

**cell phones for the
spirits: ancestor worship
and ritual economies in
vietnam and its diasporas
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ABSTRACT

Religion has been thriving in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam since *đổi mới*, the onset of market reforms in the late 1980s. Votive paper offerings, part of spiritual and economic well-being, play a crucial role in performing religious practices in the socialist country as well as among diasporic Vietnamese. In urban Hanoi, material objects made from paper are traded in marketplaces and later burned in the streets, in temples and pagodas, in private yards and other places on special occasions in order to be transmitted to the ancestors. In the past few years, the range of votive paper offerings produced, traded, and sent to the deceased has expanded to include new forms and references to new media. Drawing on recent debates in the role of media in religion and in particular on technologies of mediation, I focus on the use of votive paper offerings in the sociocultural context of the Vietnamese spirit world. I explore how new media and media technologies are embedded in multilayered processes of mediation in Vietnam and its diasporas. Taking religious practices of burning votive paper offerings as an ethnographic example, this essay aims to contribute to ongoing debates on popular religion and the sacred life of material goods in late socialist Vietnam, on its transnational ties, and on the entanglements between religion, media and materiality.

Keywords: Vietnam, Vietnamese diaspora, popular religion, trance mediums, ancestor worship, media, materiality, ritual economy.

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Introduction

Religion has been thriving in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam since the economic reforms known as *đổi mới* in the late 1980s. In contrast to pre-*đổi mới* decades, pilgrimage sites, churches, and pagodas are being renovated, while altars are decorated with flowers, fruit, and spirit money for the gods. Votive paper offerings, part of spiritual and economic well-being in popular religious practices, play a crucial role in a number of rituals in the socialist country as well as among diasporic Vietnamese. The living purchase such offerings to burn them, thereby sending the sacrificial items to the dead, who are imagined to live in the “other world.” Paper offerings in the form of luxury goods such as mansions, cars, and motorbikes are traded in many shops in urban Hanoi as well as in markets run by the Vietnamese in former European socialist cities. Currency made of ritual paper is burned on special occasions in the streets, in temples and pagodas, in private yards and other places, in order to be transmitted to the ancestors. Over the last decade, the range of offerings has expanded to keep up with the times and now includes new media in votive paper form that have begun to be produced, traded, and sent to the deceased.¹

In this article I explore the cultural logic of burning votive paper offerings. These material objects for the dead are part of the revitalization of religious practices in late socialist Vietnam (Endres 2011; Pham 2009; Taylor 2007). However, the growth of popular religiosity, in particular the increase of spirit cults, fortune telling, and other spiritual practices, is not unique to the Vietnamese case, but is embedded in the relationship between economic growth and prosperity cults in the greater (Southeast) Asian context (Endres and Lauser 2012a; Hefner 2010; Salemink 2008). The conjunction of religion and capitalism and entangled neoliberal practices has been discussed in terms of “spiritual economies” (Rudnykyj 2010) with regard to Islamic practice in Indonesia as conducive to globalization, and to “ritual economies” (Yang 2000) emphasizing the significance of popular religious revival and its role in the Chinese postsocialist market economy. In China, Singapore, and Vietnam, shops carry paper copies of luxury products such as Mercedes Benz, Gucci bags, villas, and TVs (see Figure 1), together with everyday consumer goods such as cloth, rice cookers, glasses, and combs.

Spirit money also plays a crucial role in these economies, in particular in ancestor veneration. Various aspects of spirit money, including the “dollarization of ghost money” (Kwon 2007), offerings made to the wandering spirits of war dead (Bodemer 2005), and the role of modern spirit money in ritual life, have been analyzed as “cosmologies of credit” (Chu 2010), the latter referring to the Chinese migration context, in

FIG 1

TV screen made from paper. Hanoi 2013. Photograph: Hühwelmeier.



particular by investigating the flow of money, food, prayers, and gods. In addition to purchasing spirit money and everyday consumer goods made from paper, preparing food, fruit, and incense to give to the dead, the Vietnamese also obtain paper replicas of cell phones, computers, and iPads to use in the exchange with the other world. By exploring the inclusion of new media among the paper offerings available to consumers, I wish to contribute to ongoing discussions on popular religion and the sacred life of material goods in contemporary Vietnam (Kendall 2008; Kendall, Tam, and Huong 2010) and on religion, media and materiality (Meyer 2012).

As new media technologies are intrinsically entangled with globalization, modernity, mobility, and migration, communication devices in paper form – which have so far rarely been the object of systematic empirical or theoretical investigation in the anthropology of religion and its linkages with media studies – are part of migration, transnational ties, and global networks (Fjelstad and Nguyen 2011). The prominence of spirits and of travelling spirits (Hühwelmeier and Krause 2010) in the past decades cannot be understood without considering processes of globalization and localization shaped by new mass media and technologies. By introducing religion into the study of media and vice versa and drawing on discussions on trance mediums and new media (Behrend, Dreschke, and Zillinger 2015), this contribution asks why paper replicas are important media in the context of spirit mediumship and ancestor veneration in a society on its way to market socialism. In order to invoke the transcendental, trance mediums need certain equipment, including technical media (Behrend and Zillinger 2015, 3). In Vietnam, paper images of media and other consumer products are burned and thereby transferred to the hereafter. Therefore, further questions address issues of producing, selling, and burning “modern” votive paper objects by investigating people’s ideas and practices about communication with and within the afterlife, both in urban Hanoi as

well as in Vietnamese diasporas. The burning of paper models for the spirits is an old practice, but was denigrated as wasteful by the Vietnamese government for decades, and became popular in the socialist country only many years after the economic reforms in the late 1980s.

Referring to the Vietnamese proverb “*trần sao âm vậy*,” which can be summed up as “The other world is similar to the one in which we live in almost every detail” (Malarney 2003, 186), I argue that in the sociocultural context of the Vietnamese spirit world, votive paper offerings are embedded in multilayered processes of mediation. Since religious practice mediates between the transcendent and the immanent, religion may productively be approached as a “practice of meditation” (Meyer 2006, 290). Scholarly work on the role of media and religion (De Vries 2001; Hirschkind 2006; Mazzarella 2004) has contributed to a reflection on the nature of mediation and religion more generally (Eisenlohr 2011, 2012; Engelke 2010; Meyer 2010). Following these debates, I consider the ritual burning of paper replicas in Vietnam as a “practice of meditation.” Exploring this practice opens up important questions about presence and immediacy, remediation and iconology, about the relationship between mediums and “new” media and the materialities of the media (Morris 2015, 30). Moreover, these questions are entangled with the coming and going of spirits, and more specifically, their repeated “*coming into presence*” (Lambek 2010, 17). Michael Lambek suggested voice as central to possession and to the spirit’s presence, as witnessed and confirmed by others. Spirits are materialized and present in the bodies of their hosts, initially through illness, but they may also appear in dreams. More central to possession “are the periodic manifestations of spirits, as they burst through or push aside the consciousness of the human host...” (20). In the Vietnamese context, in addition to human bodies (old media), material objects (some of them are old media as well) play a crucial role in possession rituals, and without these objects, spirits would not appear. Trance mediums emphasize that some spirits need vehicles to appear and to withdraw and therefore carefully arrange votive paper offerings such as elephants made from bamboo and paper as part of the preparation of the ritual. Material objects can be purchased in the marketplace, and are burned during the ceremony. In the process of burning, as burnt offerings, they are sent to the otherworld and thereby transformed into real objects. This raises the issue of whether fire is a destructive or a creative element, as in these cases, fire and smoke are mediums of transfer, transmitting goods to the otherworld, thereby strengthening the communication between the living and the dead.

By exploring paper votive offerings in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, I aim to illuminate the creation and

maintenance of links between believers in different localities on the one hand, as well as between religious practitioners and the spiritual realm on the other. Further, instead of separating religion and technology into different domains, the focus on practices of mediation illustrates how ideas about the supernatural, the spiritual, or the transcendental are made accessible for believers, are reconfigured via media and mediums, and are effective in the sense that religious objects and religious entities such as spirits travel across borders. The duplication of the world and the objects within it in the form of paper effigies, the making and burning of ritual money and modern consumer goods, and the transmission of the goods to the otherworld aims to appease gods, spirits and ancestors, pleasing them and relieving their hardships. Similar to Chinese beliefs about the afterlife (Blake 2011), ideas about the otherworld in northern Vietnam are built on the concept of the hereafter as a mirror image of this world. Gods are endowed with monetary and commercial interests and spirits of dead relatives are imagined as needy and sentient. In the realm of the dead, money is the medium and synonym of luck. By burning spirit money and other goods made from paper and by offering real food and drinks during rituals, believers establish and intensify the community between this world and the otherworld (Scheppe 2015, 8).

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Hanoi and among transnational Vietnamese in postsocialist cities such as Warsaw, Prague, and the eastern part of Berlin, the first part of this article focuses on religious practices in late socialist Vietnam and the flourishing of popular religion in urban Hanoi. The second part explores practices of mediation, in particular the burning of paper votive offerings in spirit mediumship rituals and in ancestor veneration. Finally, I investigate transnational religious practices, focusing on diasporic Vietnamese in Berlin.

Religious practices in late socialist Vietnam

In the twenty-first century, Vietnam is witnessing a revitalization of a variety of popular religious practices. After the government-induced social and economic reforms known as *đổi mới* ("renovation") in the late 1980s, an increasing number of Vietnamese engaged anew in rituals that had previously been banned. Many were quite reluctant at first, according to people I spoke with, and it took more than a decade before the Vietnamese began renovating temples and pagodas, trading in material objects for rituals, and participating in ceremonies, which prior to *đổi mới* had been considered "social evils" (Fjelstad and Nguyen 2006, 7). Whether the socialist state considers religious beliefs and practices to be impediments to modernization, whether local authorities see religious practitioners as "backward," whether

some scholars in Vietnam talk about “indigenous cultural traditions,” or whether practices are regarded as “superstition” (*mê tín dị đoan*) or “national folk traditions,” or “folk beliefs” (*tín ngưỡng dân gian*) is a matter of reading, interpretation and, not least, an issue of power (Taylor 2007, 10).

While some restrictions on religion and religious practices have been loosened in Vietnam over the past ten years, conflicts between the state and the Catholic Church in 2008 and 2009, when a parish in Hanoi was the center of a dispute with municipal authorities over the appropriation of land, point to ongoing tensions between clerics and state officials. Conversions to evangelical Christianity and the establishment of Pentecostal underground churches in urban Hanoi do occur (Hüwelmeier 2010, 2011). Catholicism, Buddhism, Protestantism and other scriptural religions are considered *tôn giáo* (“religion” as opposed to “folk beliefs”), and priests and pastors are reporting an increasing membership. Likewise, a growing number of people have been participating in ancestor veneration, spirit mediumship, soul calling, and fortune telling over the past two decades.

Some scholars construe religious practices such as mediumship or goddess worship and other forms of popular religion in Vietnam as unofficial counterculture, while others interpret them as indexing actual or potential resistance against the state, as a response to the decline of state power or as a means of coping with the uncertainties connected with the transition from a planned to a market-based economy (Taylor 2007, 10–11). Before *đổi mới*, officials attacked religious practices as wasteful and superstitious. But for over a decade, they have often remained in the background, sometimes criticizing, sometimes tolerating, and sometimes even encouraging all sorts of religious events (Malarney 2002, 2). Although members of the Communist Party, some local politicians secretly participate in religious practices themselves, according to Pentecostal preachers I spoke with. Philip Taylor referred to the “resurgence” of popular religious activities as well as of Buddhism and Christianity, and analyzed the renaissance of prosperity cults, pilgrimages, and spirit worship in terms of the “re-enchantment” of religion in post-revolutionary Vietnam (Taylor 2007). As discussed by scholars for more than two decades, the resilience of religion, albeit in new forms and ever transforming modes, questions the narratives of modernity and its disenchantment (de Vries 2001; Behrend and Zillinger 2015, 1). This is particularly true with regard to postsocialist Vietnam where the manifestation of religion may well be seen as a response to the forces of globalization and to the challenges of neoliberalism with the emergence of new markets (Salemink 2015).

Similar phenomena can be observed in various parts of Asia, as material objects made from paper are also very popular in neighboring countries, with similarities and differences among objects across the region. In China, for example, one can order Ecstasy, Viagra, and various types of condoms (Blake 2011, 178) in votive form. The production of paper money and other objects in the cultural context of contemporary China has been interpreted as “commerce with the spirits ... conducted according to ceremonial giving” (Blake 2011, 198). Paper replicas in Vietnam seem to be less elaborate in design than the prestige goods to be found elsewhere in the region. In Singapore I came across paper versions of Prada shoes and Chanel accessories, while the recent *Supermarket of the Dead* exhibition in Dresden, Germany, showcased votive paper offerings from China (Scheppe 2015), including Louis Vuitton suitcases and fast food from McDonald’s. In Hanoi, the brand names available in the marketplaces for technical media include Nokia and Samsung, and food offerings for the ancestors always consist of fresh food and fruit, not paper replicas.

Trading in votive paper offerings has a long tradition in Vietnam. Producing replicas of commodities and burning these items for the dead as well as spending money for luxury goods made from paper may be interpreted as an expression of desire of the living who strive to participate in the global consumer society while simultaneously sharing these desires with the dead. After the end of the American War in Vietnam with its hardships as well as the economy of scarcity that continued even many years after *đổi mới*, the Vietnamese dreamt of owning everyday consumer goods such as rice cookers, and later, prestige goods. Seen from this perspective, paper replicas may be considered dream worlds for the living who cannot afford a luxury life, but who simultaneously want to please the ancestors by sending luxury goods or want to let them participate in ideas about their concept of life, more imagination than reality. This construction of dream worlds resembles practices of the poor in parts of Africa, such as in Kenya, who, after their arrival from the countryside in Mombasa, visit photo studios to be photographed with a “luxury jet” in the background, painted onto the wall by local artists (Behrend 2003, 24). Such photos, evoking imaginaries of mobility, the global world, and success, were sent to families who had stayed behind. Likewise, the Vietnamese transmit luxury goods to the otherworld to please their loved ones with the most modern consumer products and simultaneously have them partake in an imagined prosperity by a salient use of images as a simulacrum of the real thing represented.

Despite the long ban on popular religious practices by the state, including the production, selling, and burning of votive paper offerings, rituals nevertheless took place prior to *đổi*

mới (Nguyen 2006, 134). In the 1970s and early 1980s, during the high socialist era, votive paper offerings were produced and circulated secretly. While “hang ma (votive offerings) are generally paper representations of useful things that are promised by vow and/or dedicated to the deceased, gods, or saints” (Nguyen 2006, 127), it is important to distinguish between different offerings in spirit mediumship on the one hand, and in ancestor veneration on the other. In the following paragraphs I focus on various practices of mediation, arguing that different votive paper offerings are used to please a variety of spirits in diverse settings.

Trance mediumship and “old” media

Lên đồng spirit mediumship has a long tradition in Vietnam and is associated with the Mother Goddess religion (*Đạo Mẫu*). Its practitioners worship the goddesses of the four palaces of the universe (*Tứ Phủ*): sky, earth, water and mountains. Spirit mediums are possessed by up to 36 spirits during the ritual over a couple of hours. Trance mediums have a calling (*căn đồng*), and some have to perform these ceremonies several times a year. While being possessed by the spirits, mediums dance to music played by *chầu văn* musicians (Norton 2006), receive offerings, distribute *lộc* (blessed gifts) to the audience, and bestow blessings to cult members (Dror 2007; Endres 2011; Fjelstad and Nguyen 2006, 7; Kendall, Tam, and Huong 2010, 63; Salemink 2015). *Lên đồng* mediumship rituals are performed in public temples in and outside Hanoi, some places controlled by caretakers. However, *lên đồng* ceremonies also take place in private shrines in individuals’ homes. In Hanoi I participated in the rituals of a *lên đồng* cult group of 25 members, mostly female, that has existed for over 30 years. Within this group several mediums perform rituals, while they act as ritual assistants in another setting. The mediums have built shrines dedicated to the Mother Goddesses in the upper floor of their homes. Spirit mediums invite *chầu văn* musicians who provide musical accompaniment and also comment on the ritual, a ritual expert (*thầy cúng*), and members of the group as well as friends and relatives to participate in the ceremony.

Several days before a *lên đồng* spirit possession ceremony is set to take place, the medium will start preparing the ritual. In particular, he or she will arrange a communal meal for all participants, and visit *phố Hàng Mã* – the street in the old quarter of Hanoi, which is named after its main product, namely *hàng mã* (paper votive offerings) – or marketplaces in advance, to order paper boats and horses as offerings for the spirits and/or to help the spirits travel. The preparations also include the purchase of gifts for all participants, as these are considered blessed gifts (*lộc*), such as fruit, beer, and cookies,

FIG 2

Horses, elephants, and ferries as vehicles for the spirits. Hanoi 2013. Photograph: Hüwelmeier.



being distributed after the ritual. During the *lên đồng* performance, paper votive offerings are sent to the otherworld by burning them on the roof terrace or in the yard of the medium's private house in special incinerators. The process of the spirits "coming into presence" (Lambek 2010) and their withdrawal can be conceived as movement, as travel, or as a kind of mobility between this world and the otherworld, which in the Vietnamese context is sensed by offering and burning replicas of horses, elephants, and boats as vehicles of travel in the course of the *lên đồng* ritual (Figure 2).

Some spirits, national heroes for example, emerging in the *lên đồng* ritual need means of travel such as horses, while others require elephants, ferries and boats to traverse rivers in the mythical landscapes. According to the *bà đồng* (the medium) and to cult members I spoke with, some historical figures would refuse to appear and incarnate the medium's body without a proper means of travel. While trance mediumship in late socialist Vietnam consists increasingly in female members

of the aspiring middle classes, and is thus performed by a relatively small group of practitioners, ancestor veneration is practiced by most Vietnamese. In the course of a number of rituals connected with worshipping ancestors, different kinds of votive paper offerings play a crucial role.

Ancestor veneration, debt and offerings

According to the majority of Vietnamese, ancestor veneration is the most important religious practice to be fulfilled in the homeland and in the diaspora (Jellema 2007). If people do not respond to the demands of ancestors, do not give offerings or do not burn incense, the spirits of the dead may afflict their kin with different types of harm. The living may suffer from disease, become economically less successful, and may have family problems. For these reasons, the Vietnamese buy votive paper money (*vàng mã*), or paper versions of ritual money, gold and silver bars, and luxury goods. Votive paper money or “hell money” is also burnt during funerals to ensure that the spirit of the deceased can use this money in the afterlife. It can be reasonably assumed that the term “hell” was introduced by Christian missionaries. According to imaginaries of most Vietnamese (and Chinese alike), there is an underworld (*địa phủ*) with a court, where the souls of the dead are first judged and where spirits need some money.

Burning “hell money” and other votive offerings as part of commemorative rituals is a popular religious practice in Vietnam and embedded in reciprocal exchange and flows of positive emotions between the dead and the living. Ritual money or “hell money” has existed for centuries, and is based on an ancient concept of life “as type of bank loan ... every birth to this world was based on the allowance of a loan from ‘the treasury of the Other World,’ ‘the Bank of Hell’” (Kwon 2007, 77). However, what has changed over time is the currency of ritual money, in particular the invention of replica US dollars and recently of euro notes, as I will discuss below.

When burning replicas of commodities, religious practitioners not only talk about the offerings as gifts for their ancestors, but also refer to pagoda contributions and altar offerings as the repayment of debts towards spirits, gods, and ancestors. With regard to ancestors, various people in Hanoi, from return migrants to teachers to businessmen to traders, explained to me that giving offerings must be understood as a way of returning what the dead gave for one’s family in the past. But this is only one side of the coin. The other side is one’s future (monetary) “investment” in family affairs such as a marriage, in business or in the transfer of one’s kin to other countries for better economic opportunities. People believe themselves to be dependent on the assistance and on the support of ancestors, and therefore food, fruit, ciga-

rettes, and votive offerings to the dead are charged with the moral imperative of filial piety. Further, neglecting ancestors provokes anger and bad sentiments on their side, and most people fear the negative consequences of such neglect. This is also true for transnational Vietnamese. Thus, in the words of a businesswoman whom I met in Hanoi but who lives in Berlin where she trades in votive paper objects among other goods: “My ancestors helped me to become rich in Germany. It is my duty to pay back what I received. By giving offerings, I share with others and will receive protection for future economic success and personal well-being.”

Reunion rituals are performed on special occasions, such as the *Tết* festival (the New Year festival according to the lunar calendar), and the anniversary of a person's death. Filial devotion is expected, demanded, and performed. Ancestor veneration is performed on various occasions. Some days before a person's death anniversary, the deceased will be invited to participate in the gathering. On the day of death, the extended family gathers in the house of the oldest son, to celebrate the temporal communion with the dead relative. When I participated in such a ritual in urban Hanoi the invited guests first visited the ancestor altar on the third floor of the house, where a separate room was furnished with a huge shrine. Several votive paper offerings were displayed on the altar: a big black car, a cell phone, and a villa were among them (Figure 3).

All of the visitors, about 40 people, brought offerings such as fruit and flowers, and the eldest son, responsible for hosting the event, decorated the altar with various votive paper offerings, burned incense, and then prayed. The other family members did not start to pray until he had finished. Female relatives had spent the entire day preparing food in the kitchen and this food was now placed on the altar, as the ancestors eat first. Only after they had enjoyed the meal, meaning after the incense sticks had burned to the ground, did the participants of the death anniversary ritual gather downstairs in the living room for the shared meal, considered *lộc*, blessed food.

The repeated return home (*về*) of the dead must be contextualized with their departure (*đi*), and thus this coming and going of the ancestors is imagined as movement, as a kind of mobility between two worlds, the world of the living and the world of the dead. As altars are not permanent homes for the dead, but only meeting places from which the ancestors “come and go” (*đi về*) (Jellema 2007, 64), the living are calling the dead home for special events. In Vietnam, the coming and going of spirits, as explained above, is linked to imaginaries about the dead who need vehicles to travel in order to come and go. For this reason the living provide transportation by

FIG 3

Ancestor altar with votive paper offerings. Hanoi 2013. Photograph: Hühwelmeier.



purchasing paper replicas such as motorbikes and cars and incinerating them in order to send them to the dead.

While ancestor worship regained popularity among Vietnamese after *đổi mới*, several years passed before politicians and government representatives started commemorating the heroes of the nation and worshipping ancestors on a national level (Pham 2009), asking them to protect the country and the well-being of its inhabitants. National spirits such as the royal dead from different historical periods or military heroes from the past are today venerated in various public places. "Monuments to the worship of the past" (Ho Tai 2001, 1; see also Schwenkel 2009) have been built in many localities in Vietnam. A socialist war memorial, located about 350 km from Hanoi, was transformed into a colorful Buddhist-Daoist altar by a spirit medium and her followers some years ago to venerate virgin war martyrs who were killed by a bomb in the American War in Vietnam, the so-called Ten Girls (Endres and Lauser 2012b, 135). Similar to ceremonies in other contexts,

FIG 4

Client transporting a villa made from paper. Hanoi 2013. Photograph: Hüwelmeier.



rituals for national heroes also involve paper offerings. The votive paper objects for the Ten Girls included two-storied houses, clothes, jewelry, and even “glamorous paper lingerie sets embellished with scintillating sequins” (Endres 2008, 762), and were burned as part of the ritual.

Another important group of dead consists of the war dead of Vietnam, the so-called “ghosts of war” (Kwon 2008) whose remains were never found, meaning they could not be buried properly. In Vietnamese culture, ghosts are conceptualized as the wandering souls of the dead who have no descendants to care for them and who are restless because they have not yet found a place in the otherworld. Many Vietnamese people venerate the displaced, unknown ghosts, called *cô bác*, as most people lost family members during the war. These rituals are conducted in the streets, not in the house (Kwon 2007, 74), as people are scared of these ghosts. Like ancestor spirits, ghosts who experienced a tragic death, such as soldiers, need food, paper clothes, and spirit money. Practitioners of these rituals believe that ghosts will no longer afflict the living after they have received what they need.

An increasing number of Vietnamese visit mediums to get into immediate contact with their ancestors, or they consult fortunetellers to know more about their future or about family issues. In both cases the ritual experts may give advice to buy votive paper offerings and burn them to please the spirits. Although a number of people are critical towards the expenses incurred through votive paper offerings, many Vietnamese are part of a “morality of exchange” (Do 2007, 174) and spend money, gold, and silver to satisfy the needs of the dead. Customers travel by motorbike to the old quarter of Hanoi to buy objects made from paper for special occasions (Figure 4).

FIG 5

Cell phone and credit card made from paper. Hanoi 2013. Photograph: Hühwelmeier.



New media technologies

The producers of paper votive offerings keep up with the times and provide paper versions of luxury goods, such as photo cameras, radios, TVs and tape recorders, as well as of more recent devices, including computers, iPads, and cell phones (Figure 5).

Scholarly work on trance mediumship and new media has illustrated that Korean shamans, for example, represent themselves via photography, video and DVD, and in cyberspace on shamans' own home pages (Kendall 2015, 131). Similarly in the Vietnamese context, cult members were recording parts of performances of spirit mediums on smartphones and sending the clips to group members who had not been able to participate. Mrs. Thu, a spirit medium who is not part of the cult group mentioned above, told me she paid a camera crew to produce a DVD of her *lên đồng* performance in a temple outside of Hanoi. She uses this DVD to distribute to her friends and for advertising purposes. When she shares the DVD with other mediums, she discusses various questions with them, such as what she can improve during future performances. Several times, she emphasized in our conversations, she became possessed by spirits while watching the DVD at home, which points to the fact that a possession ritual can maintain power even when mediated via a screen. The use of video cameras and film cameras in various religious settings, such as in trance rituals (Zillinger 2015) and in Pentecostal gatherings (De Witte 2010; Hühwelmeier 2015a; Meyer 2015), is of increasing importance in popular religious practices such as in soul-calling rituals in present-day Vietnam. Recording technology is also common among Hanoians who employ the services of fortune tellers. When I took part in such sessions, clients were explicitly encouraged by the fortune teller to record her sayings and advice. Clients wanted to be able to listen to the messages again at home and to share their visit with family members and friends. The use of digital technol-

FIG 6

New media technologies. Hanoi 2013.
Photograph: Hüwelmeier.



ogy (Figure 6) in the world of the living enables the communication of data by electronic means, usually over some distance. Transmitting or receiving information electronically in a digital form is part of the everyday lives of the majority of Vietnamese today and therefore considered to be a prestige good for the deceased.

New technologies, and cell phones in particular, are required to organize business in the afterlife, “just as we as traders use one or two mobile phones in our daily activities,” a retailer explained to me. As many petty traders cannot afford a computer or an iPad or find it not convenient due to their constant movement throughout the city, the cell phone is the most important object for the maintenance of family ties as well as for creating and maintaining business connections. Indeed, cell phones with brand names such as Nokia or Samsung, along with Apple iPads and smartphones, are recent additions to the inventory of the shops trading in votive paper offerings (Figure 7), which came up in the past decade. As

FIG 7

Nokia cell phone made from paper and real Samsung cell phone. Hanoi 2013. Photograph: Hühwelmeier.



reported by Nguyen (2006, 130), Mrs. Lan, whose father had been a high official at the Vietnamese Ministry of Education during his lifetime, was told by a soul caller that her father had an important job in the otherworld, namely assisting a president. Mrs. Lan therefore decided to buy a votive cell phone for her father, as this “would give him more flexibility with his busy schedule” in the otherworld. In this case, the cell phone is intrinsically connected with the status, influence, and power of the dead during his lifetime, and second, with the prosperity of relatives in this world.

While there is a handicraft tradition of producing votive paper offerings such as horses and elephants made from bamboo frames and wrapped with colorful papers in some villages near Hanoi (Nguyen 2006, 138) (see Figure 8), handicraft producers told me about the production sites of cell phones, iPads, and computers made from paper and burned on death commemoration days. According to their narratives, electronic devices made from paper are produced by huge machines in other provinces of Vietnam.

One of the traders I encountered in Hanoi was Mrs. Hà, a woman in her fifties, who has been trading in votive paper offerings, among them communication technologies made from paper, for a couple of years. Her customers order iPads, cameras and mobile phones, among others. During one of our encounters I asked whether ancestors who had never used these items during their lifetime would be able to deal with information and communication technology (ICT) in the otherworld. “Of course,” she answered, “this world is like the otherworld” (“*trần sao âm vậy*”). “The ancestors will find somebody in the otherworld who will know how to use the iPad, just like in this world.” Her mother, who was 91 years old and has been trading in votive paper offerings for about 20 years, emphasized in our conversation that the deceased, in order to communicate with their kin in the otherworld, should have a

FIG 8

The art of making votive horses. A village near Hanoi 2015. Photograph Hühwelmeier.



cell phone, as this is the fastest way to make an appointment and to visit relatives in the hereafter.

However, other families take different decisions. Mrs. Hoa told me that during the death day ceremony of her father, her brother brought bags full of spirit money to burn at the cemetery. When I asked why there were no other votive offerings, she explained that her father had been a bank director and that the only material object he needs in the hereafter is money, as this was what he was mostly concerned with during his lifetime. Furthermore, “he who has money can buy everything,” she commented, “and he can even pay for a Mercedes with a driver,” underscoring once again how the logic of the world of the living is just as applicable in the world of the dead.

As illustrated by these cases, the forms of paper votive offerings in Vietnamese ancestor worship rituals are tailored to reflect the prestige goods available during the time period of the living and to accommodate the specific needs of each

deceased based on the details of their individual lives. This also holds true in the migration context and its new challenges for both the living and the spirits of the dead.

Travelling spirits – burning ritual money and passports

As anthropologists have highlighted, technical media are extensively used in spreading religious messages and in connecting people and places (De Witte 2010; Eisenlohr 2012; Garbin and Vásquez 2011; Hüwelmeier 2015a; Morris 2015; Zillinger 2015). By drawing on scholarly work on the global circulation of religious television and radio, on video and audiocassettes (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002; Hirschkind 2006), on Internet and print media, the last section of this article examines the relationship between religion, media, and transnational mobility from the perspective of religious practitioners. As burning votive paper offerings is a practice of establishing ties between the living and the dead for people in Vietnam, this is also true for the diasporic Vietnamese.

In exploring the modalities of transnational religion, Thomas Csordas identified “what travels well” across geographical and cultural space” (Csordas 2007, 260) and referred to the portability of religious practices and the transposability of religious messages. Votive paper objects travel well across borders and are therefore part of commemorative practices also performed in the Vietnamese diaspora. As a result of transnational migration, and in particular the movement of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese contract workers to fraternal socialist countries (Hüwelmeier 2011) between 1980 and 1989 and later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, votive paper offerings can today be purchased in Asian markets in a number of countries in Eastern Europe. During my multi-sited fieldwork on global bazaars I noticed that paper prestige goods such as mobile phones are traded in Asian wholesale markets in the eastern part of Berlin (Hüwelmeier 2016), as well as in Vietnamese marketplaces in Warsaw and Prague (Hüwelmeier 2015b, 2015c), much like in Vietnam. These luxuries did not exist in these places before 2010.

However, the range of votive paper offerings available in post-socialist cities is not as diverse as that in the old quarter in Hanoi, because it is difficult to ship paper replicas of goods like cars or mansions which are as big as doll houses. One solution used by Vietnamese spirit mediums in the US is to have master mediums in Vietnam send them photographs of votive offerings as replacements for the actual offerings (Fjelstad 2010, 62). Images of paper votive offerings in Silicon Valley temples are thereby remediated (Bolter and Grusin 1999), used as substitutes for the original votives, and are burned during rituals in California. As this example illustrates,

ritual goods from Vietnam have subsequently been altered to fit the local circumstances of Vietnamese diaspora. Visual representations are so powerful that they can even mediate other forms of mediation. In this case, mediation takes place on different levels, while simultaneously various media, paper votive offerings, photo-cameras, and computers are involved in the complex processes of entangled and multilayered practices of mediation.

When I started doing fieldwork in the newly established Vietnamese marketplaces, the Dong Xuang Center and the Asia Pacific Center in the eastern part of Berlin in 2005 (Hüwelmeier 2013a), there were no paper copies of luxury goods and no spirit money to be found on the shelves. As votive papers were not available there, Vietnamese people living in Berlin or visitors from Vietnam brought these material objects from Hanoi to be used in Germany. In 2006 I met Mrs. Tiên, a 70-year-old Vietnamese fortune teller whose daughter is a spirit medium in Germany. The old lady was visiting her daughter for a couple of weeks in an eastern German town. She told me that she saw many *cô bạc* (dead soldiers) in the East German town, sitting on the roof of a house at night, a place that her son intended to buy. She clearly identified these spiritual entities or ghosts to me, explaining that they were dead German soldiers waiting for food. As “Germans do not take care of their dead soldiers,” she asserted, she felt pity and started preparing a ritual by cooking rice and offering food to the hungry ghosts. By burning paper cloth, which she had brought with her all the way from Hanoi, she sent clothing to the wandering souls, as they were all naked and had been freezing day and night, she said. Mrs. Tiên asserted that the wandering souls were pleased and disappeared after the performance. By performing the ritual, she is referencing practices in Vietnam, where every year on a special day in the lunar calendar a ritual called *Lễ xá tội vong nhân* (or *Lễ Vu Lan* in the official discourse), takes place. People put rice, incense, and a small amount of money in front of their houses, and, only recently, cloth for aborted children. The “hungry ghost festival” is performed for all wandering souls such those of aborted human fetuses, of people who committed suicide and whose dead bodies could not be identified, and war dead, whose remains have not yet been found (Kwon 2008). The bringing along of paper votive offerings objects to Germany by transnational Vietnamese people is part of transportable religious practices and linked to processes of migration and global religious networks (Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010).

While some paper votive offerings are difficult to ship from Vietnam to the West, spirit money is quite easy to bring to other countries. It is traded in the Berlin *Đông Xuân Center*, a multiethnic bazaar in the eastern part of Germany’s capital,

named for the famous market in Hanoi (Hüwelmeier 2013a, 2013b). But ritual money with ancient heroes printed on it is not the preferred currency which is sent to the ancestors by Vietnamese people in Europe. Instead, they offer ritual dollar bills, as this currency is considered more convenient for spirits. It should be mentioned here, that money replicas can be bills with ancient emperors such as the Jade Emperor printed on it, or US dollars, and now euros. The use of US and European money for ritual purposes is not an invention of diasporic Vietnamese, but a continuation of a tradition of burning money that comes from other times and places. According to the Vietnamese in the eastern part of Berlin whom I spoke with, it is easier for the dead to buy goods in the hereafter with US dollars, as this currency is accepted everywhere. "If they meet relatives from the US in the otherworld, they will pay in US dollars," a Vietnamese trader explained to me. In addition, US dollars are an unofficial parallel currency in contemporary Vietnam, and people prefer to pay with this money when conducting large financial transactions. Only in 2013 did I start seeing paper votive money on display in Asian wholesale markets in the eastern part of Berlin, not only US dollars, also euro notes, but no other currencies. Parallel to this development I began noticing ritual euros while conducting fieldwork in Hanoi that same year, available in Hàng Mã street as well as in various marketplaces in Vietnam's capital (Figure 9).

Tens of thousands of Vietnamese former contract workers mainly from Hanoi and other parts of northern Vietnam, are now living in reunited Germany and sending remittances, "real" euros, on a regular basis to those they left behind. Thus spirit money in the form of euros is an indication of ongoing social and economic ties between Vietnamese in Germany and in Vietnam. Among diasporic Vietnamese, burning money seems more important than offering other objects made of paper partly because villas or cars made from paper are not available due to shipping costs. Although clients can buy cloth for the ancestors more recently, as well as packages with glasses, jewelry, mobile phones, and credit cards in Berlin's Asian markets, most Vietnamese people prefer to invest in ritual money. Some of my friends in Berlin told me that they transported spirit money since many years from Hanoi to Berlin, so they use this way of pleasing their ancestors as it is "more easy" to just burn paper money on the balcony instead of Mercedes Benz votive paper offerings, which are not available in Berlin. Moreover, as many transnational Vietnamese people transfer huge sums of real money from Germany to Vietnam, remittances are part of global capital flows and therefore the burning of spirit money enables ancestors to purchase luxury goods needed for a comfortable afterlife.

FIG 9

Spirit money. Euros and US dollars.
Hanoi 2013. Photograph: Hühnelmeier.



Due to the recent increase in transnational migration, some ancestors need passports, as a Vietnamese friend recounted to me. Mr. Nguyễn, who has been living in East Germany since 1987, and whom I came to know in 2006, was unable to visit his parents in Hanoi for various reasons. His father died in the late 1990s without ever having been able to visit his son in Europe. Participating in the funeral of one's father is a moral and social obligation for the Vietnamese, in particular for the first-born son, but Mr. Nguyễn had not been able to fulfill this duty. It was only after 2005 that he was able to travel to his parents' home in Hanoi. Upon his arrival, his sister-in-law organized a trip to the grave of Mr. Nguyễn's father in his natal village, together with other family members. At the grave they performed a ceremony, inviting the father to make a trip to Germany, as he had always dreamed about this journey. During the ritual in the natal village, the family members burned the offerings at the grave of the deceased. It was imagined that only after the ceremonial burning of the passport replica would the father be able to make his trip to

FIG 10

Photo camera made from paper.
Hanoi 2013. Photograph: Hühnelmeier.



Germany to reunite with his son. As film cameras and photo cameras (Figure 10) are part of travel in the global world, this kind of votive paper offering is also used in commemorative rituals to connect actors in different worlds, separated by spatial distance while simultaneously united by temporal communion.

Conclusion

Religious practices are entangled with the larger framework of the dynamics of modernity, of market reforms and the rapid development of capitalism, of globalization, and improved transportation and mobility, including journeys by overseas Vietnamese people to Vietnam to participate in celebrating the New Year festival and death day anniversaries. As this article has illustrated, religious practitioners are not merely responding to global processes, they generate global interconnectedness and communication with and within the afterlife, not least via new technical media, made from paper and burned on special occasions. Ancestor veneration, spirit mediumship, soul calling, and other popular religious practices in late socialist Vietnam are all practices of mediation. Moreover, these practices can be considered a double mediation, in the sense of transport and communication. On the one hand, in the process of the burning of paper offerings it is fire that operates as a transfer medium to the hereafter. Secondly, what is burnt is the medium itself, thereby transferring consumer goods made from paper to the otherworld to enhance the relationships between the living and the dead. The offerings, mostly luxuries, are media on the level of images, printed on paper and are therefore material forms. While “religions will always involve material forms” (Keane 2008, 124), the materiality of votive paper offerings, their de-materialization and their

re-materialization in the otherworld, are an integral part of the imaginaries of many religious practitioners in Vietnam and its diasporas.

By burning paper votive offerings, religious practitioners fulfill their moral obligations toward the deceased and invite ancestors to participate in the wealth and social status of the living, with the practitioners thereby gaining blessed gifts and the protection of the spirits in their future social and economic lives. Ancestor worship is a way of moral exchange and part of a ritual economy ensuring the ancestor's continued well-being and positive dispositions towards the living, while the living sometimes ask for special favors or support and assistance in cases of business affairs, family issues or illness. At the same time, the production and fabrication of luxury goods made from paper may also be part of the dream worlds of those who cannot afford to buy prestige objects in real life, but who nonetheless want to let their ancestors participate in the luxury world of the new market socialism, hoping that the deceased will take care of the future prosperity of the living. Part of the material well-being of the living is manifested in cell phones, iPads, and other kinds of electronic communication, identified as technical innovations in the socialist country on its way to a capitalist consumer society. As a result, the availability and accessibility of new media for the aspiring middle classes in late socialist Vietnam has contributed to the increasing production of votive paper offerings in the form of prestige objects, at the same time inducing the "realization of an ancient dream of proximity without delay," as Rosalind Morris has suggested with regard to new technologies of electronic communication (Morris 2015, 34). Inviting ancestors to share in these technical innovations resulted in practitioners' ideas about spirits' new jobs and rapid communication with bosses and relatives in the hereafter. Simultaneously, media technologies themselves become subject to mediation practices, as illustrated by the production of film recordings of spirit possession cults, funerals, and death anniversary gatherings. As spirits are imagined to be as mobile as the living, they must be equipped with the same new technical media in order to maintain transnational networks, enabling them to continuously cross borders between Asia, the USA, and Europe, just like their relatives in the here and now.

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