Given the tensions between the radicals in the Tranh Đầu movement and their detractors, Huế during the Tet Offensive was an environment fraught with dangerous currents. When the Tranh Đầu movement was cracked down in 1966, many militant leaders of the movement were arrested and
imprisoned, especially those who were suspected to be working for the communists. Others continued to live in Huế, and some went to ‘liberated areas’ to join the communist side.

When communist forces took the city, the power relationships were reversed. Those who had fled into ‘liberated areas’ returned with the communist troops, those imprisoned were released, and those who had managed to keep their links with the communist side sufficiently discreet came out in the open to take a lead role. Some took up key roles in the interim front called Coalition of the People for Democracy and Peace [Liên Minh Dân Tộc, Dân Chủ, Hòa Bình], formed to organize a general uprising of the people. The Coalition was headed by Lê Văn Hào, a Professor from the University of Huế, Venerable Thích Đôn Hậu – the Abbot of Thiên Mụ pagoda and the most senior Buddhist monk of the middle region,175 Hoàng Phú Ngoc Tưởng – a well-known leading intellectual of the Tranh Đầu movement, and his brother Hoàng Phú Ngoc Phan. Some took up positions in the People’s Committees formed in the two districts under their control. Some chaired the People’s Courts convened to pass judgment on captured enemies.176 Others joined para-military units formed to back up the regular communist forces and to provide their operations with local knowledge.177

175 Some sources, especially those connected with Thiên Mụ pagoda where he was the Abbot, claim that Venerable Thích Đôn Hậu joined the Liên Minh Dân Tộc, Dân Chủ, Hòa Bình under duress. http://www.thuvienhoasen.org/D_1-2_2-140_4-10714_5-50_6-1_17-27_14-1_15-1/

176 Hoàng Phú Ngoc Phan chaired the Security Committee for District 1, and the People’s Court of Gia Hội District.

On the other hand, those associated with the government of South Vietnam became the hunted and went into hiding, trapped in a city held by their foes, well-informed with local knowledge provided by their local comrade informants. In such a situation, seeking revenge would be a predictably human response, and indeed retribution was very much on the mind of Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, the former leader of the Student Martyr Brigade of 1965-66, when he learnt that he was to be with the troops advancing towards Huế, according to his own recollection after his commander Hưng told him of the news.

Taking leave of brother Hưng, I ran across a small creek to the home I had built up with my own hands. Memories of Huế came suddenly back, flooding my heart. I wanted to shout out loud, ‘Listen here, the likes of Ngô Quang Trưởng, Phan Văn Khoa, you thugs had been hunting me for much of the autumn of 1966, and now I am about to “report in person” to you! Listen my brothers who shared my struggle and now shackled in jails, we are about to return and exact revenge for you. The people will open the prisons and set you free. You will have weapons to fight for your freedom and independence’. The joy was so great that I skipped all the steep steps and reached my home without even realizing it.

Many people, civilians and soldiers of the Republic of South Vietnam, were captured by the communist troops during their control of the city, and later on found to have been killed. In her memoirs, published posthumously in 2011, my mother recalled the

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178 General Ngô Quang Trưởng was then the Commander in chief of South Vietnam’s infantry division stationed in Huế, Phan Văn Khoa the Provincial Chief. TTQĐu’s note.

179 Nguyễn Đắc Xuân (1979), ibid, p. 82
general atmosphere at the time, including descriptions of one of the four searches conducted at our family home, where numerous relatives were taking shelter.

In the street, the gongs clanged noisily, together with calls for young men to present themselves to be assigned with work to do. I forbade the people taking shelter in my home to make contact. I was fearful that if they did, and said the wrong thing, it would be disastrous. [...] Amongst the young men hiding here were my nephews and grandchildren, plus several soldiers, a captain of the marines and a captain of the infantry.

In the evening of the fifth, at 8 o’clock, somebody knocked on our door. The door was firmly locked and I went to open it. I was not frightened, but my hands were shaking and I couldn’t open the door. It was locked so securely, latched above and below, reinforced by furniture as barricade, not easy to open. The knocking grew more insistent which made me fumble even more, and my son had to help me open it. A group of three people, one woman and two men came in. I regained my composure when they showed no sign of being violent. The woman told me to switch off the torch, one of the men pointed his gun defensively at me, and the other man turned his back looking the other way to hide his face from me. He was no stranger, a teacher at the Buddhist school Bô Đè, and a friend of my oldest son.  

Nguyễn Dác Xuân, the former leader of the Student Martyr Brigade of 1965-66, in a sixty seven page autobiographical writing published in 1979, provided a nine-page detailed account of how he and a group of men raided and searched the house of

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Phạm Đức Minh,\(^{181}\) a senior leader of the **Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng** who had caused untold problems for the **Tranh Đấu** movement, captured him hiding under his bed, terrorized and interrogated him. Nguyễn Đặc Xuăn’s account does not tell what happened to Phạm Đức Minh afterwards.\(^{182}\) An extract from Nguyễn Đặc Xuăn’s recollection is reproduced below to highlight the key role played by local knowledge in these searches, and to underline the links between these arrests and the tensions that had existed between some members of the Tranh Đấu movement and their detractors.

The name “Minh the Cripple” brings forth a despicable picture. His real name is Phạm Đức Minh, a member of the **Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng**,\(^{183}\) no stranger to our brothers in the Tranh Đấu movement in Huế […], who had caused our movement in Huế considerable troubles. He planted his people in our struggle to sabotage it, used the student status of his followers to voice their opposition to communism. It was him, with his limping gait and walking stick, who was always there with his underling thugs, armed with knives and guns, who forced the students of Huế to disband our struggle against the Americans in the summer of 1966. When we protested, they pressured the students to elect their VNQDD members to the movement’s leadership group to steer our anti-American struggle towards a demand that America-Thieu-Ky clique allows their party to hold sway over the government of Thừa Thiên – Huế. Naturally,

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\(^{181}\) Nguyễn Đặc Xuăn’s account gives Phạm Đức Minh’s address as across the lane from my home, about three doors further along.

\(^{182}\) Nguyễn Đặc Xuăn (1979), ibid., pp. 98-108.

\(^{183}\) Here Nguyễn Đặc Xuăn refers to the **Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng**, a nationalist political party formed in the 1920s, who organized a failed armed resistance against the French in 1929. In 1930 its entire leadership including the founder Nguyễn Thái Học was captured by the French forces and publicly executed. The enmity between the VNQDD and the Vietnamese Communist Party runs deep, stemming from the rivalry for power with the Viet Minh during the nation’s struggle for independence. After 1954, the VNQDD was active in the political life of South Vietnam, participated in elections, and wielded considerable influence.
our fellow students fiercely resisted their violent intervention. Seeing the uselessness of their attempt, they turned around and spread the accusation that our movement in 1966 was led by Communists. [...] Knowing for sure this was his home, our brothers were energised and rushed to his home at number 21/8, lane 2. It was a salubrious home, with tiled roof, set on top of a high concrete foundation. [...] We surrounded the house, and burst into the house. Minh’s wife, a capitalist woman who traded in American aid goods, big and fat with oily skin, loudly protested ‘My husband left early this morning’ [...] After I had gone out into the street, a woman whose face was covered, surreptitiously pressed a torch into my hand and whispered in a worried voice. ‘He was in there around noon. Wouldn’t have had time to escape. Watch out.’ [...] I used the torch to search all the nooks and crannies but still couldn’t discover any secret place that would hide his fat body. Disappointment began to rise inside me. Suddenly, I bent down and shone the torch underneath the divan. The gap between the divan and the floor was less than the thickness of two fingers, and I couldn’t see through it. But Hậu lay down, pressed his eyes to the floor to look under and caught the sight of a fat gut in a white shirt protruding from a shallow trench underneath.184

In another piece of autobiographical writing Nguyễn Đắc Xuân also recalled how a former rival185 of the Tranh Đấu movement was captured and placed in Xuân’s custody, and in Nguyễn Đắc Xuân’s own words, ‘members of anti-communist parties,

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185 Nguyễn Đắc Xuân identifies this person by only his initials T.M.T., but the context identifies him as Trần Mậu Tý, a non-communist activist with the Tranh Đấu movement, who, according to Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, once threatened to shoot Xuân when both were members of the Student Martyrs Brigade.
if captured during a conflict, have little chance of surviving.\textsuperscript{186} Nguyên Dâc Xuân claims he transferred the person concerned into someone else’s custody and only heard of his death much later on. Nguyên Dâc Xuân speculates three possible scenarios of his death: he may have ‘fled from his captors and killed by bombs or stray bullets, fled from his captors and then killed by the armed self-defence units or by the [communist] regular troops, or after being released into someone else’s custody, he may have been re-arrested by the leaders of the armed units in control of the citadel at the time and “dealt with” in accordance with the judgment of the gods of war.’\textsuperscript{187}

\textbf{b. The aftermath and communal psychic costs}

In the months immediately following the Tet Offensive, Huế was a devastated city in mourning. The physical destruction was vast, the psychic wounds deeply disturbing. Some ‘ten thousand houses [were] either totally destroyed or damaged, roughly 40 percent of the city, and 116,000 civilians were made homeless (out of a pre-Tet population of 140,000).’\textsuperscript{188} The Citadel’s South-Eastern Thuong Tì gate was badly damaged. The Eastern Đông Ba gate was the site of such heavy battle that its three-tiered solid brick sentry tower was flattened into rubbles. The Post Office next to the Đông Ba gate, a substantial brick building, was completely destroyed, and in its place a huge crater deep enough to have water in it. The Imperial City, the site of desperate fighting, was also badly damaged. The Trường Tiền Bridge, French-built and much

\textsuperscript{186} Nguyên Dâc Xuân (1999), ibid. pp. 255-260.
loved by the people of Huế, was blown up, its broken span a symbol of the despair that permeated the population and the fractures splitting the Huế community.

The physical damage was widespread and visible, and so was the loss of human life. The sight of dead bodies in the streets, in the homes, or buried underneath the rubbles moved Trịnh Công Sơn to write some of the most graphic lines of lyrics in the days immediately after the battles were over.

Dead bodies float in the river / or lie in the open fields
On the city’s rooftops / and in the meandering roads
Dead bodies lie unclaimed / underneath the pagoda’s eaves
In the cathedrals / on the steps of abandoned homes
Dead bodies lie all around here / in the cold steady rain
Near those of the elderly / lie those of the innocent young [...] 

Dead bodies lie in a huddle / underneath the bridge 

In the corners of collapsed houses / and in the deep trenches

Adding to this grim reality, the gruesome nature, and the terrible circumstances of many of those deaths brought much darker clouds that would haunt the populace and would split the community for a long time.

During the time when Huế was under the control of communist troops, soldiers and officials of the South Vietnamese government were captured in their own homes and taken away. Some prominent local people, on the other hand, came out to hold leading positions in the newly created revolutionary government, having been living in Huế and actively working for the other side in secret. Community fracture lines deepened into anger and hatred, when mass graves were discovered, containing the corpses of those who had been captured by the communist troops, many with wrists tied behind their back, bearing signs of torture and of being buried alive. Suspicion turned into rumours and accusations – spoken and unspoken – which split families and friends. For a period of months, newspapers carried ghastly photographs of newly discovered mass-graves. The pain and sufferings of those who died, and their family, were painfully clear in those photographs.


Estimates of the number of deaths vary, but according to the *Time* magazine published in October 1969 after the last such graves was exhumed, it was in the thousands.

The gruesome discovery late last month brought to some 2,300 the number of bodies of South Vietnamese men, women and children unearthed around Hue. All were executed by the Communists at the time of the savage 25-day battle for the city during the Tet offensive of 1968. [...] When the battle for Hue ended Feb. 24, 1968, some 3,500 civilians were missing. A number had obviously died in the fighting and lay buried under the rubble. But as residents and government troops began to clean up, they came across a series of shallow mass graves just east of the Citadel, the walled city that shelters Hue's old imperial palace. About 150 corpses were exhumed from the first mass grave, many tied together with wire and bamboo strips. Some had been shot; others had apparently been buried alive. Most had been either government officials
or employees of the Americans, picked up during a door-to-door hunt by Viet Cong cadres who carried detailed blacklists. Similar graves were found inside the city and to the southwest near the tombs where Viet Nam's emperors lie buried. Among those dug out were the bodies of three German doctors who had worked at the University of Hue.\footnote{Time, October 1969.}

The scale of human losses, and the manner in which they died, also inspired the poet and writer Nhã Ca, who had moved to Saigon to live but was in Huế for the duration of the Tết Offensive, to pen her reportage, \textit{Giai Khan Sô cho Huế [A Mourning Cloth for Huế]}.

Nhã Ca was well-known for her novels depicting the delicate complexity of life in Huế. A prolific writer, her works usually dealt with delicate matters of the heart, the sense of uncertainty felt by young women in times of war, and the intricate constraints of the social conservative forces that prevailed in Huế, written in a style that exudes the rebellious spirit of the young. \textit{Giai Khan Sô cho Huế} marked a major hardening in the way her works depicted the war. Loosely based on what she witnessed firsthand and accounts retold to her by witnesses, the novel directly placed the moral responsibility for what happened in Huế squarely on the communist troops, especially on the former leaders of the \textit{Tranh Đấu} movement who returned to Huế with them. A character, Dác, resembled the real-life Nguyễn Dác Xuân so much that readers who lived in Huế at the time often identified him with the character. In the novel, Dác, a former leading member of the \textit{Tranh Đấu} movement, having fled Huế when the movement was suppressed, returned to Huế in the Tet Offensive to actively hunt
down his former foes. An extract described the treatment meted out by Đắc to his
former rival in the *Tranh Đấu* movement, captured and accused of having infiltrated
the movement at the behest of the anti-communist Đại Việt Party. It was told from the
perspectives of a witness hiding in a dugout shelter, unable to see, but within earshot
from the events unfolding outside.

Đắc’s laughter rang out crisp and clear. His piercing laugh, full of suppressed
anger, unsettled my mind. Then a gunshot rang out, followed by a loud
scream. That’s the end. But no, another shot rang out, another scream, and this
continued. With each shot my heart jumped, followed by a sense of relief.
Death is final. But strangely, another shot would ring out again, another
scream, accompanied by Đắc’s maniacal laughter. Then the gunshots ceased
after a terrifying final scream. [...] My mother calls for Hường to return to the
dug-out shelter, and she was shaken by what she had witnessed. I asked her
what happened, and in a trembling stutter she told me what she saw. Đắc had
captured Ty, forced him to stand in a foxhole and began to terrorise him
with accusations. Đắc asked his revolutionary comrades for a chance to settle
a personal account and his comrades did not intervene. Ty stood inside the
foxhole, and each time Đắc aimed the gun at his head he would shut his eyes
tight and steel his face waiting for the bullet. [...] But each time the bullet just
missed him, and each time he would scream, thinking it’s his last. Afterwards,
Đắc pulled him up and led him away.¹⁹²

¹⁹² First published in Saigon in 1969, this novel is now available electronically at the Talawas
between fact and fiction in this novel, Ty was the name of the captured man described in this
extract. In real life, Trần Mấu Ty was one of Nguyễn Đắc Xuân’s former rivals, who was captured by
the communist forces and was in Nguyễn Đắc Xuân’s custody. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân has denied
killing him, instead claiming that he had been released into someone else’s custody before he died.
*Giải Khẩn Sơ cho Huế* does not have the subtlety and intricate complexities of other works by Nhã Ca, such as *Mưa Trên Cây Sầu Đồng* – *[Rain Falling on the Sầu Đồng Trees]*, set around a delicate, but disapproved, love affair between a young woman from conservative Huế and an outsider, or the ambiguities of love and family life in times of war in *Đêm Nghe Tiếng Đại Bác* – *[The Nightly Sounds of the Cannons]*. Instead, its power lies in a rawness of anger at barbaric brutality. Even Hoàng Phú Ngọc Trường, in a 1997 interview, said that it was reminiscent of *The Sorrow of War*, the gritty realist novel about the Vietnam War penned by Bảo Ninh, a former soldier of the north.¹⁹³ Such was the impact of *Giải Khẩn Sơ cho Huế* that in even as late as 2003, Nguyễn Đác Xuân was still writing in response to its perceived accusations.

*Giải Khẩn Sơ cho Huế* won the prestigious Presidential prize for literature in 1970, and gave Nhã Ca the reputation as an ardent anti-communist writer of the south, which later earned her and her poet husband Trần Dạ Tứ some twelve years of imprisonment after the communist forces prevailed in 1975.¹⁹⁴ At the time of its publication, together with constant news in the South Vietnamese press about the discoveries of mass graves around Huế, the general atmosphere in Huế was one of despair coupled with hatred and anger.

Remarkably, even in that atmosphere, anti-war, anti-Saigon and anti-American activities continued to simmer, spearheaded by student organisations led by several

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¹⁹⁴ Nhã Ca and her husband Trần Dạ Tứ were sent to re-education camps for a long period of imprisonment. Following strong lobbying from PEN and Amnesty International, Nhã Ca and her husband were released from prison and left Vietnam for Sweden. She now lives in the USA where she continues to write.
former leaders of the *Tranh Đấu* movement who stayed back in Huế, their connection and sympathy with the communist side had not been revealed openly during the Tết Offensive. Demonstrations against the Saigon government were strongest in the years 1970 and 1971, especially during the times of election when the incumbent president Nguyễn văn Thiệu was the sole candidate in the Presidential race, all other candidates having withdrawn from the race in protest against what they regarded as the unfair advantage enjoyed by Nguyễn Văn Thiệu.\footnote{\textit{Le Vän Lăn (2012) ‘Những đầu án độc đạo của phong trào dân#else\footnote{} thọ Huế’, \textit{Sông Hướng} Special Issue 6-12. \url{http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c265/So-Dac-Biet-T-6-12.html}.}} The oppression of the protestors was brutal. Some leaders of the movement were arrested, and in the case of the poet Ngò Kha, was never seen alive again. But despite strong oppression, as recalled by Võ Quê, ‘from 1970 onwards, our brothers continued to find all ways to bring revolutionary literature and art from the North and from the liberated areas to the propaganda and other forms of protests in Huế’, which included demonstrations against the ‘genocidal war waged by America’ and included several instances of setting fires to military recruitment offices placed at schools, burning an effigy of Nixon, and using home-made Molotov cocktails to set fires to several cars used by American personnel.\footnote{\textit{Vo Que (1979), ‘Lừa Đường Phó’ in \textit{Huế Những Ngày Nội Động}, NXB Tác Phạm Mới, Hội Nhà Văn, pp. 262-303.}}

Nevertheless, for the post-1968 period, the *Tranh Đấu* movement lost much of its broader support it had enjoyed previously within the local community. The war raged on until America lost the will to fight an intractable and costly war, which had become increasingly unpopular at home partly as a result of the psychological shock of the Tet Offensive. In 1973 the United States of America struck an agreement with North
Vietnam at the Paris negotiation table to disengage their troops from Vietnam. Two years later, North Vietnam mounted a full-scale assault on multiple fronts. In March 1975 the victorious North Vietnamese troops marched into the city of Huế, by then abandoned by the South Vietnamese army central command in a disastrous attempt to retreat further south, culminating in the collapse of the entire South Vietnamese army.

2. Radicals in charge

a. Resetting the thermostat

Following the collapse of South Vietnam, Vietnam re-emerged as a united country governed by the Communist Party of Vietnam. Together with concerns of a social, economic, and political nature, cultural agenda was a top priority in rebuilding a united Vietnam. In *Understanding Vietnam*, Neil Jameson describes the process as the ‘resetting the thermostat in the south’, where there would be no pluralistic government, no gradual evolution, and no reconciliation. Instead, the south was to be quickly transformed to socialism in a transition in which the freedom of thought and expression to which the people of South Vietnam had grown accustomed, was anathema. The “corrupted” culture of the south was an obstacle to progress.\(^\text{197}\)

Having identified the “corrupted” culture of the south as an obstacle, the Communist Party of Vietnam embraced a comprehensive social, educational, political and cultural program aiming at moulding the newly re-united nation into a single identity in a frame consistent with the guiding Marxist thoughts. A new Constitution was drafted

by a committee chaired by Trương Chinh and ratified by the National Assembly in 1979. Article 4 of the Constitution affirms the primary roles of the Communist Party of Vietnam in the following terms ‘The Communist Party of Vietnam, [...] armed with Marxism-Leninism, is the only force leading the state and society, and the main factor determining the success of the Vietnamese revolution’.198

The implementation of the new cultural agenda was swift. Saigon, the capital city of South Vietnam was renamed Hồ Chí Minh City after the revolutionary hero. Public institutions such as schools, hospitals and streets that bore the names of historical figures associated with feudalism were renamed after revolutionaries. Independent newspapers not under direct control of the Party were closed down. School curricula in every field, especially history, were reset to reflect the new revolutionary values. Books and literary magazines published in the south were banned, replaced by cultural products from the north. Former members of the army and government of South Vietnam were sent to re-education camps. Artists, poets and writers were remoulded to become “better citizens of a new society”. The place vacated by the banned books and their ideas was filled by more politically appropriate publications.199

The preoccupation with asserting an unyielding monolithic control over all cultural aspects of life in the new Vietnam was a defining feature of Communist rule in post-1975 Vietnam. Indeed the Communist Party of Vietnam has shown a pragmatic willingness to compromise on economic management, but an unwillingness to yield its total control on matters political and cultural. One can easily understand the reason

that the Party didn’t want to relax its grip on political control: its own survival depended on that. The need for the Party to maintain complete control of the nation’s cultural agenda was just as crucial to its survival. The Party’s legitimacy, its mandate to govern the nation, depended on the claims that it upheld the Vietnamese tradition of resisting foreign aggression, rendering the Communist Party as the only legitimate inheritor of that long tradition of Vietnam.

There were two major ways to bolster and sustain this claim. One was to emphasise the achievements and credentials of the Party through the teaching of a history that placed the Party in a favourable light, and nourished its image through the politics of commemoration that would sustain key aspects of that history. The other was to dismiss the contribution of others, to denounce them as collaborators with the nation’s enemy, and to wipe out any vestiges of their past through the politics of obliteration.

b. Politics of commemoration and of obliteration

After the war, ideological perspectives of the victorious side sharply shaped post-war cultural agenda of the nation, both its forward vision and its retrospective assessment. While the wartime political imperatives gave the North Vietnamese historians the task of using history to help marshal support for the war, in post-war times the cultural and political imperatives were the maintenance and cherishing the ideas, convictions, sacrifices and achievements of their struggle.

Consistent with a definite and unyielding view of the recent history of Vietnam, an equally definite and unyielding attitude permeates through many cultural aspects of
daily life, from the renaming of the streets, public spaces and social institutions to the
commemorative practices aimed at celebrating the nation’s achievements and to heal
the wounds of war. At the end of the war, there was an overwhelming need to
reinforce the sense of community through commemorations. Of the public
commemorative practices in post-war Vietnam, Hue Tam Ho Tai observed,

The creation of a common past is a means of defining what and who belong,
and what and who deserve to be consigned to oblivion. Battles over memory
are thus battles over how to draw the contours of community, who is to be
included, and who is to be excluded from the community thus defined.\textsuperscript{200}

For decades after the war, public commemoration practices in Vietnam concentrated
on celebrating the victory of the communist forces, and addressing the human losses
suffered during the war. The scale of the losses was massive. In 1994, to mark the 50\textsuperscript{th}
anniversary of the formation of the Vietnamese People’s Army, women who lost all
their sons in battle were awarded the title of Vietnamese Heroic Mothers by the state.
The state controlled \textit{People’s Daily} ran regular front page articles detailing individual
cases and by the end of the year, 19,879 such women had been identified. Another
21,600 families who suffered lesser losses were awarded the Independence Medal.
The Vietnamese government estimated that 1.1 million of its soldiers died in battle, a
figure that did not include the soldiers of the South Vietnamese Army, nor innocent
bystanders.\textsuperscript{201} In order to assuage the grief of such huge human losses, the
Vietnamese state ‘went to great lengths to ensure that its claims regarding the glory

\textsuperscript{200} Tai, Hue-Tam Ho. (2001), \textit{The country of memory: remaking the past in late socialist Vietnam.}

\textsuperscript{201} Ton-That Quynh-Du, ‘Grass over the graves’, \textit{The Age}, 29\textsuperscript{th} April 1995.
and nobility of suffering and dying for the cause were compelling, and soon after the war was over, the government began commissioning the construction of monuments for war dead (đái liệt sĩ) in localities across Vietnam. These monuments are now visible in nearly every commune and district.

Naturally, the post-war commemorative practices were organised in ways that reflected the orthodoxy view and celebrated the ideals and the sacrifice made in the name of those ideals. Commemorations, and their cousin obliteration, by their own nature, are practices of dealing with the past, of managing memories of the past. Although the commemorative fever seems to be a by-product of the economic reforms Đôi Mới, it was more than ‘just a salvage operation designed to preserve traces of the past before they are obliterated by the forces of relentless capitalist-style modernization.’ Instead, the stakes involved in public memory are far more complex: ‘deciding how to remember a century’s worth of historical change is a matter of grave difficulty for a society filled with uncertainty about its future and only just beginning to rethink its recent past.

Although economic reforms may have provided the opening of a space for revisiting the past, the managing of the past is bound by rigid parameters, and follows certain patterns. It covers a wide range of activities from celebrating the events that shaped the nation, mourning the loss and sacrifice, to the implementation of social policies

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204 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, (2001), ibid. p. 1
205 Tai, Hue-Tam Ho (2001), ibid. p. 2
designed to provide practical assistance to the families of those who sacrificed their lives for the revolutionary cause. Important events of history were often accorded additional significance and new layers of meaning to reflect new interpretations of the past. The mourning of the losses and sacrifice involved a clear-cut differentiation of the manner of the deaths; only the deaths of those who fought for the revolution are commemorated publicly. The social policies are finely tuned to give priority in housing, education and employment matters to the children of the families of those who sacrificed their lives for the revolutionary cause.\textsuperscript{206}

If the act of remembering is politics of commemoration then the act of ignoring is the politics of obliteration. The strong identification of Huế and the Nguyễn Dynasty meant that after the country was reunited in 1975, the heritage of Huế was regarded as a reminder of a "feudal" past, one that sits at odds with the ideals of the revolution, and thus its official neglect in this period is not at all surprising.

By the same token, one would expect that Huế's 'revolutionary' history, one that embraces the actions and contributions by Huế's radicals who were, in the words of the critic Phạm Phú Phong, the 'path-breakers who provided the compass for the resistance against the Americans'.\textsuperscript{207} But their legacy is one that's intensely distressing, deeply divisive, and bitterly contested.


c. Bitter legacy of the radical Huế

Lying in the ruins of Huế’s monuments are the two most potent symbols of its past. The monuments themselves point to the old Imperial Huế; their bullet holes the scars from a more recent radical time. The Imperial Huế is old, its world is gone but its memory lives on in the monuments. It ceased to be the seat of political power long ago, but through its legacy it has had an influence on what Vietnam was to become in modern times. The more recent radical Huế has left a different kind of legacy; its visible cues the ruins of the monuments, its narrative largely untold, subsumed by the larger narrative of the nation’s history. Within Huế’s cultural heritage, Colin Long has discerned the contrasting differences between tradition and modernity, separated by the geography of the city.

The city was, and still is, in a sense, two separate cities: one, symbolic of Vietnam’s ancient history and culture, a place where the rituals and traumas of the last two hundred years are made manifest in heritage structures and their ruins; the other a more prosaic reflection of one of the great themes of Vietnamese history over that period – the fluctuating and often fraught interaction of the country with the rest of the world. If the predominant “feel” of the north bank is of history and tradition, that of the south is of modernity and change.  

Colin Long notes that, like other socialist revolutions, the Vietnamese revolution contains a modernising, anti-traditional impulse. While the modernising impulse leads  

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to a tendency to reject outdated traditions, the cultural elements of the same traditions are co-opted ‘in an effort to ground the present regime’s legitimacy in the cultural legacies of Vietnam’s past.’ In Long’s view, the paradox of Huế’s heritage therefore sits squarely at the interplay between this modernising impulse and the role heritage has in the process of modernisation.

Huế’s heritage, largely a manifestation of the nation’s “feudal” past, is symbolic, in one view of modernity, of outmoded forms. From another vantage point, however, Huế’s royal heritage is seen as evidence of the achievements of Vietnamese culture, and the early years of the Nguyễn dynasty can be celebrated as a time of restored national unity: both of these have been crucial elements of the modern Vietnamese struggle for national independence.

In the context of Vietnam’s post-war politico-cultural agenda, within this modernity and tradition dichotomy, Colin Long recognises that Imperial Huế’s association with the Nguyễn dynasty remains the most problematic. Here Long is in essential agreement with Trần Đức Anh Son, a historian with a strong interest in Huế, who argues that the impact of having such negative historical baggage was real, especially in the period immediately after the end of the war.

After the nation was reunified (30-April-1975), the nation’s history turned a new page but the fate of the heritage of Hue did not immediately improve.

With a perspective full of prejudice of a number of people at the time, the collection of monuments of Hue was lumped together with the “feudal reactionary” Nguyen Dynasty, and therefore continued to be neglected, if not to say mistreated. Many monuments were used arbitrarily for other purposes: the tomb of Đúc Đức became a group living quarter, the Nam Giao Esplanade was turned into a Martyr’s Memorial, the Temple of Literature became the training school for the province’s Police, and the Six Ministries inside the Royal City became a printing factory. These continued until the establishment of the Office for The Management of the Historic and Cultural Heritage of Hue on the 10th of June 1982. [...] There will be contrary views, [...] but the reality was that political prejudice weighed heavily on the heritage of Hue, causing people to take inappropriate courses of action with these monuments.  

In a way, the antipathy shown to the monuments, especially in the immediate decades after the war, was understandable given the larger cultural settings of the nation. The neglect of the legacy of the radical Huế is more intriguing.  

The monuments serve as physical reminders of the imperial past, keeping it alive in the collective memory. The legacy of the radical revolutionary Huế, however, has few such physical pointers, rendering it almost invisible and prompting Colin Long to ask the question why Huế’s revolutionary credentials seem to be ignored in its heritage stake.  

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Hue’s involvement in the Tet offensive of 1968 also gives it an important place in revolutionary mythology. Yet it is remarkable how little of Hue’s revolutionary past is promoted as heritage. After all, Ho Chi Minh lived and attended school in the city, as did other Communist Party leaders, and one of Ho’s first political acts involved participation in a demonstration in the city. Why are sites associated with these events not accorded more importance? The primary reason is the emphasis placed on the Citadel and tombs by UNESCO’s world heritage listing, for these sites attract more tourists and are the focus of the work of international and domestic agencies.

On balance, Colin Long judged that Hue’s pre-revolutionary baggage outweighs that of its radical credentials, and saw compromise in the way Hue’s heritage is seen by its own heritage practitioners.

While Hue’s revolutionary history is legitimate, concern for it cannot entirely efface the pre-revolutionary past. One of the ways in which the Nguyen history can be reclaimed in communist Vietnam is as evidence of the independent abilities of the Vietnamese people [...] The wonderful architecture of the palace and tombs, the enchanting integration of landscape and architecture can be hailed as evidence of Vietnam’s sophistication and culture. This is the approach of Vietnamese heritage officials: Hue is inscribed on the Vietnamese National Heritage Register in the category of ‘architectural and artistic’ places rather than historic places.

Although in agreement with the points made in Colin Long’s work, I would further point out that the legacy left by Huế’s ‘revolutionary history’ is one that is psychically distressing and socially divisive for the populace of Huế, and hence swept under the carpet. The key roots of the distress lie in the events of the sixties, especially the human cost suffered during the Tet offensive, and the divisiveness has lived on since the war ended in 1975. At the end of the war, in 1975, again the former leaders of the Tranh Đấu movement returned to Huế with the victorious troops, and were given various roles in the new government. Even though on the surface life eventually returned to normal, with post-war reconstruction being the most pressing concern, the deep psychic scars resulting from the terrible devastation wrought during the Tet Offensive remained deeply buried underneath.

These fracture lines were long lasting as they were deep. One of my uncles, Tôn Thất Dương Tiem, my father’s youngest half-brother, was a well-known intellectual who came out as a key figure of the network of agents. After the Tet Offensive, he disappeared with the retreating troops and went to live in North Vietnam. For the remainder of the Vietnam War, he was hailed by the North as a progressive intellectual from the South, showing support for the revolutionary cause; while his family, like the families of those who joined the other side, continued to live in Huế. After South Vietnam fell in 1975, he returned to Huế to live. He gained the status of a supporter – cảm tình viên, but never gained membership to the Communist Party of Vietnam, most likely because of his family backgrounds. Over the years he became very disillusioned, vilified and spurned by those who felt betrayed by him, and yet was never trusted by those whose revolutionary cause he worked for. The only time I

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saw him after 1975 was in 1995, when he was bed-ridden with illness, a broken and disillusioned man.

Career-wise, other people in situations similar to his, including the former leaders of the Tranh Đấu movement, fared differently. Some grew disillusioned and became critics of the new government such as the poet Trần Vàng Sao (Nguyễn Đình), some became state cause-celebre such as the commentator Nguyễn Dác Xuân, who devoted his time to the study of historical issues related to Huế, such as the times that Hồ Chí Minh spent in Huế, the heroic Tây Sơn period, or the ‘reactionary feudal’ Nguyễn Dynasty. Some took up journalism such as Hoàng Phù Ngọc Phan, and others followed a modestly successful path in politics, such as Nguyễn Văn Mễ who rose to the position of Chairman of the People’s Committee of Thừa Thiên – Huế. Some of those associated with the Tranh Đấu movement in the early stages and not supporters of communism escaped from Vietnam as refugees and now live in Australia, such as Hoàng Văn Giầu or the painter Lê Văn Tài.

The cultural icons of the Tranh Đấu movement mostly went back to their art. Bùu Chi returned to painting. Trịnh Công Sơn returned to writing music and did not participate in politics, even though that was not by choice. Immediately after the end of the war, a very dangerous time in Huế, he was denounced in public for his views of the war, expressed in that famous line ‘Twenty years of daily civil war’. The cultural commissars of the victorious forces viewed the war as the ‘sacred war against foreign oppression’; and anyone calling it a civil war was regarded as reactionary and dangerous. After a period of personal hardship, under the watchful eye of the new government, Trịnh Công Sơn moved to Saigon to live and continue to write mostly
non-political music until his death in 2001.

Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tường became the Secretary-General of the Literature and Arts Association of the Binh-Trị-Thiên province and, for two years, took up the editorship of the literary magazine Cửu Việt, which attracted many progressive writers from all over Vietnam, but was closed down by the authority after 17 editions. He became a quiet advocate for the relaxation of the political control over writers and artists. He gained the membership of the Communist Party of Vietnam after 17 years, suffered a stroke which paralysed him for the last ten years or so, but continued to write. His writing, highly regarded in Vietnam, gained the prestigious State Prize of Literature in 2007, but his nomination for the coveted Hồ Chí Minh Prize was not considered.215

Thus in terms of career, influence, or political impact, compared to their previous generation of the likes of Võ Nguyên Giáp and Phạm Văn Đồng, who were able to leave their imprint on the historical directions of Vietnam, the legacy of this group of radicals was quite limited, their contributions quickly forgotten. In the opening passage of Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tường’s Bản Di Chúc Của Cỏ Lau [Testament of the Lau Grass], the tall lau grass growing over his old jungle haunts serves as the metaphor for the way his compatriots were being forgotten: a steady and silent growth spreading over the memories of those comrades who once shared his belief, travail and sacrifice.

In front of my eyes, all those lives full of heroism and tragedy that had once existed here in this jungle, are now being obliterated by the silence of the

grass. So these will be the roads upon which no-one would walk, the months and years no-one would know about, and the shadows of those lives would cast nowhere. [...] The lau grass grows fast, but people’s memory fades even faster.\textsuperscript{216}

That sentiment, according to the critic Phạm Phú Phong, is also a ‘preface opening the narrative of the patriots of Huế, the path-breakers who provided the compass for the resistance against the Americans, yet their legacy left for posterity is only a testament written in blood, and overgrown with lau grass.\textsuperscript{217}

Their legacy is also tragic in another way. Not only was their political power comparatively inconsequential, their contributions quickly forgotten, the very political system that they supported also had a severely restrictive impact on their artistic expression. In Người Ham Chơi, a collection of reflective personal commentary by Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tuồng, two pieces stand out, both in terms of the quality of their writing and of how they convey deep reflections on the life of their author: The Lyrebird [Con Chim Bách Thanh], and The Vi Tê Permutation [Quê Vi Tê], inspired by the 64\textsuperscript{th} permutation of the Book of Change.

In The Lyrebird Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tuồng recounts a trip to his brother’s home in Phú Nhuận, Sài Gòn. His brother kept at home an extremely clever lyrebird that could faithfully replicate all the sounds of the noisy city outside. When still ‘in the jungle’ Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tuồng had been a great admirer of the lyrebirds.

\textsuperscript{216} Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tuồng (1991), Bản Di Chúc Của Cò Lau, Huế: NXB Thuận Hóa.

As dawn breaks, the garden comes alive with bird-calls; the vocal competitive spirit is truly in the bones of all birds. The lyrebird is always present at this moment, perched atop the magnolia tree singing with the voice of all the other birds, the mynas, the nightingales, the orioles, or the imperial pigeons. It mimics the calls of the other birds perfectly, and sounds even better than them; and, even from a distance I can hear its calls, clear and robust, like the leading vocalist of a choir. And, amazingly, when the cicadas start to twang in unison, the lyrebird improvises on the spot and replicates the musical din of the cicadas.218

Hoàng Phù Ngọc Tuông notes certain special characters in lyrebirds. Those captured and kept in captivity from infancy, and have never experienced nature, will not sing the tape-recorded calls of the oriole in nature, yet will happily sing the street calls of the🇭 우리나 liên vendor. And lyrebirds ‘can sing the voice of all others, but no-one has ever heard their own voice. Perhaps they do not have a voice of their own. With the lyrebirds, what they do not have, ironically, is their own self.’ Those captured in maturity, after they’ve grown up in nature, are extremely difficult to keep. ‘They attack at the cage, thrash their wings, and bash their head against the bars until they die. Before dying, they emit a series of strange mysterious calls that sound like burbling creeks and cascading falls. That may well be the lyrebirds’ voice, learnt from the time they first encountered nature.’219

The lyrebird is like a talented singer, sufficiently skillful to trill the voice of all other singers, but does not have a voice of its own. Those familiar with culturally directive autocratic regimes will intuitively see in Hoàng Phù Ngoc Trường’s lyrebirds the writers and artists living there-under.

From the same collection was also another piece of fine writing, *Quê Vĩ Tế*, inspired by the 64th permutation in the *Book of Change*.

*Quê Vĩ Tế* – Yet to Cross the River is the last permutation, ending a series of 64 permutations in the *Book of Change*. ... It sends a foreboding message about the journey that humans must endure throughout life: that there is a river ahead, yet to be crossed. As one moves amongst the Five Elements, the circle of life goes through the entire 64 periods of the Book of Change, enduring times of danger, perils and separation, then enjoying bliss and joy; through Yin domination to the return of the Yang forces, through hardship to prosperity. One’s fortunes fluctuate, one’s paths precipitate, and as the end of the journey approaches, one breathes a soft sigh of relief at the 63rd, the second last permutation, *Ký Tế* (The River Has Been Crossed). Here one may think that the task has been completed, one’s debt to life has been repaid, only one more step to the end of the long journey. Completely unexpected, the final step is the *Vĩ Tế* permutation. Another river appears, and again one has to take another step forward, beginning the whole journey again.220

The final paragraph sums up the never-ending treadmill on which Hoàng Phù Ngoc

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Tuòng and his comrade artists had to tread towards acceptance and appreciation of their dedication to the revolutionary cause.

Their contributions and sacrifice for the revolutionary cause may not have been duly appreciated by those on their own side, yet the other side of the ledger is not squared either. In the mind of many people of Huế, the one thing Hoàng Phù Ngộ Tuòng and his comrades have in common is that they all switched sides, played a role in the interim authority during the Tet Offensive, and must bear some sort of responsibility for those deaths. Initially, the reaction from the people in charge of Huế for those fateful 25 days was one of silence or dismissive counter-charge, but with the passage of time, some have come out to acknowledge partial responsibility, though not that of their own.

The response by Lê Minh, the military commander in charge of the Thừa Thiên – Huế front, written in his retirement to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Tet Offensive, is worth reproducing in full, as it contained all the standard belligerent lines of rebuttal, but also revealed a hint of acknowledgement, if not acceptance, of responsibility.

I feel the need to talk about a regrettable matter. The great loss of human lives during the Mậu Thân campaign is a subject that has been exploited by the enemies who have ceaselessly exaggerated and distorted it from then to now. First of all, American bombs and bullets killed thousands of people, they killed masses of people on the spot when they retook the city, and hundreds of prisoners taken by us would have survived except that they were killed by
intercepting American helicopters, which fired indiscriminately at any gatherings. That much is clear as daylight. Is that not the greatest war crime?

Nevertheless, there is another side to the matter. In times of war, the punishment dished out to those who have committed crimes against the people is something that’s unavoidable, once the masses have risen up. And in such cases, no government can control the spontaneous actions, fuelled by the hatred harboured by the long-oppressed people, or spurred on by the pride in the nation which burst out in everyone.

In the end, there were those who were unjustly dealt with in times of war. Whatever the reasons were, the responsibility still lies with our leadership, including my own responsibility. The responsibility for the revolution now is to clear the miscarriage of justice for the family, the children of those who died in such circumstances, where the revolutionary justice had no intention to give them the death sentence. The miscarriage of justice must be cleared, whether it involved one person or one hundred persons.221

In 1997, when interviewed by Thuy Khuê on Radio France Internationale, Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tuông said he was not in Huế at the time, expressed deep remorse in response to questions about those deaths, but sheeted home the responsibility elsewhere.

The important thing I wish to express here, […] is the sharp pain I feel at the bottom of my heart whenever I think of the terrible deaths that many families in Huế suffered, due to the unjust killings by those who rose up, during the battle of Huế in the year of Mậu Thân. It was an error, totally unjustifiable

from the standpoint of conscience, as well as from the point of view of the revolutionary war. But I believe it was an error with a local character, committed by those who led the Tết Offensive in Huế, and not a policy of the revolution in general. Because such indiscriminate killings did not take place in other localities during the Tet Offensive, even in large and complex contests such as Saigon.222

Predictably, everyone has denied any personal involvement. Overall, the denials fall into two categories; not being there, not being of high-ranking enough to know about, or to have made a difference. Nearly all of them avoided writing about the specifics of what happened in 1968, with the notable exception of the talkative Nguyễn Đắc Xuân.

On one hand, the massacres of Huế remain un-investigated and a taboo subject in Vietnam to this day. On the other hand, this matter remains the source of a great deal of bitterness and regularly flares up in the various forums of political discussion within the Vietnamese diaspora, with almost all of them calling for investigations into these deaths and regarding the matter as a crime against humanity. On these forums, and in the writings published in diaspora, there’s usually no doubt as to who were responsible, and the names of the Tranh Đâu movement leaders always feature prominently.223 The vitriol hurled at those believed to be responsible can be violently extreme and sometimes less than accurate, but is an indication of how swallowed


grief and unaddressed grievances can fester into deep hatred and uncontrolled anger. In his book, *Biên Đông Miền Trung [Troubles in the Middle Region]*, Liên Thanh, the Chief of National Police of Huế for the entire period of the *Tranh Đäu* movement to the end of the war, who now lives in the USA, reserves the most poisonous for Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tưông. It is aimed not so much at Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tưông the person, but instead it drives home the shame that would be wreaked upon the family name of Hoàng Phú, indicative of the shared mindset of both the originator and the recipient of the vindictive missive. It’s very typical of Huế style.

> Your action was clever for one minute, but stupid life-long. Perhaps the dream of an intellectual like you was that you would leave for posterity something positive about you and your familial lineage, but you and your brother\(^{225}\) have left for generations to come a legacy full of damnation and curses for yourself and the Hoàng Phú family name, forever tainting your familial name with shame and disgust in the mind of the people of Huế whenever their conversations veer your way.\(^{226}\)

The response by Hoàng Phú Ngọc Phan was also very much in kind, pointing out that Liên Thanh is a direct descendant of Prince Cuòng Đệ, the symbolic head of the Độ Du reform movement, who was a supporter of Hồ Chí Minh, and by extension of communism. For Liên Thanh to be such an ardent anti-communist, Hoàng Phú Ngọc

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224 For example, Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tưông is often described in the diaspora press and websites as ‘the butcher of Huế’, who directly executed many, despite his denial of being there at the time. However, a taped recorded message of his voice calling the people of Huế to rise up was broadcast on the city’s radio during the Tết Offensive, leading many to believe he was there in person. TTQĐ’s note.

225 Here Liên Thanh refers to Hoàng Phú Ngọc Phan.

Phan implied, was to be disrespectful one’s own ancestors.227

Taken as a whole, the legacy of the radical Huế is indeed difficult to integrate into the official narrative of Huế’s history and heritage. They have found themselves at the margins in post-war Vietnam, their contribution to the revolution is being forgotten, yet the unresolved issue of responsibility for the human losses suffered continues to render their legacy painful and divisive. The legacy of the Tet Offensive killings, totally suppressed in Vietnam as a topic for serious discussion, will remain a festering wound underneath a layer of healthy skin, afflicting the legacy of those involved. Only time will tell whether suppression will allow the grass to grow over the memories, or these old wounds will break out to the surface when the society changes further.

3. Huế since the sixties A personal account

My immediate family moved to Huế in 1958, when my father retired. My extended family, on my father’s side, has had a very long association with this city. We are direct descendants from King Gia Long. King Gia Long’s youngest son, Prince Từ Sơn Công, was my great-great-grandfather. In my childhood of the 1960s, Huế was a small city, everything was close to home. My primary school, Trần Quốc Toản, and my high school, Hầm Nghĩ, were both located within the Citadel, within 500 meters from my home. From memory, Huế was a very peaceful place to grow up in, despite the war. The pace of life was quiet, the landscape gentle. With a slow flowing Huong river, Huế had the sleepy feel of a safe, if inconsequential town, where nothing

227 http://daohieu.wordpress.com/category/t%C6%B0-li%E1%BB%87u-tr%E1%BB%87u-%E1%BB%87nh-cong-s%C6%A1n/
important happens, ‘the stupa is old, its bell ancient / the river is gentle, its waves inconsequential.’

Huế’s gentle pace of life was captured by Trịnh Công Sơn in the sensitive way he observed the local schoolgirls walk to school, against the quiet backdrop of the city.

Except for those who lived too far away and had to ride their bicycles to school, the majority walked to school with their slow, deliberate royal steps. [They] walk in order to be watched, to feel beautiful. […] to be admired by other eyes, but also to have time to gaze at the sky, the earth, the river, water, flora and fauna. Camphor, red poinciana, alchornia, tamarin trees and the Perfume River winding through the ancient city breathed a pure, gentle breath of dewy smokey mist that leavened a young girl’s soul. Perhaps that was why Hue never ceased to be a source of poetic impulses.

Ancient forts, palaces, and tombs made people yearn vaguely for the past, in a way that might have saved them from the trappings of life’s desires. […] Time passes so quietly here, so quietly that one no longer has a sense of time. A shadowless, colourless time. Only the deaths of old people in the cold winter stir one to life, suddenly made aware of the whispers of the tombs and mausoleums in the surrounding hills.

Huế was also a very conservative city where family relationships played an important

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228 Nhã Ca (1964), ‘Tiếng Chuông Thiên Mụ’, in Nhã Ca Mới, Saigon.
role in shaping one’s moral standards and social conduct, and where public opinion carried much weight. I remember growing up in Huế in the 1960s quite happily. Children of my age were able to pursue our youthful interests. We played sports, mostly the sports which were inexpensive to provide, such as table tennis, badminton or soccer. We played games which varied according to seasons. In spring and early summer we made kites and flew them from atop the Citadel’s wall,\(^{230}\) taking advantage of the gentle wind. In the rainy season we would go catching fish to keep in the outdoors ponds that are commonly found in the garden houses around Huế.

Extra-curricular activities were available and affordable. Apart from my standard high school education, I also attended the evening classes at the National Conservatoire – Trường Quốc Gia Âm nhạc, which was situated inside the Imperial City. To get to our music school, we would ride our bicycles through the ornate Hiền Nhơn Gate and enter the quiet oasis of the Imperial City, along narrow streets under the canopies of the flamboyant trees, moss-covered walls framing the vista of the walkways, and a light fragrance of the old frangipani calming the soul. Life was enjoyable even when the country was at war. Huế in my early childhood gave no hint of the turbulent times that were to follow.

In the early 1960s, politics began to make its presence felt in our life, even for a young primary school student like me then. At my school’s general assembly on every Monday morning, the flag would be raised and we would all sing the national anthem. Then, around 1960 or 1961, in addition to the national anthem, we also had to

\(^{230}\) The outer wall of the Citadel, built with packed earth and reinforced with bricks, was ten metres thick at the base in some places, and tapered to about four or five metres at the top, wide enough for children to play reasonably safely, as long as they take good care not to fall off. Falling from the top of the wall to the ground would usually be fatal.
sing a sycophantic song *Suy Tôn Ngộ Tống Thống – In Praise of President Ngộ*, the chorus of which went 'Toàn dân Việt Nam nhớ ơn Ngộ Tống Thống / Ngộ Tống Thống muốn năm / Toàn dân Việt Nam nhớ ơn Ngộ Tống Thống / Xin thưởng để ban phúc lành cho người ...' which translates as ‘The entire people of Vietnam are grateful for President Ngộ / Long live, long live President Ngộ / The entire people of Vietnam are grateful for President Ngộ / Pray the lord to give him his blessings ...’ Shortly after, a subversive version began to circulate, with an obnoxious reference to his sister in law, Madame Ngộ Dinh Nhu; and as we were too young to understand the sexual references of its lyrics, in all innocence we would openly sing it to the amusement, and the shushes, of older people around us.

Then, when undercurrents of subversive dissent burst out in demonstrations and general strikes, the binding social glues of this conservative and hierarchical society began to disintegrate in front of our eyes. We saw our highly respected teachers defer to the young university students who came to our school on the back of motorbikes, armed with loud speakers and rolled-up banners, to request that the school heed the call that day for a general strike. The expression used at the time for a general strike was *dinh công bãi thị*, literally *no work no market*, and on those days schools, markets and shops were mostly closed. I remember going to several demonstrations with my school friends. Slogans, shouted openly at rallies, directly challenged the authority, ranging from demands to lift the oppression of Buddhists in the early stages, to demands to overthrow the ‘nepotism of Diệm and Nhu’ at the heights of the protests. In daily conversations, sometimes people connected to the ‘Diệm regime’ were identified by name, and a sense of social division began to emerge along lines of political loyalty. In those times of rising public emotion, non-conforming with the
majority's view would require extraordinary conviction and courage, and contrary views were often kept within family circles.

After the government of president Ngô Đình Diệm was overthrown in a military coup in November 1963, there was a sense of jubilation in Huế initially, followed by a slow realization that the new government was unable to resolve the crisis. Even though people connected to the government of president Diệm were replaced by those sympathetic to the Buddhist cause, a general air of uncertainty hung in the air, and demonstrations continued, led by Buddhist monks and young students, in open defiance of the generals holding power in Saigon. A period of instability followed the overthrow of president Diệm, with a succession of coups-d'état and a series of interim governments dominated or led by the army.

Figure 16 Hiền Nhan gate leading to the Imperial City, photo taken 1966
Source: http://www.flickr.com/photos/24150334@N08/2298496541/
As I entered my first years of high school, in 1965-1966, the situation grew more tense, the protests more regular and organised, led by what we commonly called Phong Trào Tranh Đấu. As the protests grew more regular and intense, the presence of the military became more pervasive, culminating in clashes in the streets between protestors and the riot police, marines and paratroopers sent in to take control of the city. Even after the control of the city was firmly in the hand of the Saigon troops, a large part of the population put up passive resistance in the form of non-cooperation, and it took more than a year for the city to regain normalcy. Yet, even in those turbulent times, life went on. Schools, markets, and businesses went on as normal, except for the days when there were demonstrations in the streets, when teargas filled the air and everyone stayed indoors. Despite all that turbulence, to me, as a young student living in a major city, war was something that happened a safe distance away.

But all that changed in my third year at high school, in 1968, when North Vietnam mounted a surprise attack on all major cities and towns of South Vietnam during the New Year ceasefire – the Tet Offensive. They took control of Huế with relative ease, and held the city for 25 days. My family lived inside the Citadel and we knew there would be fierce fighting inside the Citadel to retake the city’s control. Fortunately, we fled from the Citadel ten days after the fighting started, and took shelter in the Gia Hội area. Gia Hội was also under the control of the communist troops, but the fighting there was not as intense. In her memoirs, my mother recalled the circumstances that drove our family to decide to leave the Citadel, a most fortunate decision, as it turned out.

Before we could leave, another group of men came. Some were regular
soldiers. They asked if there were young men here and again I said no. They said they had seen a young man wearing a white shirt in the house. Not knowing who it might have been, I said that was my son. Fearful that they might begin searching our home, I called out ‘Du, come out here, these men want to talk to you.’ He was only 14 but as tall as a 20 year old. He was lying behind his grandfather, not in the bunker, so he came out quickly and they weren’t suspicious. They said, ‘Here’s a young man, why did you say there were none?’ and I replied, ‘He’s only 14, I have papers to prove that.’ They said, ‘Alright, we request that you allow the young Du to come with us, to work on digging bunkers for the people.’

My mother stalled for time, and at dawn the following day, except my grandparents, my father and my oldest brother, we all left home and headed towards the Citadel’s eastern gate Đồng Ba. The gate was closed off with barbed wire and barricaded with furniture, but we found a gap and crawled through one by one before the troops guarding the gate realized. A few days later it was booby-trapped and some of our family friends who tried to leave by the same route were killed.

We took refuge at several homes in the Gia Hội area where the fighting was not as intense as in the Citadel. After the fighting ceased we returned home and were confronted with a scene of total devastation. Uprooted trees blocked the roads, buildings were destroyed, and almost every house inside the Citadel was damaged in one way or another. My family’s home and its garden, an area the size of an average Australian suburban home, was hit with uncountable bullets, several rounds of

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mortars, and a helicopter-fired small rocket that neatly pierced, but did not break, a central column of our house, plus an unexploded bomb or shell buried deeply near the front gate. Again, from my mother’s memoir:

Reaching the gate of Trường Tử we could only recognize the Tam Tòa building, all the other homes were destroyed. [...] Uprooted trees blocked the way, innards of dead animals hanging off their branches. Bloated pale bodies of dead dogs and pigs, soaked with the rain, stank to high heavens. The dead body of a woman was lying in a ditch; dogs had gnawed off part of the flesh to the bone, showing yellow fat tissues, her frozen arm still in the self-protective raised position. A little further along I saw movements behind the shrubbery and my husband came out, a bush-hook in his hand, hacking his way through. I burst out crying. He was stunned speechless. It was as if we had died and came back to life again.232

To me, life before Tết Offensive was tough but happy; afterwards it was desperate and dense with gloom as Huế became a shell-shocked city in mourning. Our family was very lucky to survive without loss or serious injuries. Others were not so fortunate. The sight of people wearing white funeral cloths on the head, or a patch of black on the sleeve to mark a death in the family was common. Sometimes you would notice the absence of someone in a particular family, but unless you knew the family well, you didn’t know what had happened to them. They could be dead or they could have gone to the other side.

As the electricity plant of Huế was blown up during the fighting, the whole city was without electricity for many months. At night, walking in the narrow streets, you often heard the sounds of Buddhists chanting the sutra reserved for those in the other world, punctuated by prayer bells. You could smell in the air the scents of incense or sandalwood being burnt at the altars; the darkness of the evening adding a sense of privacy to the pain felt by those inside their homes. Combined with the flickering light cast by the oil lamps, the whole neighbourhood had a prayerful feel of a place of worship in open air.

![The eastern gate, Đông Ba, photo's date unknown, but after 1968](http://www.virtual-doug.com/virtualdoug/2006/02/how_far_weve_co.html)

While the immediate devastation of Huế was depicted with graphic rawness in the lyrics of 'A Song for the Dead Bodies', it was in a later composition, *Em Di Trong Chiều [In the Evening You Walk]*, with its gentle and poetic lyrics, set upon the musical foundation of a slow funereal march, that Trịnh Công Sơn captured the intangible air of loss, the subtle atmosphere of mourning, the private sense of individual sorrow, and the sad hue it casts on the surrounds.
You walk over the bridge / the wind follows you /
unfurls your mourning cloth / a dash of white framed by the evening sky
You walk over the bridge / the leaves stir into life /
a deep river flows / carrying the pain of your soul
You walk over the bridge / evening weighs on your shoulders /
sadness clamps down your lips / your heart is shattered /
one has departed / and one remains here

You walk over the bridge / your soul drifts with the clouds
You walk over the bridge / A life without solace / A life of private yearning
You walk over the bridge / gunfire echoes after you
Villages in the country / are tinged with sorrow
You walk over the bridge / a gentle breeze blows /
carrying your heart / to an unknown place ...

Yet, almost unbelievably, life went on for those who remained. The dead were buried. Both my grandparents passed away within months after the end of fighting, and were buried in the front yard of my home as our family’s burial plots in Đa Lề district were too far away and considered unsafe at the time. Commerce resumed, markets reopened, and schools were rebuilt. My classes at the high school continued, without a few friends, and with a heightened sense of awareness of the direct connection between ideology, politics, war and destruction.

As I entered the later years of high school, discussions between my classmates on politics began to gain an edge of urgency. In addition to the standard books such as the novels of the Self-Reliance Writers [Tự Lực Văn Đoàn] group, set in the social framework of the transitional time of the nineteen forties, translations of Chinese classics (Three Kingdoms and Warring States of Eastern Zhou) and of works by well-known Western writers from Victor Hugo to Hermann Hess, we began to read more contemporary fiction with more relevance to our situation: Nhà Ca, Túy Hồng favoured by girls, Duyên Anh by boys who were boys and Duy Lam, Thế Uyên by boys matured before their age. Nearly all of us indulged in the escapist sagas about Chinese swordsmen with incredible fighting skills and impeccable virtues, serialized in the newspapers. Those with a bent for tough philosophical matters would read Sartre in translation and Thích Nhất Hạnh’s early works. Quotes from Karl Marx were often on the lips of my Year Twelve philosophy teacher. Older students, who were approaching the age of military draft would keenly feel the precariousness of their future paths: the only grounds for draft exemption were family circumstances (being the only son in the family), and academic excellence (passing examinations every year, and progressing to university). For those without either, an air of fearful resignation to fate would render them uninterested in any school work.

In this rather bleak world, my evening music classes at the National Conservatoire of Huế were a much welcomed source of joy. We would all ride into the Imperial City in a small group past the military sentry stationed at the Hiền Nhon gate234 where we would dismount from our bicycles and show our identity cards, issued for all those over fifteen, and continue to ride through the same narrow lanes, framed by moss-

234 The Hiền Nhon gate only began to be guarded by armed soldiers after 1968.
covered walls, through the gate of our Conservatoire, lock our bikes and walk up a wide staircase to our class. In the months after the Tet Offensive, the whole city was without electricity, and we would each bring two large red candles (we all avoided the funeral colour of white), for lighting. In soft lighting, the sight of young boys and girls in their mid-teens, combined with the sounds of music of our own, plus strands of flute notes wafting in from another class somewhere, provided a wonderful and soothing contrast to the world of despair and devastation outside. At the end of our classes, quite late, we would all ride together out, again stopping at the check point, and then we would accompany the girls to their home safely before heading home ourselves with a happy heart.

In my last years of high school in the early 1970s, the war raged on with increasing intensity with mounting losses on both sides, culminating in a terrible battle in 1972 for Quàng Trị, north of Huế, during which a substantial proportion of the population of Huế, including my family, fled south to Đà Nẵng out of the fear that the city may again fall. Our family stayed in Đà Nẵng for months, all of us cramming into the home of my kind uncle, already bursting with other relatives. As a result, all classes at my school were abandoned for half of my final year of high school, Year 12. Yet, the national examination went ahead unchanged, the result of which decided the fate of many who were about to turn 18, the draft age. I did well in the Baccalaureate exam and won a scholarship for Australia at the end of 1972, so I did not witness first-hand the fall of the city, nor the end of the Vietnam war, and its consequential upheavals.

Upon returning to Huế in 1991, 1995, 1998-99 and 2001, I noticed the huge changes that had taken place after the re-unification of the country. During the months leading
to the fall of Huế on the 26th of March 1975, many of Huế’s residents fled to areas further south such as Đà Nẵng or Saigon, and tried to return after the war ended. But in the aftermath of the war, the victorious regime implemented drastic measures forcing out of Huế almost one third of the population, those deemed to be supporters of the previous government, mostly to the New Economic zones. Many of those forced to move were ordinary people, such as one of my childhood friends, with whom I studied music at the conservatoire and who had developed a modest name for herself as a singer. After April 1975, she and her family were forced to move to the central highlands where they had to fend for themselves. When I visited them in 2001, the flimsy house that she and her husband built themselves from raw timber spoke volumes of the hardships they went through.

Many homes that had belonged to families of supporters of the former government were confiscated and reallocated to families of those who fought for the revolution, or used for administrative purposes. Out of the twenty odd families that lived in the same lane with my family home before 1975, less than ten remained in 1995. The house across the road to my family home was confiscated and turned into the headquarters of the Secret Police of the District. The house behind it was confiscated, but the original family was allowed to live in the back area near the kitchen and toilet, while the new occupiers lived in the house proper. The home opposite the new Police headquarters used to belong to a family who fled the North in 1954, but was given to a new family from the North, who added a double-storey house in the style of the narrow fronted tube house commonly seen in the Old Quarters of Ha Noi. The home next door to us was given to the families of two high ranking officers of the People’s Army, who promptly dissected the old house and its garden with a brick wall, right
through the middle, complete with barbed wire on top, into two separate households.

The changes swept through public buildings also. At one end of our lane was a large complex, originally housing the Viên Cố Mạt, where the highest ranking mandarins of the Nguyễn Dynasty used to meet to discuss state security matters. Used by the French for legal jurisdiction and renamed Tam Tòa, in 1975 it was turned into the administrative headquarters of the People’s Committee. Across the road from the old Tam Tòa was my primary school which retained its function and name, Trần Quốc Toản, a national hero of the Trần dynasty. A short distance away, my old high school Hàm Nghĩ, named after the patriotic Nguyễn king and situated in the old Quốc Tử Giám, was closed down and turned into a museum showing exhibits of the War against the Americans, with tanks and heavy artillery pieces displayed in its former playgrounds.

Đàn Nam Giao, where the Nguyễn kings used to conduct the most important rites, was used as the site commemorating soldiers who died for the cause of the revolution. Names of institutions and streets were changed also, with historical figures, especially those associated with the Nguyễn dynasty, replaced by revolutionary heroes or historical figures associated with other periods. The famous Đống Khánh High School for girls was renamed Hai Bà Trưng. The street that ran along the eastern side of the citadel, the route my family took to escape from the citadel during the Tet Offensive, was renamed Mẫu Thân, the Vietnamese name for that year of the money, 1968, to commemorate the victory of the Tet Offensive. It was a street along which many died in their attempt to escape from the citadel.
To me, clearly the massive upheavals that engulfed Huế from the sixties to the nineties were politically significant and socially divisive. In political terms, the developments in Huế in this period had a great impact on the course of the war, and hence the nation’s political destination. Socially, the bitter contests fought during the war opened up deep fissures among the population of Huế afterwards.

On my visits to the city, living with my family there for four months on the longest visit, again and again I noticed the tense undercurrents beneath social relations. My oldest brother, well known for his anti-communist views and punished for them, would never invite our next door neighbours over; and should they visit us, they would be received in the side section of the home.

The same tension undercuts friendships and family relations too. In 1995 I visited my uncle Dương Tiềm on his death bed at his home – as a child I used to visit his home; it had a landscaped outdoor pond with a wonderful collection of tropical fish, making
it a favourite place for young children like me. But my brother was not pleased that I went to see him. And in 1998, on hearing that Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tuồng was bedridden with sickness, I said I wanted to visit him, but my brother spoke to me in a tone with so much coldness that I dropped the idea.

Yet, on the first day of the Lunar New Year, a delegation from the Secret Police headquarters next door, led by its chief, all in suits and ties, came to pay us a goodwill visit and was welcomed properly. Something was at work on that day, something of sufficient strength to bridge the usual social distance: tradition dictates that one visits one’s neighbours on the first days of the Lunar New Year and such visits must be welcome. I suspect tradition would prevail on other days of great spiritual significance also. Tradition, shared by a common belief system and spiritual values, places a high premium on cohesiveness and seems to me to be one of the few ties that bind, especially in the first post-war decades.
CHAPTER FOUR Spiritual Huế, through its monuments

The preceding three chapters have charted the rise and fall of Huế as an Imperial Center, examined its role as the crucible for the radicalization of anti-colonial Vietnamese, and explored the complexities of the legacy resulting from the massive upheavals that befell the city in recent times. This chapter searches for the reasons that Huế’s imperial heritage has continued to be relevant despite the rending of social and personal relations that such upheavals have brought upon the city. It explores the spiritual side of Huế by looking at the spiritual values ascribed to the monuments inscribed on World Heritage List, three of which are of central interest in this thesis, the burial complex of King Tự Đức, the Thế Tổ Miếu ancestral temple, and the Đàn Nam Giao, where the Nguyễn kings conducted the yearly rites Tê Nam Giao.

The burial complex of King Tự Đức was first and foremost a burial place. Its design reflects the personal taste of the king, the story of its construction reveals the historical backgrounds of his time, and its aesthetics bear testimony about the person of the King. The complex’s usage, as an alternate place of residence prior to the King’s death and as a burial complex to worship him after his death, reflects an acceptance of the co-location of the present world and those gone from this world, an essential element of ancestor veneration.

On the other hand, the ancestral temple Thế Tổ Miếu was chiefly the site of familial worship. The most imposing of the five ancestral temples inside the Imperial City, it is dedicated to the worshipping of King Gia Long (whose posthumous Imperial title was Thế Tổ Hoàng Đế) and his succeeding kings. It was used exclusively by members
of the royal families to communicate to their ancestors on occasions of state importance such as the coronation of a King, or major decisions affecting the dynasty, familial matters such as the marriage of a princess, or personal milestones such as the 40th or 50th anniversaries of the king’s birth. In short, it was the space intended for familial worship, but also the space where state matters and familial worship collocated, due to the special position of the family.

Whereas the above two monuments served the spiritual needs of a personal and familial nature, the Đàn Nam Giao was connected to the needs of the state. It was of great importance to the spiritual life of the Imperial Center because of the rite conducted at this site, the Lễ Tê Giao. Conducted yearly by the king, Lễ Tê Giao [Lễ = rite, Tê = worship / sacrifice, Giao = connection] encapsulated the Confucian theory of thiên mệnh [mandate from Heavens], according to which the king, thiên tử [Son of Heavens], ruled the country in a mission entrusted to him by the powers from above. The rite celebrated this connection through an elaborate ritual of sacrifice, strictly codified and managed by the highest officials of the Ministry of Rites. Lễ Tê Giao was the most important rite during the Nguyễn dynasty, but over time declined and ceased in tandem with monarchy rule. After the end of the war, the site was used as the commemorative site for soldiers fighting on the communist side, but the decision was reversed a few years later. Following its inclusion of the World Heritage List, as a part of the renewal of cultural assets of the city, it was restored, and at the present time, a part of the Lễ Tê Giao is re-enacted and presented as a performance to visitors at the biennial Huế Festival.

Together, these three monuments and their associated ritual practices provide a
composite insight into the spiritual life of Huế at different levels, cosmos, state, family and the person. All three monuments have one element in common; being the space to conduct the rituals that connect the world of the present to the world beyond it. They were constructed for different purposes, but their associated rituals all have the same deep roots in the cosmological order of the Vietnamese practice of ancestor veneration. In the case of the Đàn Nam Giao, this gives it the spiritual potency that the state has relied on in the past for its claim to legitimacy. As society changed and that cosmological order became irrelevant to the modern state, the Đàn Nam Giao fell into neglect and disuse. Its continuing relevance is now due to the fact that society now has a utilitarian need for it. The other two monuments, however, are totally unconnected to the needs of the state. They are symbols of significance in the private familiar sphere. They strike a chord with the people living in Huế, who conduct their own spiritual life in a similar manner. This chapter begins with the person – the burial complex of King Tự Đức, then the familial – the ancestral temple Thê Miếu, and the state – the Đàn Nam Giao.

1. King Tự Đức’s burial complex

The royal burial complexes contain the earthly remains of the king, providing a direct link to the person of the king. The reign of Tự Đức (1847-1883) was the longest of all the Nguyễn kings. The second oldest son of King Thieu Tri, Hồng Nhâm was selected by his father to succeed him and became king Tự Đức, over the first son Hồng Bảo, whose talents and character were regarded by his father as inferior. The resulting dissatisfaction harboured by Hồng Bảo and his descendants was a major factor in an

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235 Dai Nam Thuc Luc Chinh Bien (1973), Hà Nội : Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học xã Hội, Fourth period, Volume I, pp. 31-34
attempted palace coup to topple king Tự Đức, the Lime Pestles Rebellion [Giặc Chia Vội] referred to earlier in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

In Vietnamese standard history books, king Tự Đức is usually portrayed as a weak and ineffective king who lost the nation to the French. He was physically not robust, due to an early childhood illness, and rarely left the capital city, thus conducting the defence of the nation a distance from the site of battles. Looking through the indices of the Châu Bản Triệu Tự Đức, the Imperial Archives of the Tự Đức reign, one senses that he was intimately involved in matters of the state in manners that were hands-on, energetic, conscientious and extremely hard-working.

The level of detail of the instructions given by the court to the local commanders, and the manner of consultation within the court, are revealed in the Đại Nam Thực Lực Chính Biên. For example, the Đại Nam Thực Lực Chính Biên records the following detailed battle plan discussion among the mandarins of the court and the resulting decision adopted by the king, in the context of what tactics should be applied in response to French military pressures.

In February of the 15th year of Tự Đức reign (1862), the mandarins of the court discussed the reports from the Heads of Long-Tưòng and An-Hạ provinces, who requested guidance, in the following manner.

The mandarins argued that the newly recruited troops were not yet ready, in military and logistics terms, the roads are in disrepair, there is no opportunity

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236 See, for example, Huỳnh Công Bá’s Lịch Sử Việt Nam, NXB Thuận Hóa, 2002.

237 Châu Bản Triệu Tự Đức [The Royal Archives of the Reign of Tự Đức], edited and translated into Vietnamese by Vũ Thanh Hằng, et. al., NXB Văn Học, 2003; hereafter CBTTĐ.

Yoshiharu Tsuboi points out that Tự Đức’s frail health prevented him from leaving his capital city and thus he never went into battle directly. Yoshiharu Tsuboi (1990), Ươc Đài Nam Đối Đầu với Pháp và Trung Hoa 1847-1885*, TP Hồ Chí Minh, p. 181.
to bring the troops there yet. The areas of Xuyên Mộc, Long Nhũng of Biên Hòa are uplands; the French would not be able to hold these areas. We should send 500 battle hardened troops there to hold it, the small number of troops making logistics easier. If the enemy advance we retreat, and if they retreat we advance, making them confused about our real strength, thus supporting those who rose up against the French in Gia Định and Định Tương, and giving heart to our troops in in Vĩnh Long, An Giang, Hà Tiên. The plan is to deceive and constantly harass the enemy. Wait for our preparations to be complete then attack to retake Biên Hòa first, then Gia Định. The King agreed and sent an edict to Nguyễn Tri Phương to implement.²³⁸

The volumes of Đại Nam Thực Lục Chinh Biên covering king Tự Đức’s reign reveal the hard work of a king who had to adapt to major changes in the way the situation was viewed; from an early, optimistic and naive assessment that as France was not Vietnam’s neighbour, there was no risk of them staying for a long time, to a belief that honest negotiation and financial rewards will ‘buy back’ lost land, to the final realisation that the French’s intention was to colonise the whole nation of Vietnam.²³⁹

The king of a nation under extreme military pressure from the French, he also had to deal with problems with increasingly unstable internal control. The Châu Bàn is littered with reports from the Ministry of Defence [Bộ Binh] reporting on battles,
assessing the situation, sometimes requesting strategic guidance, which were usually promptly given by the Emperor in the form of an edict.\textsuperscript{240} Reports from the Ministry of Law and Justice \textit{[Bộ Hình]} were also numerous, frequently dealing with clandestine activities of the Catholics, as were intelligence reports from Department of National Security \textit{[Viện Cơ Mật]}.\textsuperscript{241}

Vietnamese history text-books usually describe him as a king who closed his mind to the world, often citing his failure to implement reform proposals petitioned by the more forward-thinking mandarins such as Nguyễn Trưởng Tô. \textsuperscript{242} The Introduction to king Từ Đức's Selected Writings, published in Vietnam in 1996, describes him as a man who knew 'only the Confucianist texts without realizing that they had become obsolete for the time of his life'. \textsuperscript{243} Yet king Từ Đức was not at all a dogmatic king. Indeed he showed remarkable flexibility and an open mind; his actions suggesting a king who had a strong interest in the world outside Vietnam. He authorised an English teaching curriculum at Từ Dịch Quân (10 words per day with regular tests, rewards and punishments) and a similar course for French, with Trương Vĩnh Ky as examiner and sent students to France to study the language to become interpreters. He authorised the purchase of an English warship, considered buying ships and arms

\textsuperscript{240} For example, \textit{CBTTD}, items 406-407, 9-2-1861, Cabinet reports of military setbacks in the south, Nguyễn Tri Phương was injured in action; item 426, 5-10-1861, a Cabinet report on the discussion of the opposing views of the military officers on how to deal with developing military situation in Biên Hòa.

\textsuperscript{241} \textit{CBTTD} Items 444-445, 15-3-1862, 447-448, 23-3-1862, Reports from Chiefs of Provinces on progress on the control of local bandits. Item 169, 4-5-1857 a report on the activities of a Catholic who built a church and kept a hidden hoard of banned religious materials

\textsuperscript{242} For an orthodox critical assessment of the Từ Đức in this respect, see Dinh Xuân Lâm (2005), 'Trách nhiệm của triều Nguyễn trong sự thất bại của xu hướng đổi mới ở Việt Nam cuối thế kỷ XIX', in Cổ Đồ Huế, Xưa Và Nay, NXB Thuận Hóa.

from Russian sources and employed Americans as maintenance engineers and pilots for the Mân Thoa ship. 244

Militarily, he fought the French invasion in the early period of his reign and suffered numerous losing battles. After each military setback, he would sue for peace and try to negotiate for the return of lost territory. For most of the middle years of his reign he directed his forces in the major engagements, made strategic and tactical decisions in military matters and conducted negotiations through his various emissaries. Never once had an upper hand at the negotiating table, king Tự Đức nevertheless believed in negotiations as the only possible way to salvage the nation’s interests in an impossible war. After the loss of the three eastern provinces of the South, Gia Định, Định Dương and Biên Hòa, in 1862, 245 he sent Phan Thanh Giản to France in 1863 to negotiate the return of three provinces, but without success. 246 In 1867 the French threatened to take the remaining three western provinces by force and Phan Thanh Giản, then the governor (Kinh Lục Sư) of southern Vietnam, surrendered without resistance. He committed suicide realizing the futility of opposing a superior force but accepting the responsibility for the loss of the southern provinces. 247 This pattern of military defeat

244 CBTTD, Items 711, 730, 731, 728, 675.
245 The three provinces were lost to the French under the terms of the Nhâm Tuát peace treaty (1862) negotiated by Phan Thanh Giản and Lãn Duy Thiệp. As he delegated Phan and Lãn to enter negotiations, Tự Đức gave specific instructions that under no circumstances concessions were to be made on territorial control and freedom to practice the ‘false religion’. But Phan and Lãn signed the treaty, the 12 heads of agreements of which included the secession of the three provinces, freedom to practice religion and an agreement to pay the French huge compensation for their war expenditure. (Dai Nam Thuc Luc Chinh Biên, Fourth Period, Volume XXVI pp. 301, 302.)

On the other hand, Yoshiharu Tsuboi argued that Phan Thanh Giản acted within the court’s instructions. Pointing to the mild nature of the penalties that Phan received for losing the three provinces, Tsuboi argued that Phan was not to be blamed entirely for the signing of this treaty. Yoshiharu Tsuboi (1990), ibid. p. 197.

246 The delegation was led by Phan Thanh Giản, with Phạm Phú Thứ and Nguyễn Khắc Dân as deputies. Dai Nam Thuc Luc Chinh Biên, 4th volume, Vol. XXVII (1863) p. 21.

247 On the death of Phan Thanh Giản, the manner of his death is usually recorded in Vietnam’s text books as by poison. The Dai Nam Thuc Luc Chinh Biên notes that he committed suicide by
leading to negotiation and concession repeated itself over decades until the Tự Đức court was reduced to a position of military irrelevance, political subservience and economic dependence. For example, the peace treaty of 1862 imposed severe economic burdens on Vietnam, including a demand for Vietnam to pay crippling compensation for the cost of the war, amounting to 400 \textit{van} (4 million) đồng, the equivalent of 280 \textit{van} (2.8 million) silver leaves.\textsuperscript{248}

King Tự Đức presided over a difficult period when internal politics had to be adapted to reflect the changing military situation. His court became increasingly split into two factions, the pro-war faction led by Tôn Thất Thuyết and Nguyễn Văn Tuông, and the pro-peace led by Phan Thanh Gian and Trần Tiến Thành. Although personally leaning towards negotiation, king Tự Đức still placed great trust in the pro-war Tôn Thất Thuyết and Nguyễn Văn Tuông, appointing them as regents on his death bed to assist his successor.\textsuperscript{249} Some scholars see King Tự Đức as able to consult widely, pointing out that although individual mandarins held strongly divergent views, the hostility between the factions broke out only after his death.\textsuperscript{250} King Tự Đức also showed remarkable flexibility in the way he treated the Catholic population. In the early years of his reign Catholics were persecuted harshly,\textsuperscript{251} but in the later years the treatment

\textsuperscript{248} \textit{Dai Nam Thuc Luc Chinh Bien,} 4th period, volume XXVI pp. 301, 302.


\textsuperscript{251} In the early years of fighting, the Catholic population were treated harshly, with distrust and suspicion. The \textit{Dai Nam Thuc Luc Chinh Bien} notes that in the aftermath of the fall of Gia Định (Saigon) strict measures were needed to deal with the Catholics of Gia Định. For example, a catholic named Kien of Vĩnh Long province who ‘openly boasted that as the French warships were

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of Vietnamese Catholics had to be mediated through the French authority,\textsuperscript{252} and he turned to education as the way to combat the increasing influences of the Catholic populations, rewarding the localities where the Catholics were ‘educated’ to return to their right paths.\textsuperscript{253}

Universally regarded as intelligent and scholarly, king Tự Đức’s greater love seems to have been poetry. One of the most peaceful and beautiful pavilions at king Tự Đức’s burial complex, the Thụy Tả Pavilion, was where he would come to listen to or to compose poetry. Despite having to deal with the weighty matters of the state and the grave situation facing the nation, Tự Đức nurtured his love for poetry with great passion. One of the most accomplished poets of Vietnam; he composed prose compositions, hundreds of poems in Chinese and in the Nôm vernacular.\textsuperscript{254} One of his compositions, the \textit{Khiêm Cung Ký} – Notes for Khiêm Cung, engraved on a stone stele at his burial complex, is a five thousand word literary essay on his times, with reflections both philosophical and personal, an historical text in its own right. In all likelihood, the \textit{Khiêm Cung Ký} would have been gestated and composed largely during the time he spent there.

\begin{itemize}
\item now stationed here, killing everyone in sight, he does not fear the law of Vietnam anymore,’ was promptly executed. \textit{Dai Nam Thúc Lục Chinh Biên}, Fourth period, Volume XX (1859) p. 37.
\item The peace treaty of 1862 included an agreement that places of religious teaching would be allowed to be built. \textit{Dai Nam Thúc Lục Chinh Biên}, 4\textsuperscript{th} period, Volume XXVI (1863) pp. 301.
\item \textit{Dai Nam Thúc Lục Chinh Biên}, 4\textsuperscript{th} period, Volume XXVIII (1863) p. 44.
\item Phan Dang, (1996), \textit{Văn Thơ Tự Đức [Tự Đức’s Selected Writings]}, Huế : NXB Thuận Hóa.
\end{itemize}
The burial complex

Like the burial complexes of the tother Nguyễn kings, Tự Đức’s consisted of two distinct areas, the lăng area which contained the tomb itself, and the tám area which contained the buildings to support the king’s daily activities and pastimes when he visited the site. The tám area of king Tự Đức’s burial complex had dozens of buildings, large and small, including the Họa Khiêm [Humility in Harmony] Palace where he worked, Hương Khiêm [Essence of Humility] Palace where he slept, the pavilions of Xung Khiêm and Dư Khiêm where he fished, relaxed, composed poetry and enjoyed the scenery; the Lưu Khiêm [Legacy of Humility] Lake where he went boating and picked its lotus blooms; the Minh Khiêm [Enlightened Humility] Theatre, the Y Khiêm Hall; and the Tri Khiêm Quarters where the king’s cortege of concubines, and their attendants, slept.

*Figure 18 The ruins of the Tri Khiêm Quarter*
For almost 10 years, between the completion of the construction and his death, this complex served as a second place of residence for the King, a retreat from the hustle and bustle of the capital city, and also an alternate place for the Royal court. It would have been here that king Tự Đức held court with his inner circles of mandarins discussing matters of state, met his fellow scholar poets to discuss and compose poetry. In short, here the world of the present life made its presence felt in the space intended for the afterlife.  

Only after the passing of the king that the two areas Lăng and Tâm became the realm of the deceased. When king Tự Đức was alive, the entire complex was referred to as Vạn Niên Cơ, later changed to Khiêm Cung. After he passed away in 1883 it was referred to as Khiêm Lăng.  

It should be noted that Khiêm – humility in Vietnamese – is the word chosen by king Tự Đức to name all the palaces and buildings within the burial complex. Khiêm Cung Ky – king Tự Đức’s own literary composition, inscribed on the stone stele standing at his burial complex, contains expressions of genuinely felt personal humility, more than usually required in the works written in the classical tradition. This self-critical reflection is absent from the ‘Saintly Virtues Supernatural Legacy [Thánh Đức Thần Công]’ dedications engraved on the steles at the burial complexes of other Nguyen kings. Their dedications were composed by their descendants and any critical view of the King would have been an

255 The historian Phan Thuần An is of the opinion that Tự Đức held court at Khiêm Cung to discuss matters of state as well as for reading poetry and relaxation, but I have not found any reference to the use of Khiêm Cung as an alternative court in the records such as the Đại Nam Thục Lục Chính Biên, which usually mentions the place at which the King issued his edicts.


intolerable double breach of piety to the father and respect to the King. Tự Đức had no children, and wrote his own dedication without such constraints. An extract from Khiêm Cung Kỳ reads:

What still worries me is that my self-cultivation remains incomplete, my ambitions unfulfilled, my title is hollow and undeserved, compared to my real sins. My weak physique does not give me the strength to deal with the great issues. As of the present, externally the lost sovereign lands have not been recovered, internally rebellions and other troubles have not been pacified, and problems of succession prove to be troubling and intractable. It is difficult to find someone suitable, so in whom am I to trust these matters.258

‘In whom am I to trust these matters’, the final phrase of the extract quoted above sums up the concerns weighing heavily in his mind: the tough inheritance left for his successor and the lack of trustworthy and capable hands to handle it. And being an avid reader of history, 259 King Tự Đức would have been aware of the long list of historical antecedents where strong external threats combined with incapacitating internal weaknesses to bring past dynasties to an end.

After king Tự Đức passed away in 1883, all these structures were maintained and preserved for the worship of the King. As if they regarded him as still alive, his wives and concubines moved their residence here to continue to care for his soul, and this was where they spent the rest of their lives, showing their total loyalty and devotion to

259 Tự Đức was an avid reader of history. He composed a large number of royal commentary poems [Ngữ Chê Thi] inspired by historical anecdotes.
the late king who had departed to the other world. In his will, king Tư Đục provided specific instructions for the living arrangements for his wives and other personal attendants.

The Palace of Họa Khiêm is to be used for burial, and afterwards as the place of worship. The Lương Khiêm Palace for the worship of my mother, the two homes can be used by my two wives Học Phi (Scholarly Lady), and Thiện Phi (Lady of Goodness), and the rest can be divided among yourselves to be used as living quarters.  

Four months after king Tư Đục’s death, his wife Học Phi was living at the burial complex with her adopted son, Ứng Dàng, when he was chosen to become king Kiến Phúc, after which she moved to the Trường Ninh Palace inside the Imperial City. Others lived there for much longer. In 1994 a nephew of one of Tư Đục’s concubines, Mr. Nguyễn Hiếu, born 1912, could recall with clarity the times of his childhood spent there with his aunt, including an occasion in 1922 when a visiting French woman artist composed a water colour portrait of his aunt, a concubine of Tư Đục’s with the title of Mỹ Nhãn – Lady of Beauty. Thus some 39 years after Tư Đục’s death, at least one of his concubines was still living there in the complex.

The customs at the time prohibited the king’s concubines from remarrying, an act of disrespect to the king, punishable by law. If they were childless, as was the case for

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260 Đài Nam Thục Lục Chinh Biên, Fourth Period, Volume LXIX, p. 201.

261 The Đài Nam Thục Lục Chinh Biên notes that Ứng Dàng, at the time 14 years of age, was living at Tư Đục’s burial complex Khiêm Làng, Đài Nam Thục Lục Chinh Biên, fourth period, volume LXX, p. 260.

all of king Tự Đức’s wives and concubines, they could not move out to live with their children. The other option would have been to take a Buddhist vow and lead the life of a practicing Buddhist nun inside a temple or a pagoda. In the case of Hôc Phi, after her adopted son became King Kiện Phúc, she was able to leave the Khiêm Lắng burial complex to live in the Trường Ninh Palace inside the Imperial City as the King’s Mother.

In this respect, the other Nguyễn kings made similar arrangements too. After the death of king Khải Định, for example, ‘all the concubines from the rank of Tần and below had to go and live at Ứng Lắng for two years, then move to Điện Thọ palace to serve the king’s mother […] There was a pagoda with several nuns so that every day they could listen to Buddhist prayers to forget the ephemeral matters of this world. After death, they would be worshipped either at their own temple, or at a temple shared with others’.263

The concurrent usage of the burial complex when the king was still alive, in essence, was an intermingling of the present world – from state matters to poetry, and the world of death yet to come. And after his death, during the period of mourning, the whole complex became the home for his immediate family and their attendants, before it became a combination of a burial site and a familial worship site. Taken together, these practices indicate a comfortable acceptance of the intermingling of the present world and the spiritual world at certain appropriate times, a major element underpinning the practice of ancestor worship.

This intermingling of the activities of the present life in the space intended for the next life is compatible with the belief ‘sinh ky tử quy’—in life we entrust, in death we return’—which regards life in this world as ephemeral and impermanent. It is also compatible with the traditional rituals associated with ancestor worship, which, on days of special significance, acknowledges the spiritual presence of ancestors in the present world.

Visiting one’s ancestor’s tombs is another important practice for many Vietnamese, especially for those living around Huế. In early 2001 I spent a month in Huế and tending to ancestral burial places was an important part of my family’s activities especially in the first days of the New Year. My notes recall the experience.

We spent the first day of the year visiting the pagodas and the graves of our ancestors. We went to the pagoda Linh Mụ at seven in the morning and after Linh Mụ we went to visit the tombs. The first one we went to was that of one of King Gia Long’s wives, who gave birth to King Gia Long’s youngest son, Tứ Sơn Công, who is my great-great-grandfather. Her tomb is at the top of a small hill in an area called Đa Lề, about 10 kms away from the city. Immediately below the tomb of King Gia Long’s secondary wife lies my mother’s tomb, a modest tomb the size of our living room, encircled by a low wall. At one end is the entrance, with a small screen that bars direct access to the tomb. You then see two graves in parallel, one already filled and complete, which is my mother’s and the other still unfilled, awaiting my father’s remains which will one day be brought home. At the other end are two headstones with my mother and father’s names, their dates of births and deaths, all engraved with Buddhist
symbols. Burial places, spiritual matters, pagodas, and family ties dominate life in Hue to an extent not felt elsewhere in Vietnam. The second tomb we visited was a little further away, where Tù Sơn Công, my great great grand-father, is buried. His tomb is slightly smaller than his mother’s and is circled by two layers of walls the outer one of head height and the inner own of waist height. I think there is a formula that determined the size of one’s tomb, depending on one’s position in the family.

That burial places are of importance to Vietnamese is well known and well-established. In the context of the material cultural heritage of Huế, out of the monuments inscribed on the World Heritage List, the royal burial complexes remained the least damaged, suggesting a respect that is widely shared and could withstand even the harshest of political storms.

2. The Thê Tô Miếu

Other sites of spiritual significance that have survived include the ancestral temple Thê Tô Miếu, named after king Gia Long’s posthumous Imperial title, Thê Tô Cao Hoàng Đế, reserved for the founding king of a dynasty. Unlike the design of the Imperial cities of previous dynasties, which did not place ancestral temples dedicated to the previous kings inside the Imperial City, the Imperial City of Huế has five such temples.264

To the left of the Palace of Supreme Harmony [Diên Thái Hòa], the most important

palace where the King held court, are the ancestral temples of Triệu Tô Mieu and Thái Tô Mieu. Triệu Tô Mieu is dedicated to the worship of Nguyễn Hoàng’s parents, Nguyễn Kim and his wife. Thái Tô Mieu is dedicated to the worship of the nine Nguyễn Lords from Nguyễn Hoàng to Nguyễn Phúc Thuận. To the right of Điện Thái Hòa are the Hưng Tô Mieu and the Thé Tô Mieu. Hưng Tô Mieu is dedicated to the worship of King Gia Long’s parents, Nguyễn Phúc Luân and his wife. Thé Tô Mieu is dedicated to the worship of King Gia Long and those who succeeded him. Only the male members of the Royal family could visit these four ancestral temples. The fifth ancestral temple, the Phùng Tien temple, situated between the Hưng Tô Mieu and the Queen Mother’s Điện Thọ Palace, is reserved for the women members of the royal family. Of these five ancestral temples, Thé Tô Mieu is the most imposing and most important. Apart from the main ancestral hall, its enclosure also houses the Nine Dynastic Urns, the Hiển Lâm Pavilion, and Tả Hữu Tông Tự, the two small temples dedicated to the most loyal lieutenants of the Nguyêns.265

a. The altars inside the Thé Tô Mieu

Inside the main hall were the altars dedicated to the Nguyễn kings. The central altar is for king Gia Long and his two wives, his tablet at the centre, that of his first wife is to his left and the second wife his right. To the right of king Gia Long’s altar is that of king Minh Mạng, to his left is king Thieu Trị’s and king Tự Đức’s is to his right, one spot further away, and the pattern continues. At the end of the Nguyễn Dynasty in 1945, there were seven altars for King Gia Long, Minh Mạng, Thieu Trị, Tự Đức, Kiên Phúc, Đông Khánh, and Khai Định. The order and position of the altars match

exactly the arrangement of the nine Dynastic bronze urns, each dedicated to a king’s reign, standing in the courtyard. The Dynastic urn that corresponds to king Gia Long’s reign, takes the central position, with king Minh Mạng’s to its right and so on. The deposed kings Đức Đức and Hiệp Hòa, and the exiled kings Hâm Nghi, Thanh Thái, and Duy Tân, did not have their altars inside the Thê Tổ Miếu. In 1954, the management committee of the Nguyễn Phúc family decided to add the altars for the exiled kings Hâm Nghi, Thanh Thái and Duy Tân, bringing the number to ten.  

Figure 19 The altars inside Thê Tổ Miếu, taken in 1999, during a rite to mark the anniversary of the

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b. The rites conducted inside the Thế Tổ Mieu

Whereas the important rites with wide social significance such as the Tết Nguyên Đán, the Rite of Lễ Tế Giao, or the coronation of a new king, were conducted in public, the ancestral temples were used on these important occasions for more private purposes, to communicate to the ancestors of the developments. For example, the funeral of king Gia Long began with the rites at Nam Giao to inform Heaven and Earth and the spirits of the passing of the King, the rites at the Triệu Tổ Mieu and Thái Tổ Mieu to inform the ancestors. After the funeral was completed twelve days later, rites were also conducted at Nam Giao and other ancestral temples to inform the spirits of the ancestors that the king’s funeral had come to an end. Similarly, the celebration of longevity for king Minh Mạng when he turned forty involved the rites conducted at Thái Tổ Mieu and Thế Tổ Mieu, as were occasions such as the crowning of the Empress, the Empress Dowager, the marriages of Princesses, and the anniversaries of the coronation of king Gia Long. In short, the ancestral temples inside the citadel were used for the spiritual needs of the members of the Imperial family, to connect the happenings of the present world to the world of their ancestors.

Underpinning the practice of these rites, such as those that mark an important date of special significance to the family, is the belief – not always held in a literal sense – that

268 Đỗ Bằng Đoán, Đỗ Trọng Huệ eds. (1968), Những Đại Lễ và Vụ Khúc của Vua Chúa Việt Nam, Sài Gòn : Hoa Lư.
one’s ancestors, or at least their spirits, are within reach of one’s communicative powers. For example, for Tết Nguyên Đán, the Lunar New Year, inside the homes of most Vietnamese, the altars would be carefully prepared, with a full banquet served up for the ancestors to enjoy. To begin the rites, the head of the family would light incense and kowtow in front of the altar to greet the visiting ancestral spirit. Sometimes, in a soft voice, he would provide a verbal report to the ancestors about the developments in the family of that particular year. The famous anthropologist Leopold Cadiere observed the role of the head of family in these matters in the following terms:

Apart from the anniversaries of death, the ancestors are also present in a clear and profound manner, in the first days of the New Year. At midnight of the New Year’s Eve, among the sounds of the firecrackers, people ‘welcome the ancestors home’, in the usual parlance, and the ancestors come to reside in the home, and receive many offerings. On the third or the seventh of the New Year, they ‘farewell the ancestors’ and the ancestors resume their existence, quiet but no less real, as in their usual lot.  

**c. Restoration of the Thê Tô Miếu and continuation of ancestral rituals**

Since the inscription of the monuments of Huế on the World Heritage List, much attention has been given to the restoration of Thê Tô Miếu; and in 1998 the central section of this important ancestral temple was restored with financial assistance and

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270 For a fuller description of the rites associated with the practice of ancestor worship, see Leopold Cadiere, Vê Văn Hóa và Tin Nguồn Truyền Thông Nguội Việt, NXB Văn Hoa Thông Tin, Hà Nội, 1997.
expertise from Poland. This took place at the same time, and in similar circumstances to the restoration of the Đàn Nam Giao, when economic reforms and World Heritage listing combined to create a favorable environment for their restoration, as will be discussed in later in this chapter.

But there is an important difference. Whereas the re-created Rite of Tê Giao are re-enactments by hired actors chiefly for the pleasure of outsiders, the rites at the restored Thế Tổ Miếu are conducted by direct descendants of the Nguyễn kings in accordance with their familial tradition for their own spiritual needs. Thus, whereas the Đàn Nam Giao has remained very much in the public sphere, there is a strong element of the private in the way Thế Tổ Miếu has been restored and its associated rites conducted.

Changes resulting from renovation policy in 1986 unintentionally provided space for a revival of ancestral worship in royal ancestral temples conducted by the Nguyễn Phúc clan who were once royalty in Vietnamese monarchical society from 1802-1945. After renovation, especially after UNESCO’s proclamation of Hue as a World Heritage Site in 1993, many local cultural forms have been revived and portrayed as a representation of Hue identity by state agencies for tourism. However, [...] the rituals of Nguyễn Phúc clan in royal temples are the only type of royal culture practiced by the royal clan that seems not to be conducted for tourists.

Although not intended for outsiders, these rites were conducted in the open and

272 Huynh T.A.V. (2007), Revival of ritual ceremony in Hue royal temples after renovation (doi moi) : the reconstruction of identity, Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand, p. 7.
therefore publicly accessible, as the temple Thé Tô Miếu itself is a part of public space. In 1999 my family and I spent over four months in Vietnam and we participated in the rites to mark the anniversary of the death of King Gia Long, inside the Thé Tô Miếu. At each altar, the most senior male member of that king’s descendants was the first to offer individual prayers, in unison with those at the other altars. A small royal court ensemble, which included all the instruments prescribed for use at such occasions, played specifically prescribed pieces of music for each stage of proceeding and concluded the formal praying segment with a procession out in the courtyard directly in front of the temple. As the procession continued, a group of tourists congregated around to watch, some wanting to take photographs – perhaps thinking it had been put on for them. Although complex and formal, in essence the rite was remarkably similar to those conducted at the ancestral altars in the homes of many ordinary Vietnamese on special occasions of family importance.

Figure 20  Photo, taken in 1999, showing court music being performed in the courtyard of Thé Tô Miếu on the anniversary of the death of King Gia Long
Ancestor veneration requires regular family rites to honour the ancestors, and thorough maintenance of the heritage of the family, not only the ancestral tombs but also the family’s own place of worship, called Phù or tử đờm. Some families use the former home from a distinguished ancestor, usually an outstanding mandarin or a notable member of the aristocracy, as his ancestral temple. It is where the various branches of the extended family would meet on important days of the calendar, serving as the focal point for their common familial root. In my family, for example, Phù Tù Sơn, the former residence of my great-great grandfather, Prince Tù Sơn Công (King Gia Long’s youngest son), is used by his direct descendants as the place of worship. Smaller than the ancestral temples in the Imperial City, these Phù represent another important layer of cultural heritage of Hue, focal points for networks of familial, social and spiritual needs. Thê Tờ Miếu, being the ancestral temple dedicated to founder of the dynasty, is at the apex of all these ancestral temples.

At the end of monarchy in 1945, the control of the Imperial City passed from the private sphere to become public space but these smaller Phù stayed within private control of the families concerned. But in times of great economic change, of large scale movements of people, they are the first properties to face the pressure of change. Some have been sold, but many continue to be maintained by the families as their own place of worship in accordance with ancestor veneration practices.

3. Đàn Nam Giao: The rite Lê Tế Giao and political legitimacy

Whereas the burial complexes of the Nguyễn kings and their ancestral temples belong to the private personal sphere, the Đàn Nam Giao is the space for rituals considered to
be essential for the well-being of the state, the Lê Tế Giao. The remaining sections of
this chapter traces the importance of the Rite of Lê Tế Giao to the state right through
Vietnam’s history, and tracks the transformation of the Đàn Nam Giao in recent times
to demonstrate that, in the public sphere, heritage values can be re-read and re-
interpreted through a shifting socially mediated frame.

a. Lê Tế Giao prior to the Nguyễn Dynasty

The rite, Lê Tế Nam Giao, or Lê Tế Giao, had been conducted by Vietnam’s kings
from the Lý dynasty, through the Trần, Lê dynasties to the Nguyễn, at a site chosen
specifically for the rite, south of the Imperial City, hence the site’s name, Đàn Nam
Giao.\(^{273}\) Its significance seems to vary throughout the dynasties, somewhat in tandem
with the influence of Confucian thinking in the royal courts.

In the early dynasties of Lý and Trần, during which Buddhist monks dominated the
inner circles of the royal courts, the rite, conducted on important dates associated with
agricultural calendar – the winter and summer solstices – was rarely mentioned in
Ngô Sĩ Liên’s Đài Việt Sử Kỳ Toàn Thư, suggesting a significance of an earthy social
dimension rather than one that symbolically strengthens the political legitimacy of the
kings.\(^ {274}\) During the Lê [1428-1788], which saw the rise of Confucian scholars’
influence in state matters, the rite was codified as one of the four major rites of the
nation, and its attendant rituals prescribed.\(^ {275}\) The Nguyễn dynasty, during which

\(^{273}\) Phan Thuận An (1995), ibid. p. 156

\(^{274}\) Ngô Sĩ Liên. & Phan Phu Tien. & Ta Quang Phat (1974), Đài Việt Sử Kỳ Toàn Thư, Saigon: Bộ

Confucian influence rose to a peak, codified the Lê Tế Giao in great details, conducting the rite yearly from the fifth year of Gia Long’s reign to Thành Thái when it became a triennial rite. The last Vietnamese king to have conducted the Lê Tế Giao was king Bảo Đại.

The Lý, underpinned by strong Buddhist influences, did not seem to need the political legitimacy conferred by the rites associated with Confucian prescriptions, such as the rite of Tế Giao. Contrasted with its numerous references to the construction of pagodas and temples, the Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư makes only one mention of the construction of the site for the rite of offerings to the Heavens during the entire Lý dynasty.²⁷⁶ For the Lý kings, spiritual support came from leading Buddhist monks such as Văn Hạnh,²⁷⁷ and the authority of the King over his subjects were reaffirmed yearly in a rite of taking the blood oath.²⁷⁸ Externally, the mandate to govern came from appointments by the Sung emperors, from whom the Lý kings were given the title of Giao Chi quan vương²⁷⁹ – the Duke of Giao Chi canton (as Vietnam was then called), until 1161 when Lý Anh Tông, the sixth Lý king, was given the title of An Nam Quốc vương – the King of the Annam kingdom, and Giao Chi was changed to

²⁷⁶ For example, Lý Công Uẩn, the first Lý king, moved the capital from Hoa Lư to Đại La (present day Hà Nội) in 1010, naming the new capital Thăng Long. The construction of the new capital city included many pagodas and palaces but there was no mention of the construction of places for Confucianist rites such as the rite of Giao. **DVSKTT**, vol. 1, p. 242. The only reference to the rite, was in 1154, ‘King Lý Anh Tông went to the southern gate of the capital, Đại La, to supervise the construction of the Dàn Viên Khâu’, the site for the rite of Offerings to Heavens on the day of Winter solstice. Later that year, he had a temple built to worship Confucius. **DVSKTT**, vol. 1, pp. 342-344.

²⁷⁷ The monk Văn Hạnh was a mentor of Lý Công Uẩn, and played a key role in his rise to become the founding king of the Lý dynasty. **DVSKTT** vol. 1, pp. 237-, 240. Lý Công Uẩn built numerous pagodas and strengthened the ranks of Buddhist monks through regular recruitment, by royal decrees, of novices to study to become monks. **DVSKTT**, vol. 1, pp. 247, 249. See also ‘Rethinking Vietnamese Buddhist history: Is the Thien Uyen Tap Anh a “Transmission of the Lamp” Text’ in Essays Into Vietnamese Past, K.W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (eds.) South East Asia Program, Cornell University Ithaca, New York, 1995 pp. 81-115.

²⁷⁸ **DVSKTT** vol. 1, p. 256.

²⁷⁹ The title of Giao Chi Quản Vương given to Lý Thái Tông (1010-1028) p243 vol. 1, Lý Thái Tông (1028-1054) p 259 vol. 2; Lý Thành Tông (1055-1072) p282 vol. 1; Lý Nhân Tông (1072-1127) p289 vol. 1; and in 1161 Lý Anh Tông (1136-1175) was given the title as An Nam Quốc Vương and the former name of Giao Chi was changed to An Nam Quốc (vol. 1, p. 346).
An Nâm Quốc – the Kingdom of Annam. The combination of the strong Buddhist influences in state matters, the lack of power by Confucian scholars, and an apparent acceptance of the nation’s status as that of a canton, explained why the Lê Tế Giao was hardly referred to in the DVSKTT covering the Lý dynasty.

The Trần dynasty replaced the Lý when Trần Thủ Độ outmaneuvered the last Lý king, Lý Huệ Tông, and installed his own son on the throne. Clannish to the point of incestuous, the Trần’s inner court was mostly dominated by a circle of trusted members of the king’s family. During the Trần dynasty, although Buddhist influences remained strong the court influence of Confucian scholars began to rise under a more organized and regularized examination system. But it was not until 1267 that king Trần Thanh Tông appointed two Confucian scholars Đảng Kế and Đỗ Quốc Tá to the highest posts of the inner royal court [hành khien], and ‘only from this point on Confucian scholars could hold real power.’

Yet, despite the increasing prominence of Confucian scholars in the Trần royal court, the rite of Lê Tế Giao is not mentioned at all in the DVSKTT for the Trần dynasty [1226-1399], an indication of the unconnectedness of its values and the court politics.

At the end of Trần dynasty, Lê (Hồ) Quy Ly usurped the throne through court manipulation and installed his son Hắn Thượng. Claiming the Trần had no successor, Hắn Thượng asked the Ming emperor for recognition of the new dynasty, but instead the Ming emperor sent several armies to Vietnam in the name of restoring the Trần.

The DVSKTT records that in his brief reign, Hồ Hắn Thượng conducted the rite of Giao in the new capital in Thanh Hóa, noting that the usurper of the throne did not

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280 DVSKTT, vol. 2, p. 34.

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perform the rite satisfactorily.\textsuperscript{282}

After numerous battles, the Ming forces captured both Hồ Quý Ly and Hồ Hán Thượng, and established direct rule, an administrative system that prescribed the appearance of its subjects, regulated the agricultural tax and the examination regime, and established a system of resident registration.\textsuperscript{283} The harsh colonial regime of the Ming ended in 1428 after Lê Lợi successfully waged a war of resistance from Lam Son and began the Lê dynasty [1428-1787].

During the Lê dynasty, Confucian scholars steadily gained further influences with the royal court, and regular, standardised examinations provided Confucian scholars with clear career paths to the court’s administration. The practice of engraving the names of top scholars on stone steles also began during the Lê dynasty, in 1442, the year when the historian Ngô Sĩ Liên gained his tiến sĩ. The court’s rites were formalistically regularised, with the rite of Giao prescribed as one of the four major rites, to be conducted according to a strictly prescribed manner.\textsuperscript{284} But it is in the court records of the Nguyễn dynasty that the rite of Lê Tế Giao, its scale, duration, and rituals, are described in great detail, suggesting that indeed, as noted in the UNESCO Decision to list Huế’s monuments on the World Heritage list, the Nguyễn dynasty was a time when Confucian monarchy rule reached its apogee of influence.

\textbf{b. Lê Tế Giao during the Nguyễn Dynasty}

\textsuperscript{282} \textit{DVSKTT}, vol. 2, p. 204.

\textsuperscript{283} \textit{DVSKTT} vol. 2, pp. 237, 243.

\textsuperscript{284} The other three major rites were chinh dân [first day of the Lunar New Year], thần tiệt [the king’s birthday] and cáo miếu [rite at the ancestral temple] \textit{DVSKTT}, vol.2 pp. 341–342.
The *Kham Đinh Đại Nam Hội Điện Sự Lễ* - the Imperially Ordered Compendium of the Protocols and Precedents of Đại Nam - (hereafter *KDDNHDSL*) provides a richly detailed description of the rites, covering their preparations, the selection of the date, the composition of the King’s entourage in their prescribed full court regalia, their itinerary, how the rituals to be performed, the number of musicians and dancers involved, the music to be played and the dances to be performed, the adornments of the altars and the preparations of the animals to be sacrificed for offerings.285

Details varied from time to time, but in essence the conduct of the rite remained the same over time. In 1915, the pioneering anthropologist Leopold Cardiere, editor in chief of the *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hue* and the Administrator [Công Sứ] R Orband, president of the Friends of Huế Association, drawing on their contacts - senior mandarins of the Duy Tân court in charge of the Ministry of Law [Bộ Hình] and the Ministry of Rites [Bộ Lễ] who gave them access to relevant documentations - participated in the rehearsals of the rite, and observed the details of the sites, the decorations and other materials used in the offerings. Their writings, published in the *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hue* of 1915, provided an account that by and large matched that found in the pages of the *KDDNHDSL*.

Preparations for the rite of Giao began in early spring with a petition from the Ministry of Rites to the king, asking for the appointment of a senior mandarin to select an auspicious day in the second month of the lunar calendar, from three possible dates recommended by the *Kham Thiên Giám* [The Astronomy

Its preparations involved numerous mandarins from the highest levels down to the regional minor officials, and the rite was witnessed by many ordinary people who lined the streets of its procession. Three days prior to the chosen date, the king and all involved in the rite began a period of abstinence during which they all had to 'take a cleansing bath, a change of fresh clothes, sleep in the outer part of the house, abstain from alcohol, meat, onions and chives, refrain from visiting the sick, from attending funerals, or listening to music, and [for mandarins] from executing penal orders.'

The day before the rite, early in the morning amid a great deal of fanfare, the king and his substantial entourage of royal guards, numbered between six hundred to three thousand, depending on the year, left the Citadel from the Điện Thái Hòa [Palace of Supreme Harmony] through the Ngo Môn [Noon Gate], outside of which all lower ranking mandarins lined the route from there to the landing at Phú Vân Lâu on the bank of the Hương river where the king and his entourage boarded the royal barge to travel along the Hương River to the landing at the Dương Xuân village.

Upon disembarking, the king was greeted by a full complement of royal guards including musicians in full regalia and travelled on to the site Đàn Nam Giao in a palanquin. At the site, the king was met by the full complement of senior mandarins of the court and all other participants who had travelled there to ensure preparations were in place, and proceeded to take residence at Trai Cung [Palace of

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Abstinence] while the final preparations for the rite were completed.²⁸⁹ Mandarins of the most senior ranks plus members of the royal family participated in the rite as assistants, helping with the placement of tablets bearing the names of previous kings on their dedicated altars, and other altars dedicated to heavenly bodies – including constellations of significance to the spiritual cosmos, overseeing the slaughtering and preparation of the sacrificial animals (roasted on cinnamon-scented fires), the choreography of music and dance involving the entire Great Ensemble of court musicians and Royal dancers, and the co-ordination of ritualistic steps of calling for, praying and making offerings to the spirits of the cosmos.²⁹⁰

The rite began at an early hour of the morning, with the king at the center of all these activities. With the assistance of the Minister of Rites who would call out for him to follow each step, he would pray and make the offerings at the principal altars, assisted by designated personnel of the highest rankings and seniority. The prayer would have been read out loud by a senior mandarin on behalf of the king, who would personally go through the motions of kowtowing at the principal altars, offering incense, wine and the sacred offerings, punctuated by designated music being played in between each step.²⁹¹ Towards the conclusion of the rite, which lasted for hours, wine was again offered, the text of the prayer – written on a length of silk – was burnt, and the offerings at the altars – having been touched by the spirits, were dismounted with ritualised pomp and ceremony. Later on, the meat from the sacrificed animals would be divided and given to the mandarins as lộc – blessed gifts from above.²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Khâm Dính, Vol. 6, Book 94 – Nghi Tiết [Conduct of Rites], pp. 521-530.
²⁹¹ Khâm Dính, Vol. 6, Book 94 – Nghi Tiết [Conduct of Rites], pp. 522-531.
A part of king Duy Tân’s prayer, recorded by Orband in 1915, is reproduced, to show that at the core of Lễ Tè Giao lies the .

At this auspicious time, with the greatest honour I respectfully offer the sacred precious stones and silk, the sacrificial animals, glutinous rice, flowers and fruits. This triennial rite is also an opportunity for me to pray to the souls of my predecessors. I pray to Heavens to protect their descendants with their sacred and mysterious power. I call for the souls of my predecessors to descend and enjoy all these offerings that have been placed upon the altars.293

At the end of the rite the king returned to his Palace of Abstinence and was congratulated by a mandarin from the Ministry of Rites for having successfully conducted the rite of Nam Giao. The king then changed into a less formal outfit, and the entire entourage then began to make their way back along the same route, again in full regalia, to the Citadel where the king resumed his normal daily duties.

The rite of Lễ Tè Giao is regarded as of central symbolic significance to Confucian monarchy rule. As the king was the only person who could conduct it, the rite confirmed his special position as the link between the powers above and his earthly subjects, thus cementing the Confucian doctrine of Thiên Mệnh – Mandate of Heavens.294 But, as described in the KDDNHDSL and observations made by Cadirere and Orband in 1915, the rite itself was laden with religious overtones, involving a

highly ritualistic invocation of the spirits of cosmic beings and of the king’s ancestors.

The rite of Tế Giao was one of the major, if not the most important rite conducted by the Nguyễn kings. It followed Confucian codes and convention, but its subjects of worship formed a cosmic world that included the ancestors of the king himself; as if having ruled the nation, upon their deaths, not only did they become a part of the other world, but a sacred part of the other world, with powers of guardianship over the well-being of the nation. Other aspects of the rite, such as the ritual sacrifice of the animals and the distribution of the blessed gifts – lộc – to the participants afterwards, give the rite a striking semblance to the shamanistic rituals of the Vietnamese. Perhaps one could call it a symbol of shamanistic Confucianism. Cadiere was not without good reasons to see in it a strong element of the belief system held by the Vietnamese.

‘The worship of the power of heavens and earth is deeply engraved in the religious psyche of the Annamites. Common language usage provides numerous evidence of their faith in the power of Heavens [Trời]: they call upon Heavens as a witness, as an agent for action, and they pray to Heavens as their savior. Heavens is of supreme goodness, is capable of love and compassion, brings life and provides protection. Heavens is the supreme master of humans’ fate. […] Sometimes in dire circumstances of an economic or spiritual nature, the souls of the Annamites are directed to the omnipotent Heavens in a gesture that’s beautiful because of its simplicity – the rite of offerings to Heavens, the essence of which [can be seen] in the rite of Nam Giao. In this major rite, […] as if he was representing the nation and
authorized by the nation, on behalf of all people, the emperor kneels down, makes the offering, expresses gratitude and asks for blessings. Just as the belief in the power of Heavens is the supreme and purest essence in the entire belief system of the Annamites, the offering made at of Nam Giao, the serious expression of that belief, is the supreme act of the rite of Nam Giao.  

Over time, the conduct of the rite varied, by an edict from the king or as a result of changed circumstances. From an annual event, first conducted by King Gia Long in the fifth year of his rein (1807) at the present site, it became a triennial event in 1890 under King Thanh Thái, due to its cost being too onerous. Its duration, originally three days, was also reduced to one day by king Bảo Đại, the last king of Vietnam to have conducted the rite of Giao. The route of the procession also changed with physical changes to the city. After a bridge was built across the Hướng River, the king’s entourage crossed the river over the bridge and proceeded overland to its destination, as observed by Orband:

The procession went past the Quóc Tự Giám, left the Citadel by the Southeast gate, and as the king left through this gate the sound of the bells and drums at the Noon gate ceased. Over the Thanh Thái bridge, along the Jules-Ferry street, over the Phú Cam bridge and along the avenue leading to the Đàn Nam Giao, the king proceeds to the Palace of Abstinence. Along the route, the

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296 In the ninth year of Minh Mạng’s reign (1828), the king ordered the Ministry of Rites to deliberate on the use of music and other ritual implements in the rite of Giao, the recommendations of which was set into practice in the rite of Giao conducted in 1830. Khâm Định, vol. 96, Lễ Lần [Major Rites], pp 361-362.
musicians do not play their instruments but the sounds of the drums and bells created quite a cacophony.\textsuperscript{297}

At present, a part of the procession is re-enacted during the biennial Huế Festival, for the benefit of tourists visiting the city.\textsuperscript{298} It follows the same route described by Orband above.\textsuperscript{299}

4. Rituals in a changing society: Transformation of the site Đàn Nam Giao

a. The Đàn Nam Giao

Commensurate with its importance and scale, the site for the Lễ Tế Giao – the Đàn Nam Giao – is a substantial compound. After assuming the throne in 1802, King Gia Long began to build a site for the rite of offerings to Heavens at the village of An Ninh in 1803, but three years later moved it to the present site. Construction began in 1806 and the first rite of Lễ Tế Giao at the present site was conducted by King Gia Long in 1807.\textsuperscript{300}

Built as open air structures and surrounded by planted pine trees – symbols of the righteous man – the Đàn Nam Giao covers a large area of land, the perimeter of the

\textsuperscript{297} Orband, R. ‘Tế Nam Giao, Tiên Lệ và Châu Bị’, 


\textsuperscript{298} DiGregorio and Oscar Salemink (2007), 


\textsuperscript{299} http://vietbao.vn/Van-hoa/Le-te-dan-Nam-Giao-Hoanh-trang-va-uy-nghi/65056280/181/

\textsuperscript{300} Dai Nam Thuc Luc, First Period, vol. 1
compound marked by a rectangular outer wall of 390 meters by 265 meters. This outer enclosure has four gates at the middle of each side, with the main gate facing due South, the others due North, East and West. Each gate is divided by columns into three entrances, in front of which stands a traditional screen – bành phong. Further in, there are three concentric walled enclosures, built atop of each other with decreasing dimensions, the foundations of which are of increasing height, serving as open air platforms where the rite is conducted.

Each inner enclosure has four gates matching those of the outermost wall, with steps leading to the next level. The topmost enclosure is circular in shape, is reserved for the altars dedicated to Heaven, the Earth, the founding lord Nguyễn Hoàng, the founding king Gia Long and the Nguyễn kings who had passed away. The next level down is square, reserved for the altars dedicated to the spirits of the mountains and the seas, lakes and rivers, hills and plains, clouds and rain, wind and tempest, the spirits of the stars and constellations, the planets and the moon, the spirits of Great Light (the sun) and of Nocturnal Light (the moon), and the spirits in charge of the burial complexes of the previous Nguyễn kings and Nguyễn lords from Nguyễn Hoàng, the list is long. The lowest level enclosure, also square, does not have any altars.

Apart from these three enclosures, there are other buildings within the compound, a mixture of permanent fixtures including the Palace of Abstinence [Trài Cung], the

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Kitchen of the Spirits [Than Trì], the Storehouse of the Spirits [Than Khổ], and some temporary structures erected for use during course of the rite.

The last Vietnamese King to have conducted this rite was Bảo Đại, either in March 1942 (Scott) or March 1945 five months prior to abdicating from the throne.

Figure 21 Photo of the Dàn Nam Giao (circa 1903)

b. The Dàn Nam Giao after the end of monarchy

With the upheavals that befell the city of Huế, the Dàn Nam Giao itself suffered a great deal of neglect during the Vietnam War. Without protection, the pine trees surrounding it were often cut down for firewood, and its large area was sometimes used by youth organizations such as the Scouts and Buddhist Youth for outdoor camping or for orienteering practice on a small scale. Being left largely unattended and un-inhabited, at the periphery of the city, much damage was caused by war and
vandalism.

After the war ended in 1975, in order to assuage the grief of human losses, the Vietnamese state ‘went to great lengths to ensure that its claims regarding the glory and nobility of suffering and dying for the cause were compelling’, and ‘soon after the war was over, the government began commissioning the construction of monuments for war dead in localities across Vietnam. These monuments are now visible in nearly every commune and district.’\(^{303}\) The Martyr’s Memorial for the city of Huế, built at a prominent spot on a bank of the Huong River, was reportedly sabotaged by an explosive, and in 1977 it was installed atop the Đàn Nam Giao.\(^ {304}\)

That decision provoked a strong backlash of the local populace in the form of a verse naming those responsible, Trần Hoần, then Commissar of the Province and Head of its Department for Culture, and Bùi San, his immediate superior, the then Party Secretary of Thừa Thiên Province.\(^ {305}\) That decision was reversed two years later, before it was included on the World Heritage List. Four years after that, the Đàn Nam Giao was listed on the National Heritage Register as one of cultural and historical significance. Since then it has been restored and now plays a central role in the re-enactment of the Nam Giao procession, a part of the Lễ Tế Giao, principally for the enjoyment of visitors to the biannual Huế Festival.


\(^{305}\) Trần Hoần cùng với Bùi San. Hai thằng hợp tác phá đàn Nam Giao. [Trần Hoần together with Bùi San / Those two bastards colluded to wreck the Đàn Nam Giao].

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c. Economic imperatives and social values of heritage

The transformation of the Đàn Nam Giao, from the most sacred place and of great symbolic significance to one of neglect and abandonment, to the location for commemoration for the winning side of the war, then as part of a festival celebrating Huế’s heritage, shows how fluid the social values of heritage can be, and how flexible the past can be imagined and re-imagined. As noted by Hue Tam Ho Tai, ‘The creation of a common past is a means of defining what and who belong, and what and who deserve to be consigned to oblivion. Battles over memory are thus battles over how to draw the contours of community, who is to be included, and who is to be excluded from the community thus defined.’

However, the boundaries that define which is to be cherished and which is not, are also subject to other imperatives such as the economic well-being of the society. The inscription of Huế’s complex of monuments on World Heritage List came around the time when Vietnam’s economic reforms combined with the lifting of the United States of America trade embargo to create a favorable environment for economic development and tourism in Vietnam.

As a new destination, previously out or reach due to the Vietnam war, Vietnam attracted an increasing number of tourists drawn to the country for a number of reasons, including visiting the country’s legacy of the well-known war. Like other


modern international tourists, cultural aspects of their total experience are important; they are keen to interact with the people of that culture and not simply to have a visual experience of an iconic structure. As well as giving the visitors a pleasing visual experience, the complex of monuments, as vestiges of a time past, provides a connection to the history of the place. The inscription of the complex of monuments on the World Heritage List helped highlight that connection and renewed interest in a heritage that had up to then been largely neglected by the state, a politically inconvenient legacy. Paradoxically, it is the historical circumstances that bequeathed the city its universally recognised cultural heritage that pose difficult issues for its management: the responsibility for the management of its heritage sites, including tourism development, lies within the powers of state instrumentalities of a modern socialist government antagonistic of the nation’s feudal past.\textsuperscript{308}

The renewed interest in the heritage value of the monuments of Huế brought about an increase in heritage tourism, with the number of visits to the historical sites of Huế rising from 243 thousand in 1993 to 1.3 million in 2002, to 1.55 million in 2007. In recent years, the number of visitor arrivals has stagnated and the rate of repeat visits remains low. The number of visitor arrivals has recently ceased to be of central importance as a target for tourism development strategies for Hue. Huế’s tourism authorities now consider their role to be ‘one of supporting the conservation of cultural and nature heritage sites, rather than as a means of attracting tourist arrivals and increasing revenue for the government.’ Instead, the goal is to ‘restore the sites and the traditional culture associated with them, not only by conserving the tangible

remains, but also through the revitalisation of Hué’s cultural heritage.\textsuperscript{309}

Funded with international assistance and underpinned by serious research and expertise, the restoration has returned some of their former glory to the monuments and provided a focus for efforts in tourism planning. In turn, the prominence accorded to Hué’s heritage has helped revitalise interest not just in the monuments themselves but also in cultural aspects associated with them. A biennial cultural festival, the \textit{Hué Festival}, with exhibitions, performances and re-enactments of old rites, has been held every two years since 2000 to showcase cultural aspects of the heritage of Hué.\textsuperscript{310} The development plan for Hué tourism, 2005-2010, aims to achieve conservation and maintenance of its cultural heritage through cultural tourism.\textsuperscript{311}

Since the inscription on World Heritage List, there has been quite a transformation of how the heritage of Hué is presented, a transformation that fit a wider pattern of tourism marketing in Vietnam, in which the history of conflict and colonisation is airbrushed to suit the perceived interest and taste of tourists.\textsuperscript{312} This transformation sidesteps historical connections that are awkward and inconvenient. It negotiates around the history – heritage intersection by focusing on the aesthetics and creativity of the monuments in a process described as de-politicisation of it heritage.


It doesn’t quite amount to an erasure of an inconvenient heritage, but the net effect is the construction of a narrative that tells a part of the whole story. While there cannot be said to be one single correct narrative associated with a heritage attraction, the current official scripting of the Hue Monuments in terms of aesthetics is not simply about reconstructing a past that without having to challenge dominant versions of revolutionary history, but Hue’s renovation is also ‘an important part of recent attempts to define an enduring set of symbolic materials […] that define the best of Vietnamese national culture,’ promoting it as one of the pre-eminent sites for the renewing of arts and culture.

The focus on the arts and culture helps to present Huế’s heritage in a readily digestible way to its visitors, offering them an experience wrapped in the physical beauty of the restored monuments, in the colours and music of festivals, the revived performances and highly visual re-enactments of rituals. However, the emphasis on aesthetics has led to glossing over some deeper significance: historical and spiritual aspects of Huế’s heritage do not feature in a meaningful way in the official scripting of Huế narrative.

While the appropriation of the Đàn Nam Giao site for a Martyr’s Memorial could be seen as an attempt to substitute one symbol for another for domestic consumption, the re-enactment of the rite Lê Tế Giao was primarily aimed at visitors to Huế. However,

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the reproduction of a rite with such powerful political overtones did cause some unease as to whether or not the Party ought to ‘shore up its political legitimacy by assuming the ritual potency of the former (feudal) Nguyễn dynasty’, even when the re-enactment involved professional actors. By 2006, however, the rite was ‘televised nationally in its entirety, with the role of the Emperor played by a professional actor calling on the Lord of Heaven on behalf of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (though refusing to sit on the throne), and with high-level political leaders in the audience.’

The connection between heritage and the needs of the society remains, even when the socio-political imperatives of the society had changed greatly. Certain aspects of the past have been co-opted to serve society’s needs, framing the heritage values of Huế within the public cultural settings of the post-1975 era, and then the post-economic reform period. Thus, in the public sphere, Huế’s heritage values depend to a large degree on what tangible benefits it is perceived to bring to either the state or to the society. In the private personal sphere, however, Huế’s heritage is rooted in its connection to the practice of ancestor worship.

In conclusion, the study of the three monuments in this chapter has revealed them to be places with multiple dimensions of meanings. The story behind the construction of King Tự Đức’s burial complex tells us much about the historical events of his time; its architecture and physical appearance embody the aesthetic values embraced by the king; and its usage both during and after his death underlines an acceptance of the co-location of the other world in the present. The Thê To Mieu, on the other hand, was the space where royal family’s spiritual needs were met, and we can see through the

study of the Dàn Nam Giao that it played a key role in the strengthening of national identity and political legitimation of an independent state.

As heritage values lie in what heritage symbolises and what it does, the study of these three monuments has provided an insight into how heritage values of the monuments of Huế have endured the political and social storms of the last century. Spiritually, they resonate with the dominant belief system of the Vietnamese; and I argue that there lies the explanation for their enduring appeal.
CONCLUSION

On reflection, Huế’s history, heritage and war legacy form a complex and multi-layered subject deserving a re-examination for a number of reasons.

For the 17th and 18th centuries, our understanding of Huế’s past has been skewed by a lack of attention to Huế as the new centre emerging in the south, with its own cultural pulses and sense of identity. For the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century, our interest in Huế’s history has been limited to the royal court and its politics, at the expense of attention to the influence of Huế’s reservoir of intellect and its educational, social and cultural networks in the radicalisation of Vietnamese. In more recent times, our knowledge on the events taking place in Huế, the Buddhist protests and the radical Tranh Đâu movement of dissension, has been predicated on analyses of a political nature. Scholarly discussion on the Tet Offensive, although numerous, has been limited to battle tactics, military strategies, and its impact on the course of the war. In addition, a full discussion on the Tet Offensive’s devastating impact on Huế’s population has been stymied by extreme polemics and restricted by strict taboo.

Logically, to reach a fuller understanding of Huế’s history, imperial past and its war legacy, *a priori*, one needs to revisit these aspects and provide a fuller picture where current literature is lacking, argue for alternative perceptions where existing discourse is over-preoccupied by a narrow range of visions, and bring into academic discussion the topics that have been avoided.
First, in relation Huế’s history and imperial past, two broad areas need to be re-examined: Huế’s imperial heritage in the form of the monuments inscribed on the World Heritage List, and Huế’s role in shaping Vietnamese politics of the early decades of the 20th century. On both, my thesis has argued that the deficiencies in relevant literature have their roots in an approach that identifies Huế completely with the Nguyễn rulers. The consequences of this approach are that the politics of Huế’s royal court became the focal point for a large body of mainly judgmental work concentrating on its failures; and that Huế’s connections with radical politics in Vietnam have been invisible because scholars turned their attention elsewhere. As a result, the monuments have been viewed as representations of a feudal world, fusty and irrelevant.

On the perception of the monuments, I argue that the label ‘feudal’ blinds us from seeing their deeper meanings. To label them as such is to subscribe to a flawed logic: they were built by the Nguyễn, rulers of a ‘feudal’ state, and therefore ‘feudal’ in nature. In this context, an argument over the ‘feudal’ nature of the Nguyễn rulers is moot. To engage in that argument, either for or against the ‘feudal’ label attached to Huế’s imperial heritage, is to commit the same error of logic. Instead, my work searches for more insightful ways to see their deeper meanings, ones that would better explain their enduring power. This enquiry has developed two-folds in my thesis, with Chapter One concentrating on their historical and aesthetic values and chapter four focusing on their spiritual significance.

Chapter One provides a detailed account of their construction, discusses the cultural and aesthetic principles guiding their architectural forms, and identifies the historical
events in which they were degraded or destroyed. The study of their usage, especially that of the royal burial complexes, later extended in Chapter Four, shows that even in its most straitened times, the imperial center’s projects still embraced the standards and ideals at the core of its culture, dignified in its appreciation of the finest artistic pulses within that tradition. Thus my work here has provided a much needed counterview to a large body of judgmental work on Huế’s imperial heritage, framed around the political failures of its royal court. It also has provided a useful guide to the chronology of their creation and destruction, identifying three main historical events – the French assault in 1885, the scorched earth retreat by the Viet Minh in 1946, and battles of the Tet Offensive of 1968 – as the ones that brought about much damage and destruction.

Chapter Four provides an in-depth study of three key monuments, the burial complex of King Tự Đức, the Thế Tổ Miếu ancestral temple, and the Dân Nam Giao, to reveal that they are places with special spiritual dimensions. In terms of purpose, I have discussed how they respond to spiritual needs at three different levels, the person, the family and the state; and put forward a strong case for the argument that Huế’s heritage contains a spiritual element that continues to render it relevant through demonstrable links to the present. Through the study of the rites conducted at these monuments, I have pointed out that their overall organising principle is solidly ground in the belief system of the majority of Vietnamese – the practice of ancestor veneration. I argue therefore, they should be regarded essentially as spaces with special spiritual potency. This, I argue, provides us with a deeper insight into their essence, explains their continuing relevance to contemporary society, and avoids the convenient but flawed label ‘feudal’.
A related question raised in the Introduction has to do with the enduring nature of Huế’s heritage. Clearly, part of the appeal of Huế’s heritage is due to its aesthetics, and for a significant number of people, their personal or familial connection to the imperial past. Chapter Four identifies a broader base for this appeal: many monuments in Huế, especially the burial complexes and the ancestral temples, are imbued with spiritual values that resonate deeply within the belief system shared by the majority, that of ancestor veneration. Chapter Four has also shown that even for a symbol of pure ‘feudalism’ such as the Đàn Nam Giao, it is possible to negotiate a socially mediated path towards a delicate accommodation.

On the question of Huế’s connections with radical politics in Vietnam, my thesis has brought out a so far un-noticed aspect of the re-generative power of heritage. While it is commonly known that an overwhelming majority of the first generation of revolutionaries had close personal connections with the scholar-gentry class, Huế’s cultural and intellectual milieu surrounding their formative years have been broadly over-looked as a factor in the success of their revolutionary project. Instead, leading scholars have looked elsewhere: David Marr looked at the international sea-changes in ideas and intellectual outlook, Hue-Tam Ho Tai at the more westernized urban centers of Vietnam, Luong Van Hy at the strength of the traditional village as sources that gave rise to the powerful outburst of revolutionary fervor. While all the above are quite valid in their own analysis, my account given in Chapter Two reveals a fourth: the concentration of intellect, of talents and facilities existing in Huế facilitated the paths of many of its residents towards their chosen goal. While at first glance it seems counter intuitive to expect revolutionaries soaring out of the ashes of an imperial
centre, the evidence presented here amply demonstrates that Huế was in fact a major node where revolutionaries were radicalized, where ideas were transmitted through scholars and schools with deep links to Huế’s imperial past. Thus my work here has provided us with a more complete picture of Huế’s history in the period, and in a wider sense, contributes to our awareness of an underlying continuity in the pulses of the Vietnamese revolution.

Huế’s history has produced intimate royal patronage of Buddhist teaching centres, the pagodas that were built in the capital, and became the radicals’ rallying points in the Buddhist crisis in the early 1960s. The discussion in Chapter Two focuses on the manner in which the Buddhist crisis evolved into the anti-war, anti-American, and militant Tranh Đấu movement – demonstrating that Huế’s participants were leading in the cultural political front, their cultural icons gave voice to an alienated generation caught in the middle of a conflict not of their own making. To support my analysis here, I have drawn on materials in Vietnamese, literature written by authors of Huế, to provide a sense of the cultural texture at the time. The works of the poet and writer Nhã Ca, the writer Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tuòng, and the lyrics of Trịnh Công Sơn form the most prominent ridges of that texture. In selecting and translating a significant part of their works for this thesis, I have brought some of the finest writings by Huế’s authors to an English readership.

Second, in relation to Huế’s war legacy, my thesis has focused on the violent nature of the distressing loss of life in Huế in the battle of the Tet Offensive, its devastating psychological impact on the population, and its lasting bitter legacy which continues to occupy much of the heart space of Vietnamese to the present day.
To further our understanding of the violence that took place in Huế, I have pursued two main lines of enquiries: the pressure cooker conditions of war, laced with pre-existing poisonous ill-will and animosity, and the actions of the individuals concerned. I argue that when Huế became the epicenter of the battle ground, all the tensions and conflicts that had existed between the radicals of the Tranh Đấu movement and their detractors set up the highly combustible conditions for the violence that occurred; but that the actions of some individuals were conscious and premeditated, as evidenced in their own recollection of the event.

To support my argument, I have produced a detailed analysis of how the movement which started with grievances over religious freedom became increasingly militant and violent; and how its suppression by the South Vietnamese authorities created acute tension and animosity between the movements leaders and their detractors. I have provided evidence to show that such tensions certainly were a part of the dangerous environment that existed in Huế during the Tet Offensive. For a better understanding of the actions by individuals, I have drawn heavily on the writings by key militant individuals such as Nguyễn Đức Xuân to illustrate how their local knowledge, combined with their actions, played a crucial role in the resulting arrests and subsequent deaths of a large number of people. I must say here that the focus on these individuals is not motivated by any sense of personal enmity. Rather, they are the very few individuals who actually have written or spoken about their roles in the Tet Offensive in specific terms. Therefore, care must be taken not to overgeneralise from their recollections to other key members of the movement.
In relation to the loss of life, the psychologically distressing impact on Huế’s population, and the reactions to this traumatic episode, I have used a wide range of materials, lyrics, literature and auto-biographical writing by those closely involved, including my mother’s memoir and my own memory, to put together a portrait of Huế prior to, during, and especially in the aftermath of this painful episode. The materials I have presented here support my argument that Huế’s legacy of war is one associated with deep psychic wounds, intense suffering, and dark hatred, resulting in deep fissures that are unlikely to heal without an open and honest enquiry into its genesis and the roles of all individuals concerned.

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