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Article (Accepted Version)

Marouda, Marina (2017) The neglected side of philanthropy: gifts to hungry ghosts in contemporary Việt Nam. *South East Asia Research*, 25 (3). pp. 251-267. ISSN 0967-828X

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The Neglected Side of Philanthropy: Gifts to Hungry Ghosts in Contemporary Việt Nam¹

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Abstract

Anthropological interest in giving, including religious charity, has grown in recent years. However, studies of philanthropy have largely been confined to activities relating to human-to-human sociality. By contrast, this article explores conceptions of giving and acts of charity from the perspective of interactions between the living and the dead. Drawing on Buddhist traditions and popular rituals in contemporary Việt Nam, it takes an in-depth, ethnographic look into a series of ritual performances that seek to provide relief to ‘orphaned’ restless ghosts. Forms of religious charity constitute the unfortunate dead as the impoverished ‘other’ and strive to create a nexus of reciprocity that implicates the living with the dead, and the human with the non-human. Further, the article argues that Vietnamese charitable acts for ghosts are not driven simply by an awareness of the needs and sufferings of others. Such concerns and sensibilities are undeniably instilled by moral and religious training in the Buddhist disciplines. However, they are supplemented and reinforced by the menacing influence the neglected dead are believed to be capable of exerting upon the living, in terms of the threat they pose, and the power they often exercise, putting one’s prospects for a prosperous future and general well-being in jeopardy.

Key words: charity, alms, ghost rituals, Buddhism, Việt Nam

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“Better there should be no prayer than excessive offering”

The Hávamál, (as cited in Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, xiv, 2011)

¹ An ESRC postdoctoral fellowship (PTA-026-27-2840) provided support for writing this article which draws on long-term fieldwork in central Việt Nam (2004-2006) and supplementary research (2011) funded by the University of Cambridge (Evans Committee) and ASEASUK. My sincere thanks to anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

It is the morning of the last day of the lunar monthly cycle, a time when the living in largely Buddhist Việt Nam habitually engage with a host of dead and spiritual entities. In a small hotel in the city of Huế in central Việt Nam, staff are busy preparing a ritual feast. In the kitchen staff are cooking and garnishing an assortment of dishes while members of the security team methodically arrange a large banqueting table on the front porch in front of the main entrance, effectively screening the way into the premises. The table is set for a profligate feast: arranged with tablecloth and numerous sets of tableware, there is an astounding variety of food and drink, sampling a range of local delicacies, soft and alcoholic drinks, to fit guests of diverse age and preferences. Fresh flowers and fruit, light and incense, the elemental offerings to spirits, are placed at the top end of the table, along with stacks of paper money and garments. After all offerings are arranged, a senior member of the security team bows before the burning incense and cordially invites guests to enjoy what is on offer, uttering a few prayerful words under his breath. The invited guests are *cô hồn*, the forsaken hungry dead that prowl the city's streets in search of food and attention. In the words of the young male receptionist servicing the front desk that morning:

These offerings are for the forsaken souls (cô hồn) of those who died tragically in the vicinity and have no relatives or anyone to care for them. They are helpless and abandoned; they have no house, no money and no clothes. We regularly make offerings to them because if we do not, then what will become of them? After all, making offerings to abandoned souls is good for our business.

In Buddhist Việt Nam, supporting the homeless dead, those who have little to survive on and no merit to assure their movement onto a next life, is generally considered an act of 'compassionate generosity' (*bố thí từ bi*) towards unrelated others. Many Buddhist devotees explain the practice in terms of 'rich' (*giàu*) and 'poor' (*nghèo*). In the words of a young male taxi driver versed in Buddhist teachings, 'it is like someone living in a wealthy country giving to those trapped in impoverished realms'.

The present article explores conceptions of giving and acts of charity relating to ghosts, and draws on Buddhist traditions and popular religious rituals for the dead in contemporary Việt Nam. Focusing on the Huế, the country's former imperial capital and long-standing national centre for Buddhism, it considers a number of instances whereby hand-outs are given for the benefit of the forsaken hungry dead. Such hand-outs are often presented on the side-

lines of ancestral rituals, complementing offerings made to familial dead enshrined in houses and ancestral halls. In recent years, however, the practice of making offerings to anonymous hungry ghosts has grown in intensity and magnitude as it is fervidly undertaken by local shopkeepers, petty entrepreneurs and market-stall holders. Such activities have evolved into one of the principal ways of staving off avaricious and potentially malevolent influences, and neutralising threats that could interfere with one's livelihood and success in trade. Most interestingly, relief missions for masses of anonymous unfortunate dead such as flood and war victims have recently come to be organised by Buddhist lay people, with the help of local pagodas. These ritual missions, which are recent innovations and distinctive to Hué, are fast becoming a prime means for generating merit for the benefit of unrelated unfortunate dead and domesticating disrupting influences that might afflict family members, and correspond to key occasions whereby locals pray for health, wellbeing and prosperity.

Scholars of Asian religions, particularly those focusing on East and Southeast Asia, have long been identified ghosts as 'hungry', 'pitiful' creatures, often likened to 'beggars' (Wolf 1974; Weller 1985; Formoso 1996; Kendall 2008; Feuchtwang 2010; Ladwig 2012). Annual festivals for feeding hungry ghosts have been a focal point of scholarly attention, often described as effective means to pacify such impoverished and avaricious entities.² Examining the Taiwanese festival for hungry ghosts over the course of two centuries, Weller (1985:46) observes that the category of ghosts has served as an enduring popular 'metaphor' for the politically marginal and the economically weak: from the dangerous political ghosts of the nineteenth century that locals likened to 'bandits' and 'beggars' and the 'uprooted workers' of the early twentieth century to the 'pitiful ghosts' of kinship that have become prominent in popular imagination since World War II. The case for ghosts as impoverished beings depending on the hand-outs of munificent living is extensively made in literature; however their relevance for understanding practices of charity has not been a topic of sustained attention. Anthropological interest in forms of giving and philanthropy including religious charity has grown in recent years, yet it is largely confined to activities concerning human-to-human interaction. Formoso's article (1996) on the charitable efforts of ethnic Chinese in Thailand to provide relief to unburied, restless dead is a notable exception. Bringing together ghost-related practices with merit making Formoso's study sheds light on the complex motivations and

²Ghost-related practices have a long history in Buddhist Asia, especially in China. On the history and cosmology of the 'ghost festival' in China see Teiser (1988) and Heise (2012). On ghost festivals in South East Asia see Ladwig (2012).

tensions informing charitable practices, especially the conflicting attitudes towards ghosts that involve as much dread and fear as pity and compassion. Formoso (1996) fittingly stresses the significance of socio-economic differences between the well-off Chinese donors and the economically weak, predominantly Thai population of hungry ghosts for understanding such charitable relations. Nonetheless, the roles unfortunate dead play as figures of fear in such exchanges remains largely unexplored with ghosts principally portrayed as passive recipients of relief efforts. The current article aims to fill a double research lacuna: first by looking at an ethnographic case whereby charity involves humans interacting with non-humans, it offers a post-human (and post-secular) perspective on studies of poverty alleviation. Second, by seeking to account for ghosts as an integral and active part in the unfolding of charity relations, the article highlights the influence that ghosts exercise in the shape charity takes, underscoring the effects their presence has on living humans in terms of eliciting specific responses.

Gifts, Ghosts and Justice

Taking Vietnamese ideas about ghosts seriously, and accounting for the influence ghosts exercise on human affairs can help further our understanding of the role of the sacred in religious charity. Research on religious charity shed ample light into the various ways in which religious notions inform charitable giving (Wuthnow 1990; Allahyari 2000; Hart 2007; Bornstein 2009). Such studies consider the relation between alms giving and religious ethics, stressing the significance of religious ideas for the articulation of moral discourses which, in turn, inform acts of giving, and shape the motives of donors and volunteers. Of direct scholarly relevance has also been the way in which religious ethics frame communities of benevolence, and shape organisational cultures of care. Despite such rich accounts, surprisingly little has been said about the overall significance of sacred beings and spiritual forces to the undertaking of charity, and of the roles sacred forces are assumed to play in rousing relevant behaviours amongst donors. The presentation of alms to Vietnamese ghosts forms a distinct set of religiously inspired charity. By means of focusing on this particular case, the current article calls for an appreciation of the dynamic roles spiritual forces play in charitable interventions. The point of departure for advocating such position lies in the appreciation of the extended networks that make up the social. Latour (1995) and other proponents of actor-network theory have long envisaged the social in terms of ensembles that include living humans and non-human beings, such as microbes, animals and machines. Questioning the given sociological

wisdom that presumes the ‘social’ as the exclusive domain of humans as agentive actors, scholars of this persuasion argue for the inclusion of other entities, such as ‘objects’, on account of their attributes as actants. The current study seeks to broaden such networks further by considering ghosts as active participants in the networks woven by gift exchange. This allows taking into account the immaterial and material presences in studying the forces exercised on the social.

In Mauss’ celebrated study, “*Essai sur le don*” (2011) first published in 1925, spiritual forces form an integral part of gift giving. Drawing on a range of ethnographic examples across space and time, Mauss demonstrates that gift transactions implicate not only living mortals, but also deities and spirits. In many ethnographic instances, spiritual entities are considered the ‘real owners of the world’s wealth’ from whom the living must ‘purchase’ the ‘right to do certain things with [this] wealth’ (2011:13-14). A telling example is potlach, the Amerindian gift-giving feast where significant parts of the goods and valuables extravagantly expended are transferred to spirits through sacrifice and intentional destruction (2011: 15). Spiritual forces also inhabit the core of Mauss’s analysis of the gift. Mauss raises a central question: what is the principle that motivates prestations, demanding that gifts are repaid? The answer for Mauss lies in the Maori *hau*, the ‘spirit of the gift’, the entity that dwells in all objects, compelling the recipient to make a return, while afflicting in devastating ways those who fail to do so (2011: 148). Mauss elaborated a theory of exchange on the principle of reciprocity, demonstrating that prestations though seemingly voluntary, are in essence obligatory. For Mauss, generosity corresponds to an obligation the non-meeting of which can bring about the near-dissolution of the social with the disrespected gods and affronted human partners demanding revenge. It is partly this potential for violence, and the threat of retribution exacted by the spiritual force residing within the gift that, according to Mauss, forces the hand of generosity.

A set of subsequent studies have re-examined Mauss’s theory of the gift, particularly the claim that the gift derives from reciprocity, and creates enduring social bonds. Both Parry (1986) and Laidlaw (2000) describe non-reciprocal religious gifts in India. Parry (1986) focuses on Hindu alms (*dāna*), particularly the gifts given to Brahmin priests in funerals by mourners, on behalf and for the benefit of the deceased. Construed in ideal form as voluntary and disinterested, *dāna* are revealed to be in practice ‘poisonous’ and ‘tainted alms’, imbued with the sins and impurities of the giver. Seeking to get rid of such impurities by transferring it to priests, these gifts are impossible to return from the outset. Parry’s study demonstrates that far from being disinterested, giving can be tactical for the donor and potentially dangerous for the recipient. Laidlaw (2000) elaborates further on the idea of the ‘pure gift’ by focusing on

Jain practices whereby lay practitioners give food alms to world renouncers. These gifts, Laidlaw points out, are given to ascetics without expectation of return, therefore work against forming enduring social relations. For Laidlaw, the fact that the ‘gift does not create obligations or personal connections’ is precisely where its ‘social importance’ lies (2000: 618). The aim of the Jain alms is to assist lay donors to meet ethicised demands for moral purity and help celibate renouncers achieve spiritual perfection.

The un-reciprocal Indian gifts Parry and Laidlaw describe offer significant insights, not least demonstrating that gift-giving is closely related to salvation concerns. Gifts can be oriented towards soteriological ends: devoid of expectations of immediate return they can involve expectations of some form of reward in a next life. Parry further astutely highlights that the notion of the ‘pure gift’ is more likely to emerge in a fully commercialised and highly differentiated economy, whereby it contrasts with profit-oriented exchange according to market models. The idea of the ‘free’ or ‘pure’ gift has also been taken up by Derrida (1992) in a late exercise in deconstruction. Derrida maintains that for the ‘free gift’ to be possible, there should be no expectation of return, no calculated interest, and no recognition of the gift as such. If a gift leads to a return (even in the form of gratitude), it becomes part of an exchange, and is therefore annulled as ‘free’ or ‘pure’. For Derrida, the philosophical and political value of the gift stems from its paradoxical position as a logical impossibility: it is sought after and desired precisely because it is impossible to attain. The ‘free gift’ literature places analytical emphasis principally on the act of giving and the role of the giver. As a result major aspects of gifting practices are missed. It is the donor’s intentions and expectations which are construed as of primary importance, often at the expense of the recipient and his/her perspective on and involvement in the relation.³ To the extent that gift-giving is an intersubjective act, understanding gift-giving requires paying attention to the recipient as well as the donor so as to fully appreciate the complexities involved.

In reconsidering the poison contained in Hindu alms, Snodgrass (2001) shifts attention from givers and their motives towards recipients and their reluctance to accept gifts. Looking at alms offered to low-caste performers for funerary services, Snodgrass observes that such performers avoid accepting alms given on behalf of the deceased as they are considered

³ This focus on donors is also evident in comparative studies on philanthropy that chart the breadth of the moral and emotional tenor involved in giving, from altruism (Allahyari 2000) to self-interest (Bourdieu 1998). This focus on donors conceptualises philanthropy as a highly personal and reflexive option, a case of constituting oneself as a ‘virtuous person’ (Allahyari 2000).

‘dangerous’ and even ‘lethal’ (2001: 687-8). The fear of accepting alms relates to threats of ghostly attacks. Alms are given in the name of the deceased to assist their transition to the other world; however such process is uncertain and its outcomes unpredictable. The deceased might fail to make the transition and instead continue to wander the earth as stray souls; especially those who suffered an untimely or violent death or face unresolved issues with the living. By accepting alms made in the name of the dead, low-caste performers expose themselves to the dangerous world of ghostly entities, who might pester or harm those who receive alms on their behalf (2001: 694-6).

Snodgrass’s study is important here for two reasons. First, it accounts for the active role played by recipients in the unfolding of generosity. Second, it points to the significance of the dead and the influence they exercise in the affairs of the living, particularly the threat of affliction. The potential for unleashing violence is of great significance for understanding charitable practices as Bowie (1998) suggests. Looking at alms-giving in Buddhist Thailand, Bowie challenges prevailing paradigms in the study of charity and merit-making that privilege the donor’s perspective. ‘By portraying merit making as a purely discretionary act of donors, the role of the poor in shaping the behaviour of the wealthier has been ignored’, Bowie remarks (1998: 474). Bowie calls for reconsidering charitable practices in relation to the principle of justice, highlighting that the rich might give because of social pressure from the poor to do so. What looks from the perspective of the wealthy-donors as an ‘act of giving’ can be seen from the perspective of the poor-recipients an ‘act of getting’ she writes (1998:475).

Bowie’s concern with justice is shared by Derrida (1993). In his *Specters of Marx*, Derrida argues that there can be no justice without ghosts: ghosts are the very guarantors of justice for they are destined to afflict the living till the latter embark upon acts of restitution. For Derrida, justice comes neither from divine rulings nor human decrees; it always comes by way of the ‘other’, this other best conceived as a ghost haunting the world of the living in a quest to retrieve debts owed. The way to ensure justice, Derrida writes, is to learn to live with the other in a way that safeguards the other’s welfare and well-being as a matter of outmost urgency and priority. Recognising wrongs committed at the expense of others as well as working towards honouring one’s obligation to others, all others, especially unknown ones is a trait of just conduct. Drawing inspiration from Bowie’s and Derrida’s writings on charity and justice, the present article considers the influence Vietnamese ghosts as impoverished others exercise in gift giving, highlighting their role in soliciting donations and exacting fairness. It does so by emphasising the ways in which Vietnamese ghosts’ demands for propitiation and

their propensity to lash out if left unattended create the conditions necessary for the bestowal of gifts.

Concerns over poverty and anxieties regarding retribution have acquired new significance in contemporary Việt Nam where the rise in national prosperity and increases in household income brought about by market reforms coincide with rising levels of poverty and increasing socio-economic disparities (Luong & Unger 1998; Taylor 2004b). As Taylor (2004b) observes, dealing with growing inequalities is one of the main challenges Vietnamese state faces in its effort to deliver prosperity and ensure justice through the (re)invigoration of market economy. After decades of failed experiments in communist economics, the state's embracing of commerce and the opening up of the country to outside investment has created new grounds for wealth accumulation, instigating novel opportunities for achieving riches that many take up. Yet it has also sharpened disparities, especially between rural and urban localities, farming and entrepreneurial households (Luong & Unger 1998). Currently, around the country there are many thriving centres of commerce where young entrepreneurs accumulate fortunes unimaginable a few years ago. Yet, many Vietnamese continue to struggle to subsist, as they are left landless, or are forced to migrate to make a living. It is with regard to the process of creating new wealth through the application of market economics that the ghosts considered here make their presence more felt, demanding attention and care. Their arrival is inexorably marked by the tensions inherent in a situation whereby an increase in the numbers of the newly prospering is accompanied by growing socioeconomic divisions, and where exuberant shopping malls overflowing with luxuriant goods intersect with shantytowns lacking basic services yet sheltering masses of impoverished existents.

The Predicament of Ghostly Life

Like elsewhere in East and Southeast East Asia, the Vietnamese religious landscape is populated by a multitude of ill-fated dead and wronged spirits (Cadière 1957; Kwon 2008). This multitude includes suicides and murder victims, casualties of conflict and road traffic fatalities, the souls of deceased infants and other that suffered a premature and violent death. In the central city of Huế, ghostly crowds include an array of historic spectres, ranging from the indigenous Cham populations that were gradually displaced by the expanding Viet kingdom from the 15th century onwards, and the imperial soldiers that resisted the French invaders in the 19th century, to the throngs of victims that fell during the war for independence (1946-54) and

the second Indochina conflict that ended in 1975. The presence and influence of such disparate collection of ghost becomes manifest in the myriad shrines sheltering wandering souls that line the city's streets.

My Vietnamese interlocutors refer to all these unfortunate dead using the term *cô hồn* which translates as 'lone' or abandoned soul'.⁴ For the living inhabitants of Huế, the fundamental predicament *cô hồn* face is the acute lack of emotional and material support from living kin and other intimates for their connections with the latter have been severed or become untraceable. It is precisely this disconnection and ensuing deprivation that permeates all facets of their miserable and destitute existence. In the words of my informants, *cô hồn* suffer because they have 'no one to care for and provide for them' (*không có ai lo cúng*). My informants commonly described *cô hồn* as those 'who died unmarried' and 'without children' (*không có con*), especially male descendants, the ones expected to care for parents and antecedents in later life and thereafter. This lack of support and care by kin is more acutely experienced by deceased infants, whose premature death not only abruptly severs connections with parents but further denies an opportunity to create intimate relations anew through marriage and procreation. The vindictive souls of deceased infants, stillborn babies and aborted fetuses, often described as 'maiden aunts' (*bà cô*)⁵ - regardless of gender that for fetuses often remains unknown - are among the most fear-provoking ghostly entities in Huế. In recent years, families have taken an intense interest in the fates of deceased members who died before or soon after birth, erecting elaborately adorned shrines at the edge of their gardens and yards to shelter the tormented souls of their little-known kin.

Cô hồn lack may also lack vital support from kin because their identities and the circumstances surrounding their death remain unknown to the living. *Cô hồn* are commonly described as having 'no name or age' (*không có tên tuổi*). Name and age are fundamental for establishing a person's identity, and along with the date of death, are essential for calling and ritually engaging the soul of a deceased person. With their name and age being unknown, *cô hồn* are deprived of traceable links to family, kin grouping and locality, often described as pitiful beings who have no 'home' or 'family' (*nhà*). As many informants repeatedly said, *cô*

⁴ In kinship terminology, *cô* refers to father's younger sister, and it is also used to formally address non-kin, usually a young, unmarried woman. *Hồn* roughly translates as 'soul'.

⁵ In places with predominantly patrilineal kinship reckonings like Viet Nam, premature death is even more problematic for girls, who are expected to marry and integrate into the husband's descent grouping, worshiped after death as mothers and grandmothers.

hồn lack access to a ‘shelter’ and a ‘place (or someone) to lean on’ (*không có nơi nương tựa*) Being all alone, *cô hồn* lead a precarious and impoverished existence, wandering from place to place in search of shelter and food, care and recognition.

Destitution and hardship are striking characteristics of the ghostly condition. The ethnographic literature on religious practices in East and Southeast East Asia is filled with references to ghosts as ‘hungry’ (Kendall 2008), ‘pitiful’ creatures (Formoso 1996:220) in desperate ‘need for alms’ (Feuchtwang 2010: 171). Likewise, Vietnamese ghosts are portrayed as destitute souls consumed by unquenchable hunger and thirst. The orphaned souls of those who pass away without anyone to care for them are deprived of the essentials of subsistence such as food, clothing and spirit money that are, in contrast, regularly provided to familial dead. As a retired teacher explained, the forsaken dead are very much like the living dispossessed; both exist in dire poverty, without a house or a firm foothold in a locale and a decent means to livelihood, and most importantly, without the support of kin that could lift them out of destitution. Therefore, both depend on the generosity of unrelated others, feeding off the kindness of the living anyone, the teacher added.

Aggravated by acute hardship *cô hồn* are spurred into action by anguish and are prone to lash out on the living inflicting misfortune, especially on the more fortunate and prosperous ones. Like elsewhere in Asia (cf. Kendall 2008), Vietnamese ghosts are predisposed to disrupt household harmony, cause quarrels and conflict, plunder valuable resources, cause sudden illness and even bring about death. In Huế, envious ghosts threaten to afflict not only the living but also their cared-for dead, who are subject to attacks by envious ghosts. Ghosts can pester familial dead by devouring the offerings made to them and disrupting the flow of gifts and blessings sustaining the links between living and dead relatives that are crucial for the wellbeing of both.

Given the threat Vietnamese ghosts pose to the well-being of others, gifts to ghosts often serve prophylactic purposes, seeking to appease the latter’s suffering and anger. More often than not, charitable gifts to ghosts are meant as ritual defences, aiming to keep such dangerous voracious influences and the threat they pose to livelihoods at bay. In his article on the charitable efforts of ethnic Chinese for the benefit of unfortunate Thai dead, Formoso astutely observes that ghosts inspire terror and pity amongst the living (1996: 220-21). Formoso describes fear and compassion as highly contrasting feelings that inform diametrically opposed attitudes to ghosts. Such attitudes, it is suggested, correspond to ethnic and religious divisions that permeate Thailand, separating the affluent Chinese community from the rest of Thai society. According to this analysis, Chinese benefactor, influenced by Confucian and Taoist

traditions, conceive ghosts as meriting ‘pity’ and ‘compassion’ whereas for Thai Hinayana Buddhists, ghosts are ‘fearsome dangers’ (1996: 220). Because Thais avoid contact with ghosts, relief campaigns for unfortunate dead are undertaken by the well-off Chinese. However, fear and compassion need not be radically opposing responses to the presence of ghosts. In the Vietnamese case, the two reactions are closely connected. The menacing influence Vietnamese ghosts are capable of exercising in the affairs of the living is key for understanding the charitable responses the former are able to elicit from the latter. In other words, the fear, ghosts instil in the hearts of the living is intimately linked to prompting generous hand-outs and other give-aways. In this case, the hand of generosity displayed by the living is forced by the threat Vietnamese ghosts pose to livelihoods.

Much as they strike fear in the hearts of the living, ghosts are also perceived as opportunities to make gains, material, spiritual or otherwise. This is true for Thailand as well as Việt Nam. Formoso (1996:222) observes that alms to the unfortunate dead have the potential of bringing about health, wealth, and familial harmony to living donors. In Việt Nam, feeding needy souls is a ritual technique for placating anguished spirits and turning them into allies. Ghosts’ penurious condition and hankering disposition makes them particularly amenable to the desires of intrepid and enterprising living. Showing generosity to unfortunate dead can be a way to enlist their potency for worldly pursuits. In Việt Nam, stories about people wooing ghosts with generous offerings to exploit their magical powers and accumulate wealth abound. Drawing on the wild potency of ghosts, particularly deceased infants, is said to be a shortcut for making profits often employed by those involved in gambling and other questionable activities. Given the dangers as well as the opportunities ghosts present with, it is not surprising that Huế’s living inhabitants engage unrelated destitute dead with offerings in numerous instances. This is particularly true for those active in the fields of trade, business and commerce.

Ghosts in the Marketplace

In Việt Nam, alms are offered to unrelated unfortunate dead (*cô hồn*) on a number of occasions in the lunar calendar.⁶ Typically, offerings to *cô hồn* are made twice a lunar month, on the 1st

⁶ For instance, offerings to ghosts are made on the Buddhist Festival *Lễ Vu Lan* on the fifteenth of the seventh lunar month, when the ‘Lord of the Underworld’ is said to open his realm to allow condemned

and the 15th, when the new and full moons bring commotion in the spirit world. On these dates there is an ‘eruption of religious activity’ as spirit beings – be it the Buddha, deities, ancestors or other unrelated dead – are held to be particularly active and responsive to the prayers of worshipful living (Soucy 2012: 40). Buddhist devotees therefore flock to pagodas to pray and engage in good causes, householders replenish offerings on ancestral and other domestic altars, and shopkeepers offer ‘hand-out trays’ (*mâm thi thức*) with food and votive items to the masses of anonymous destitute dead that roam the city’s open spaces. Twice a lunar month, the commercial streets of Huế become enveloped in dense smoke emitted from incense and paper burned outside stores, markets and business premises.

Ghosts can be a menace to anyone but those involved in commerce are held to be most vulnerable to plundering attacks by voracious forces. In Huế, providing relief to hungry ghosts is a major concern for an array of enterprising locals from street vendors and market stallholders to shopkeepers and directors in state-owned businesses. ‘Where there is money and goods, there are ghosts’, as shopkeepers and market vendors explained. To avoid avaricious influences interfering with success in trade, entrepreneurs erect ‘open air shrines’ (*am ngoài trời*) outside their premises. Huế’s commercial streets are lined with open-air shrines dedicated to anonymous wandering souls. Small outdoor shrines, found atop trees and on sidewalks, are tended by shopkeepers and street vendors operating in the vicinity, while larger communal shrines feature outside well-established markets and commercial buildings. For entrepreneurial folk, tending to outdoor shrines with offerings of fruit, water and incense is not just a bimonthly occurrence but a daily task performed every morning as soon as an establishment opens and before trading starts.

In recent years, quotidian mercantile practices involving Vietnamese ghosts have grown exponentially in scale, intensity and expense. Incremental changes in alms for ghosts became evident in the course of my initial fieldwork in Huế (2004 – 2006) as well as by means of subsequent research (2011). By 2011, bimonthly handouts for ghosts had grown from modest trays featuring scant offerings of fruit, flowers and candies to lavish banqueting tables

souls to visit the world of the living. Studies suggest that ‘ghost festivals’ marked on the same date around East and South East Asia derive from the Chinese Buddhist tale of Mulian, a monk who sees his mother trapped in the realm of hungry ghosts and saves her by offering gifts to sangha (Teiser 1988; Heise 2012; Ladwig 2012). Drawing on this Mahayana tale, ghost festivals are closely associated with the precepts of filial piety. This might be relevant for understanding *Lễ Vu Lan*, which however is a distinct case that falls beyond the scope of this article.

overflowing with an astounding variety of cooked dishes as well as paper money and clothing. Hand-outs to hungry ghosts also increased in frequency, resulting in an upsurge in expense for such activities made by various businesses. As observed in 2011 in Huế, entrepreneurs had redoubled their efforts to feed the anonymous destitute dead. In the words of an hotelier, ‘we make offerings to *cô hồn* at least four times a month that is, on the 30th, 1st, 14th and 15th; sometimes even more; basically whenever the need arises’. The need for supplementary alms arises as misfortune strikes, with sudden drops in sales or strife and illness among staff being addressed, amongst other things, through intensifying offerings to ghosts.

The upsurge in ghost-related practices is inextricably linked to tidal changes in the nation’s economic fortunes with rises in commercial activity and personal income. The far-reaching reforms known as ‘renovation’ policies (*đổi mới*) initiated in the mid-1980s, created a new economic environment for market-driven rather than centrally planned growth. As the country advanced towards creating a market-oriented economy and greater integration to world markets, commercial activities became new grounds for wealth accumulation with many families pursuing market-based routes to prosperity (Taylor 2004b). In Huế, market-oriented growth helped transform the city in the 1990s and 2000s from an economic backwater to a dynamic urban centre with a sprawling tourism industry developed around the city’s UNESCO-protected imperial sites.⁷ As the tourist industry became the province’s economic mainstay, an increasing number of families engaged in commercial activities, making a living as tour operators, hoteliers, restaurateurs and shopkeepers. As family fortunes changed for the better, entrepreneurial households started committing an ever greater share of their newly acquired wealth to the ritual relief of unfamiliar unfortunate dead.⁸

Recent writings explore the upsurge in ritual transactions with Vietnamese spirits since the onset of market reforms (Taylor 2004a; Nguyen Thi Hien 2006; Lê Hồng Lý 2007; Endres 2011). Focusing on pilgrimages to religious sites across the country and gifts given to potent deities famed for granting favours, such writings highlight the instrumental aims ritual praxis is often invested with. Taylor’s book (2004a) and Le Hong Ly’s article (2007) consider the increasing popularity of female goddesses known for lending support to pursuits of profit and even granting divine business loans. The practice of making gifts to ghosts in Vietnamese marketplaces considered here for the first time, seeks to add to ethnographic and theoretical complexity in explorations on the entanglements of mercantile and spiritual praxis.

⁷ In 2005 Huế’s urban status was officially upgraded.

⁸ On the upsurge in ghost offerings see Kwon (2007).

In Huế, marketplaces are periodically turned into sites where the most profligate feasts for anonymous hungry ghosts are staged. Like elsewhere in South East Asia, markets are places of abundance and profusion as well as spaces infused with fear and danger (Keane 2008). Being tricked by sellers into paying higher than normal a price or falling victim to thieves is what many market-goers in Huế worry about. For sellers and stallholders a main concern is the alluring effect overflows of goods have on hankering souls. According to petty vendors, marketplaces are swarmed by crowds of homeless hungry dead, thus inviting rapacious attacks. Marketplaces are therefore an ideal place to engage such voracious forces and their unquenchable appetites.

Given their chronic poverty ghosts require enormous quantities of food and other offerings. To effectively appease ghosts, stall-holders and sellers in markets pull together resources to organise grand ritual feasts for the benefit of the masses of anonymous souls that linger around marketplaces. On these occasions, markets in Huế close for the day and sellers, most of them women, form ritual groups on the basis of their trade specialisation, working together to prepare the ritual feast. Female traders set up fires and cook food on site while enlisting the help of male kin versed in ritual affairs to help arrange copious amounts of food, paper money and clothes on makeshift altars and lead prayers.

The overabundance of offerings involved in market rituals underscores the penurious and lowly nature of ghosts; traits that set them apart from other categories of dead, notably ancestors. Ghosts (*cô hồn*) are described as ‘greedy’ in sharp contrast to ancestral spirits that are catered for in domestic settings by means of carefully selected and well-portioned dishes provided on regular occasions. The overabundance of consumables common in ghost rituals exemplifies the social distance separating the propitiated unfortunate dead from their living worshippers. As female sellers explained on several occasions, the identity, age, and gender of the ghosts addressed in market rituals remain unknown to the living benefactors. As such, their particular tastes and individual desires remain un-catered for. For instance, in market rituals, ghosts are provided with sheets of paper-made ‘fabric’ (*váy*), rather than the tailored outfits ancestors are provided with. In the words of an elder leading prayers a market ritual, ‘ghosts can use this fabric to make outfits suited to their specific needs’.

Cô hồn are also offered a set of foodstuffs that is distinctive and exclusive to this class of existents. The set consists of three basics for subsistence: uncooked rice, and unrefined sugar and salt (*gạo, muối, đường*).⁹ Market ritual participants explained that these this set presents

⁹ Like elsewhere in South East Asia, rice is a diet staple.

ghosts with ‘emergency rations’ to ‘take with them and cook to eat later’. This set is often complemented with boiled cassava and sweet potato, foodstuffs locals signify as the ‘food of the poor’. ‘Rice gruel’ (*cháo thanh*), the main course for unfortunate dead that often cannot ‘swallow solid foods’ - especially infants - is another staple for ghosts. In addition, wooden fires often burn to provide relief to *cô hồn*, who according to female traders, are ‘always feeling cold’. Ghostly entities suffer from cold because they lack access to the warmth of familial settings and their hearths that Carsten (1997) describes as central for the production of meals, comfort and intimacy in her ethnography of Malay kinship. With access to domestic settings denied, anonymous wandering souls are starved of regular provisions and attentive care that are instead enjoyed by enshrined family ancestors.

Spectral apparitions have been at the heart of anthropologists’ explorations into the inner workings of late capitalism (Ong 1987; Mills 1995; Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). Such studies point to a sharp rise in the populations of ghosts and zombies as well as in ‘occult’ practices in the wake of neoliberal reforms around the world. The rise of interest in the ‘occult’ has been analysed as indicative of anxieties about the fast acquisition of wealth, and as furnishing the disenfranchised with a language for voicing discontent over being left out of capitalism’s promise of prosperity for all (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). Writing on Southeast Asia, Mills (1995) considers a spate of attacks by sexually voracious female ghosts as a metaphor through which male subalterns’ articulate a critique of their precarious existence amid Thailand’s rapid incorporation into the structures of global financial capitalism.

The surge in mercantile alms for ghosts in Vietnamese marketplaces undeniably bespeaks of intensifying anxieties. These anxieties however beset those operating at the heart of thriving market economies, thus revealing some of the uncertainties and risks nesting in commercial transactions. Leshkovich (2006) highlights some of these worries in her work on Vietnamese female entrepreneurs, who feel their success is threatened by fierce competition, uncertain returns and plundering attacks by invisible pernicious forces. Their coping strategies include turning to spirits of fortune - like the ‘God of wealth’ (*Ông Thần Tài*) and a terrestrial deity known as *Ông Địa* - for protection or in the hope of making gains. The gifts to ghosts I describe are an integral part of Vietnamese mercantile practices amounting to efforts by entrepreneurs to ward off dangerous influences. As male and female entrepreneurs repeatedly told me, offerings to ghosts aim to neutralise threats that could interfere with one’s livelihood. Deprived and distressed ghosts can plunder stocks, drain financial resources, drive customers

away and block business deals, hence throwing prospering businesses into disarray.¹⁰ Business endeavours face many risks and ghosts – driven by poverty and a forceful sense of injustice – are a likely source of adversity affecting prospering entrepreneurs.¹¹

Mercantile practices for anonymous unfortunate dead constitute ghosts as the impoverished other and provide some relief from physical torments along with soothing words for attaining rebirth. Such charitable interventions, however generous, are not sufficient to help ghosts escape their suffering and re-enter the cycle of transmutations. Releasing the ill-fated dead from their ominous fates requires a distinct set of rituals. In Huế, Buddhist devotees with the help of the sangha undertake group efforts to pray for the deliverance of unrelated, ill-fated dead, as discussed in the following section.

It is important to note that my interlocutors clearly distinguish between anonymous unfortunate dead (*cô hồn*) and familial departed, however ominous the afterlife of the latter might be. In Huế, an increasing number of kin groupings pull together resources to organise rituals aimed at ‘resolving the plights’ (*giải oan bạt đố*) of deceased fathers, teenage siblings, uncles and aunts who died amidst conflict and hardship or in floods and road accidents. The success of these lengthy and laborious rituals depends on mobilising considerable human and material resources, and the expertise of death specialists - Buddhist monks or Taoist priests - to pray for the deliverance of the troubled souls of kin. Descent groupings also make concerted efforts to lift related dead out of the depths of neglect by holding collective death anniversary rituals known as *hiệp kỳ*. *Hiệp kỳ* rituals aim to propitiate all the dead in a specific descent line, including those who might have fallen out of memory because they died childless or in unknown circumstances, and strive to (re-)integrate forgotten kin into ancestral cohorts.

Ghosts, Charity and Merit Making

¹⁰ Pervasive anxieties about wealth besiege entrepreneurs in China who offer generous gifts and hospitality to others by way of protecting their fortunes (see Osburg 2013).

¹¹ Entrepreneurs in Buddhist South East Asia are also concerned with the moral and social implications of their wealth-generating activities, and their effects on prospects for a good afterlife, as Tambiah (1970) and others observe (Leshkovich 2006). Donations to temples and charitable acts are some of the ways Buddhist entrepreneurs seek to countervail the adverse effects of their business activities.

The virtue of generosity and the practice of giving have a preeminent place in Buddhist teachings and play a central role in religious practice in East and South East Asia, often considered a primary means for generating merit (Tambiah 1970; Keyes & Daniel 1983; Cook 2008). Keyes observes that gifts to sangha are considered ‘supreme moral acts through which the laity acquires merit’, especially in Theravada contexts (1983: 274). Hence, gifts to Buddhist sangha and temples have been the main focus of attention for studies on giving and merit-making. However, as Bowie points out, this scholarly emphasis on sangha as the most ‘worthy recipients of gifts’ has led to overlooking other forms of giving and merit-making, which are equally important to locals, namely charity to the poor (1998:471).

In Việt Nam, giving alms to beggars is a merit-making practice many lay devotees perform with regularity. Supporting monks and nuns through donations, and helping build and restore Buddhist temples are religious gift-giving acts Vietnamese laity has historically engaged in (Nguyen-Marshall 2008: 66). However, Vietnamese monks and nuns are not targeted as the main recipients of charitable gifts. The Vietnamese monastic economy does not depend entirely on gifts from laity, and monks and nuns do not engage on daily alms-rounds to collect food from households as in other South East Asian countries (cf. Cooke 2008).¹² In Huế, which historically has been a national centre for Buddhism, there is a plethora of pagodas, many of which sponsored by the former royal elite of the Nguyễn court. Furthermore, Huế’s thriving monastic economy benefits from contributions made by distinguished and ordinary families in exchange for services the sangha lent as death ritual specialists. Dealing with the plights of the unquiet dead is a crucial part of the religious mission Vietnamese monks and nuns undertake, and most pagodas shelter a host of troubled souls in dedicated shrines situated at the rear of the main prayer hall. Pagodas also often run orphanages and care homes in their premises, and accept donations from laity for these purposes. Therefore, Buddhist institutions in Việt Nam form an integral part of the political economy as critical providers of care to the abandoned and the destitute, both living and dead.

For Buddhist laity in Huế, giving to strangers in need is a prime means for generating merit.¹³ Treating unfamiliar distressed souls with compassion is a key mission for Buddhists, especially female devotees who are active in religious charity. The lunar New Year (*Tết Nguyên Đán*) is a time when female devotees intensify their charitable activities, such virtuous acts making for an auspicious start to the year. To this end, groups of mothers, daughters, sisters

¹² Mahayana Buddhism is the dominant tradition in Việt Nam. For more see Nguyễn (2008) and Soucy (2012).

¹³ Gifts to kin are not regarded as charity but form part of a nexus of reciprocal exchanges.

and friends visit orphanages and care homes making donations to associated pagodas. As part of such practices, female devotees in Huế, organise relief missions for unrelated ill-fated dead with the help of local pagodas. Such ritual missions, known as *đi phóng sanh*, are a recent phenomenon and unique to this city. I witnessed this event for the first time in the year of the rooster (2005), and subsequently attended two more missions (2006, 2011) The ritual mission in 2011 was the largest in scale, involving not only an ever greater amount of offerings and elaborate prayer sessions but also an expanding group of devotees that included not only the habitual groups of female kin, but also teenage sons and even young husbands.

The purpose of *đi phóng sanh* is to pray for the deliverance of a diversity of unrelated ill-fated dead swarming the city's streets and waterways. The day-long event starts with prayers and offerings for the benefit of stray souls at the local pagoda, and culminates in a boat trip in the city's Perfume River to pray for the release of souls trapped in watery hells. Waterways are considered to be overflowing with a host of ill-fated dead, particularly flood victims and aborted fetuses. The victims of the battle for Huế (1968) that saw many corpses carried down the Perfume river, added to the crowds of tormented souls 'condemned to live under water'.

In the morning female devotees gather at the pagoda's kitchen to cook vegetarian offerings. Food and paper gifts, including funerary tablets for anonymous souls, are meticulously placed on makeshift altars set up in the pagoda yard 'facing the street'. Prayer sessions ensue inside the temple in front of Buddha's altar with monks and nuns lead pleas for the salvation of abandoned souls (*cầu siêu cô hồn*). A communal feast follows with laity and sangha consuming the food offerings. Soon after, participants board a hired boat and set out to pray for abandoned souls in the midst of the Perfume River. The sangha chant sutras and summoning the help of the merciful bodhisattva *Quan Thế Âm*, plead with the 'Guardian of the Underworld' (*Địa Ngục*) to open the gates of hell and release the trapped souls. In aid of their plea, devotees empty buckets containing live river species into the stream. The ritual expedition takes its name from this practice of releasing captive animals referred to as *phóng sanh*, which translates as 'liberating living creatures and launching rebirth'. *Phóng sanh* is considered a virtuous and merit-making act (*công đức*), and is habitually performed in Buddhist funerals to assist the newly-deceased achieve a favourable rebirth.

Abstaining from harming sentient beings, chanting sutras, using strictly vegetarian foods, all contribute to making merit in the *đi phóng sanh* ritual. With respect to releasing live animals, participants explained that merit is generated because killing these animals, all edible river species, is postponed. Merit generated in the ritual is shared among a multitude of beneficiaries, both living and dead, present or absent at the ritual. Merit transfer - the giving of

one's merit to another- is a practice common in Buddhism (Keyes & Daniel 1983; Williams & Ladwig 2012). Merit acquired by one person can be used to enhance the chances of another being for a better afterlife and improved rebirth. At the same time, merit-transfer promotes a generous state of mind, hence generating further merit for donors. In Huế, locals habitually perform virtuous acts for the benefit of relatives, especially the elderly and the frail. Merit is also transferred to departed kin to assist with a better afterlife.

The merit generated through *đi phóng sanh* rituals is shared among donors, their families and ancestors. Yet first and foremost, such rituals seek to benefit the unrelated ill-fated dead, creating the conditions for their deliverance. As nuns and monks leading the prayers explained, these rituals purport to 'resolve the plights' of ill-fated souls and help them re-enter the cycle of transmutations. Lay female participants, who contributed to this ritual by giving money, time, and effort, explained that through these means they prayed for 'peace' (*cầu an bình*), good health (*sức khỏe*), and making a decent living (*làm ăn được*). A young woman accompanied by her husband, said she was praying for her mother who suffered from cancer, while another middle aged woman and her teenage son, prayed for domestic harmony.

Praying for peace, well-being and prosperity are the three main reasons locals give for performing rituals for unrelated ill-fated dead. In *đi phóng sanh*, participants seek to dispel the dangerous and disrupting influences that could interfere with their families' welfare, by making and transferring merit for the salvation of anonymous unfortunate dead. Such acts of generosity involve prayerful written petitions (*sơ*). *Sơ* are standardised printed prayers, bought in specialist votive item shops to fit a diversity of spirits and ritual purposes. The petitions are customised by writing the name and age and home address of those who contribute to the ritual event. In *đi phóng sanh* rituals, the written petitions state the name, age and home address of the participants as well as the details of kin – either living or departed - they wish to transfer merit to. The details contained on the petitions are read aloud by sangha at the conclusion of prayer sessions, while facing the street or the river that stray souls frequent. This serves to make the identities of the benefactors known to the summoned ghostly entities who are expected to respond accordingly by refraining from harming the donors and their families.

Đi phóng sanh rituals are meritorious exercises in generosity: a technique for creating and transferring merit to unfortunate souls who otherwise lack the means to overcome their ill-fated condition. As such, they go beyond providing instant relief to unrelated dead, which is the main preoccupation for traders holding ghost rituals in marketplaces. Instead, *đi phóng sanh* aim to help ill-fated dead attain salvation and rebirth, while tempering the dangerous influence uncared-for ghosts can exercise.

Conclusion

The popularity of rituals involving giving alms to ghosts has grown remarkably in the country in recent years, amid an increasingly commercialised economy. For instance, the Buddhist *Lễ Vu Lan* festival on the seventh lunar month is now marked in popular press as an important religious occasion whereby the living are expected to appease ‘homeless’, ‘abandoned’ souls by offering food and votive items (Thanh Nien 2015b). The said month is marked in press as the ‘month of forsaken souls’ (*tháng cô hồn*) and news reports provide readers tips on what to feed ghosts and what to avoid doing during this ‘unlucky month’ (Thanh Nien 2015a).

Charitable acts towards ghosts described throughout this article are not simply driven by an awareness of the sufferings of others. Ethical concerns and noble virtues, including compassion and kindness cultivated in Buddhist teachings and promoted by kinship practices of care to the elderly and infirm, are undeniably of relevance for understanding alms for ghosts. Yet, quotidian acts of benevolence towards ghosts are also driven by considerations of the menace ghosts can unleash upon the living that is to say, the power ghosts have over the fortunes and well-being of the living is not without significance. The acute hardships ghosts face and the consuming desire to avenge the wrongs done to them propel ghosts to attack prospering others. By making gifts to ghosts and assisting with their existential plights, the living strive to dispel the perilous influence otherworldly have-nots exercise to others’ wellbeing. The requirement to respond with generosity to eerie have-nots has acquired a new relevance and urgency in Việt Nam’s neoliberal times where rising levels of prosperity coincide with yawning socioeconomic disparities.

This is the very point where ethnography meets Derrida’s call for justice. Justice, Derrida writes, comes as a response to the others’ demands with such demands continuing to haunt the living for as long as they go unanswered. The living’s generous responses to unrelated impoverished dead constitute the former as both patrons and hostages to the whims of the latter. This is a game of ontological politics where power hangs in the balance.

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