The Hùng Temple, the temple believed to be the shrine for worshipping the ancient line of kings who established the ancient kingdom of what is now Vietnam, represents an important nexus between religion and politics in Vietnam. This nexus is driven by long-standing political interests. The extent to which politicians draw from the past to bolster the temple’s significance is, however, varied. Although many studies have been conducted on the Hùng Kings (see below), there is nonetheless a lack of scholarship on the Hùng Temple in Phú Thọ Province. Existing accounts are limited to the age of the buildings, the history of physical constructions, and practices associated with the temple, especially about the investigation into how the recent building and renovation work has influenced the site’s meaning and identity. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the Hùng Temple complex, its construction process, and its importance for contemporary Vietnam in the way the state representatives want to present it.

In what follows, I examine the production of a form of nationalism in contemporary Vietnam through the observation of the interactions of state officials with the Hùng Temple. I base each section on questions of who decides what is to be seen and what is to be told, in order to argue that
claims of nationalism and national identity are at the heart of state-led place-making practices. For this to happen, the conceptual dimensions of place and place making require a bit more discussion.

**Place-Making Practices, Nationalism, and the Concept of Religion**

Among scholars, the term “place” has a long history; it bears a multiplicity of meanings and connotations.¹ In an early study of place, Yi-fu Tuan made the observation that an awareness of distinct places develops in humans from infancy.² Thus, a sense of place is tied to the physiological development that allows us to distinguish, differentiate, and classify our surroundings. Because of this, he contends that places also exist in an emotional sense, rather than simply as an intellectual category. It is for this reason that Tuan defines places as “centers of felt value, where biological needs, such as those for food, water, rest, and procreation, are satisfied.”³ However, places are also strategic, political, and laden with power struggles. The identity of a place is always unfixed, contested, and multiple. As Doreen Massey argues, the concept of place depends on the notion of articulation. Massey states, “It is a move, in terms of political subjects and of place, which is anti-essentialist, which can recognize difference, and which yet can simultaneously emphasize the bases for political solidarities.”⁴

I follow Massey’s suggestion and view place as “a particular articulation of [social interrelations], a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings.”⁵ Thus, place can be viewed as a dynamic process of place-making activities, which often involve multiple sites. Further, the actions of human beings upon places have patterns. As Tuan shows: “We measure and map space and place, and acquire spatial laws and resource inventories for our efforts” and “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.”⁶ Returning to the notion of articulation, which Massey suggests as being crucial to understanding place, place making can be seen as a way of articulating practices.⁷

Place is constructed through building and shaping the landscape and by creating a narrative topography.⁸ This can be done through investment into a physical site, such as through the massive construction project
undertaken at the Hùng Temple. Such construction involves a planning process, which implements the ideology of the dominant group that wants to assert a certain identity to the place. But there is a difference between how the place has been constructed and how people engage with place. People can choose to act within the given space for their various personal, religious, or political reasons. They can act within the space through bonding with the site, through the processes of making, or through the interactions of a particular mix of social relations. These sorts of interactions and behaviors with and within a place are place-based practices. They add value to the place. Places need to be seen from the perspective of those performances that take them up and transform them, redeploy them, and connect them through metonymic relationships.

The Hùng Temple is a symbolic and ideologically charged site of national commemoration that brings together and touches upon aspects of national heritage, collective identity, and nationalism. A place like this provides the context for nationalist activity and is itself a product of nationalism. For this article, I use the concepts of “place” and “place making” to understand the practices producing elements of a state-led nationalism at the temple site. A localized place such as the Hùng Temple can be strategically constructed to also foster an attachment to place at a national level. The term “nation” used in this article follows Benedict Anderson’s definition as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” The nation comprises an “imagined community” because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” At the same time, nations are communities “because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”

By “nationalism” I refer to both political ideology and individual psychology, defined by Giddens as “a phenomenon that is primarily psychological—the affiliation of individuals to a set of symbols and beliefs emphasizing communality among the members of a political order.” Nationalism as such can be considered as ideas and sentiments. Politically, however, nationalism “has been defined, in effect, as the striving to make
culture and polity congruent, to endow a culture with its own political roof and not more than one roof at that.\textsuperscript{16} The political ideology of nationalism claims that a unique nation exists, that this nation has a special value and, therefore, right to existence and recognition, and that to secure this right the nation must possess autonomy, often understood as meaning that it is a sovereign nation-state.

An examination of nationalism involves the acknowledgment that “nation” is a social construct.\textsuperscript{17} The project of constructing the notion of nation is often run by the state, the dominant political group. The practices of constructing the nation can be diverse. For example, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger suggest that traditions, such as the national anthem and the national flag, were invented in Europe in order to “inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour” in the context of nation-building.\textsuperscript{18} As Peter Jackson and Jan Penrose explain, nationalist projects often draw on notions of common interest between heterogeneous groups, and by grounding and delimiting the concept of nation in a recognizable physical space, reinforce belief in its existence, and in the legality and morality of reinforcing its legitimacy.\textsuperscript{19} These strategies, namely the invention of tradition, the inculcation of norms and values, the reinforcement of political legitimacy, and the uniting discourse, all can be found separately or sometimes overlapping, as will be argued in this article, through the articulation of a bond between people and place that reflects “an immutable relationship between citizens and their country.”\textsuperscript{20}

Modern nationalist projects, in many cases, also involve religion. In the mid twentieth century, in his research in America to document a type of religion that emerges in the context of the modern nation-state, Robert N. Bellah coined the concept of “civil religion.”\textsuperscript{21} Not the continuity of any previous organized religion, civil religion is closely related to national issues, namely the rights of man, law, social order, and national meaning. It is thus involved in the most pressing moral and political issues of the day. In his comparative research of religion and politics in Thailand, Frank E. Reynolds studied the traditional Thai relationship between religion and the kingdom-state, and he stressed the continuity of this relationship in the modern nation. The kings in each period used different strategies to create and enhance royal power as sacred and indubitable. Reynolds termed this
“civic religion,” “the specific form of religion associated with the life of the national community.”

In the case of Vietnam, nationalism is the product of cultural contact with the West, while colonialism and anticolonial movements from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries have provided a significant context for the formation of modern nationalism. As shown in the section below, Vietnamese intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century made use of the story of the Hùng Kings as a mythical origin of the imagined Việt community. In that context, this article argues that the Hùng Temple has been constructed to enable a claim for a unique Vietnam and that this nation—Vietnam—has a special value. It illustrates that articulating the bond with the Hùng Temple is at the center of constructing the nation. This construction has been done through processes of state-led place-making practices. The state is not a single agent. It has particular mandates that are carried out by state officials through policy systems that can usefully be observed and examined. With the term “state-led” I am referring to the guiding role of the communist state in modern Vietnam in establishing and reinforcing cultural practices, especially through the activities of state delegations or influential agents of the state. The term “party-state” is also employed in my discussion about state policy, because Vietnam is a single-party state; by constitution, the Communist Party plays a dominant role in leading the state and society.

While focusing on contemporary practices, this article will first provide some background information on the stories of the Hùng Kings and the Hùng Temple and how they have been integrated into projects of nationalism in Vietnam. Through place construction, narrative topology, and official visit descriptions, it will also discuss how religion has been conceptualized in the state’s nationalist projects.

The Hùng Kings and the Hùng Temple: A History of Nationalist Articulation

The story of the Hùng Kings is popular among the Việt (Kinh) community, the major ethnic group in Vietnam, as an explanation of their origins. The story goes that there was a dragon king, Lạc Long Quân, who possessed great strength and magical powers. He fell in love with Âu Cơ, who was
a fairy in the mountain region. They married and she gave birth to a sac containing a hundred eggs. Soon after, the hundred eggs broke and out stepped one hundred sons. The sons were brought up and divided into two groups: fifty sons followed the father to the coastal region, while the other fifty followed the mother to the mountainous region. The eldest son stayed at Phong Châu (which is in Phú Thọ Province today) and set up his kingdom, named Vạn Lang. He was called the Hùng King. The kingdom was ruled by eighteen generations of Hùng Kings and was the first kingdom of the Việt people. From this story emerged a phrase that literally means “son of the dragon, grandson of the fairy” that the Vietnamese use when talking about their origins. Today it is commonly believed that the descendants of the Hùng Kings built temples to worship the kings for their achievements and contributions to Việt society. The location of the original temple to the kings is said to be on Nghĩa Linh Mountain in Phú Thọ Province. Further, schoolchildren today are taught that they are the descendants of the Hùng Kings, or more specifically, the “children of the dragon, grandchildren of the fairy.”

Historians point to brief passages from Chinese documents written in the first millennium CE about the Hùng Kings, their kingdom, and their people. Some Chinese documents dating from that time period mention a person who ruled the people and territory of a kingdom called Vạn Lang, which is supposed to correspond to the main part of northern Vietnam today. However, the information in these texts is incomplete, disparate, and even confusing in some details. Some scholars argue that these documents and the little information in them were the materials for the creation of fuller versions of the stories of the Hùng Kings by Việt scholars during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. The stories of the Hùng Kings were told in more detail in some collections of tales of the spirits of the Việt people; two of them that scholars highlight are Selected Oddities from South of the Passes [Linh nam chích quái] and The Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm [Việt diên u linh].

The stories of the Hùng Kings appeared for the first time in the fifteenth-century dynastic historical records, The Complete Annals of the Kingdom of Đại Việt [Đại Việt sử kí toàn thư]. This is a historical record written by mandarins under orders from Lê Dynasty emperor Lê Thánh Tông. In this document, the Hùng Kings were recorded as belonging to the
“Hồng Bàng era,” in a patriarchal lineage linked to one of the five ancient Chinese emperors, the “Agricultural Emperor,” Shennong [Thần Nông]. This story claims that the kings inherited the land and set up and ruled the kingdom over eighteen generations. There is also a reference to one of the Hùng Kings being Lạc Long Quân, the father of the Việt people. These narratives were repeated in subsequent historical records in the Lê and Nguyễn Dynasties. For an example, see the Imperially Commissioned Comprehensive Mirror of Việt History [Không định Việt Sử thông giám cường mẫu]. Vietnamese scholars subsequently passed these traditions into the colonial period in the early twentieth century.

The Hùng Temple is located in Hy Cương commune in Việt Trì, Phú Thọ Province. This hilly zone is eighty kilometers from Hà Nội, the capital of Vietnam, and on the main road to the northwest border with China. It is an ethnically diverse region that is still predominantly dependent upon agriculture. Partly because of this, Phú Thọ remains one of the poorest of the mountain provinces, despite the modernization evident in the rest of the country.

The Hùng Temple is the most prominent and sacred shrine where people display their devotion to the Hùng Kings. In a text known as the Hùng Kings’ sacred genealogy [ngốc phủ], the whole region of Phong Châu was the Hùng Kings’ capital. The last Hùng King voluntarily gave his kingdom to King An Dương before turning into an immortal. King An Dương received the kingdom, setting up a temple at Nghĩa Linh Mountain, gathering the Hùng Kings’ big family to form Trung Nghĩa village of Hy Cương commune, and asking them to worship the Hùng Kings.

The temple complex is situated within a large area that includes three sacred mountains [tam sơn cẩm địa] and surrounding land and is adjacent to the Hồng (Red) River and the Đà River. The main site of the Hùng Temple is on Nghĩa Linh Mountain, including a group of religious buildings. From the main gate at the foot of the mountain, a pathway leads to the Lower Temple [Đền Hạ]. Next to this temple is a Buddhist pagoda, with a bell house and two Buddha towers. From here, stone steps lead up for about seven hundred meters to the Middle Temple [Đền Trung] near the peak of the mountain. Not far away, at the top of the path, are the Upper Temple [Đền Thượng] and a construction called the Mausoleum of the Hùng Kings [Lăng Hùng Vương].
A descending pathway goes through the square of the Top Temple and weaves down through the forest on the other side of the mountain. The Water Well Temple [Đền Giếng] is located just behind the exit gate.

Based on a fourteenth-century document, the Gazetteer of An Nam [An Nam chí], which mentions the Lạc King (later interpreted as Hùng King) and the area of Lạc people, historian Tạ Chí Đại Trường assumed that early veneration of the Hùng Kings was practiced by the Lạc people. By the fifteenth century, this veneration practice was indicated on a map with the record of a mountain in Phong Châu called Mount Hùng Vương in the Hồng Đức Collection of Maps [Hồng Đức bản đồ]. Also under the rule of King Lê Thánh Tông, a Hùng Kings’ sacred story was constructed that officialized the cult of the Hùng Kings, and later rulers supported the worship of the Hùng Kings in villages in the area in order to “lengthen the national flow.” This, as some recent scholarship points out, was mainly the result of a top-down policy of the Vietnamese kings, who wanted to unite and systemize the world of gods and spirits in the kingdom they ruled. Premodern Vietnamese states preserved the sacred genealogy and other documents that supported the sacred temple related to the worship of the Hùng Kings. By recognizing the devotional practices and formalizing the stories of the Hùng Kings in the state’s official records, Vietnamese premodern leaders strategically invented and interpreted the symbol of the Hùng Kings as a tool to legitimize their royal authority. However, from the very limited number of written texts that mention the stories and the worship of the Hùng Kings, it is hard to say that the Hùng Kings were a central interest of Vietnamese states before the twentieth century.

The Hùng Kings and the Hùng Temple in the Concept of Nationhood and Nationalism in the Colonial Period

From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, Vietnam began to experience both French colonialism and anticolonialism. The emerging generations of Vietnamese elites, while receiving a French or French-influenced education, were eager to try different ways to develop discourses of nationalism. This is the critical period when Vietnamese intellectuals drew on the legends of the Hùng Kings to support an emergent nationalist discourse.
Stories about the Hùng Kings were used as a narrative of origin, which reminded the Vietnamese of the age-old kings and the long cultural history of the nation. They became increasingly active in constructing and popularizing the stories of the Hùng Temple. Colonial historians continued to rewrite the stories of the Hùng Kings in the history of the Việt kingdom in both French and in the romanized Vietnamese writing system [chữ quốc ngữ]. Some even turned the historical stories into poems in order to popularize them and make them accessible to schoolchildren. Stories of the Hùng Kings and festivals at the Hùng Temple appeared in newspapers. The emergence of a modern print industry significantly helped to make the Hùng Kings and the Hùng Temple known to more Vietnamese. In the same period, changes were made at the Hùng Temple site. According to the text on a stone stele erected in 1925 at the Upper Temple, a major rebuilding of the Hùng Temple occurred between 1917 and 1922. It was the result of the efforts of Phú Thọ provincial leaders in bringing the site to the attention of the Nguyễn emperor, Khải Định. The text on the marker also explains that in 1917, the king approved an edict declaring the tenth day of the third lunar month to be the official day for provincial leaders, representing the king, to conduct rituals in the temples on Nghĩa Lính Mountain. This is the earliest written record that refers to the day for performing rituals to the Hùng Kings, later called ritual day [ký thệ lễ] by the local people, or the Hùng Temple Festival [Hội Đền Hùng], and Ancestral Anniversary [Ngày Giỗ tổ] by the national public and media. In this way, the Hùng Temple ritual began to become better known and started to attract more Vietnamese. However, as reflected in the news, the Hùng Temple Festival was still not very crowded. In the only article of Phong Hóa magazine (a famous periodical from the 1930s) about the Hùng Temple Festival, the author mentions that the festival was not crowded, even on the day before the main festive day. The magazine writers appear to have found the Lim Festival [Hội Lâm], or Hương Pagoda Festival [Hội Chùa Hương], more appealing.

Some members of the Vietnamese elite commented on the renovation of the Hùng Temple as evidence of the appreciation of Vietnamese for their national founding kings. They commented that it was more dangerous to lose the soul of the nation [quốc hồn] than merely to lose its independence. Phạm Quỳnh was one such thinker. An active intellectual who
promoted the education of chữ quốc ngữ to the Vietnamese people, Phạm Quỳnh advocated using the notion of “country” as a territory shared by people who speak the same language and have the same history, rather than the older notion of “kingdom,” a place inhabited by people who serve the same king. His new understanding of nation highlighted the Hùng Kings and the Hùng Temple as a symbol of a shared past that evoked emotions about the origin of the nation. Phạm Quỳnh even made a pilgrimage to the Hùng Temple and wrote the following:

> Coming from three different regions of the country, we visited the Hùng Temple and burned incense to the Hùng Kings. It is so touching to see the new generations of Việt elites of the Western [French] education who are now conducting the traditional ritual. The altar of the kings is the symbol of the eternal soul of the nation.

Benedict Anderson’s point about how nationalists invoke age-old polities is well revealed in this example. Phạm Quỳnh’s writing helped to develop modern nationalism in Vietnam through the invocation of ancient kings. The writings of such colonial-era Vietnamese elites reflect a transition wherein Vietnamese nationalist ideas and sentiments began to be mobilized. These changes later became the founding motivation for the investment in the Hùng Temple by the modern nation-state, but in different ways, with different purposes and meanings.

In research on contemporary Vietnam, scholars have noticed the increasing significance of the Hùng Kings and the Hùng Temple. Shaun Malarney, in his research on the concept of exceptional death, has pointed out the state’s intention in using the symbol of the Hùng Kings for promoting state legitimacy. He argues that the state’s changing relationship with the Hùng Temple from 1990 to 2006 points to a reinvigoration of earlier practices, with a number of modifications, to strengthen the link to legitimate Vietnamese rulers. Dieu Thi Nguyen examines the stories of the Hùng Kings in a long history of being invented and reinvented. She argues that there are hidden reasons for the persistence of the Hùng Kings stories that help such a mythical account become so profoundly integrated into the concept of Việt culture. More recently, Olga Dror has investigated the symbolism of the Hùng Kings and the Hùng Kings Memorial Day
in South Vietnam to see the dynamics of the symbolic meanings and the ways people articulate those meanings. Xu Fangyu attempts to investigate the history of the worship of the Hùng Kings in order to see patterns of the state’s articulation toward this mythical figure and related veneration as parts of the state’s attempts to enhance its legitimacy in different periods.

I agree with these scholars that the Hùng Kings are part of a cultural, nationalist discourse, and I will now turn to examine the state’s construction of the Hùng Temple as a place that links people with the nation and its ancestors. Focusing more intensively on place-making practices, I will show how the contemporary single-party state of Vietnam intervenes in the site and reinterprets the symbol of the Hùng Kings to make both into evocative figures that are effective in promoting nationalism. I will then discuss how religious performance is involved in state-led place-making practices and the type of nationalism it produces.

I first consider developments in Vietnamese nationalism through two periods. The first is the period of revolution from 1945 to 1986, in which I draw attention to the relationship of the party-state with the Hùng Temple in the period from independence to the 1980s, when the country underwent the major reform project called Đổi Mới [Renovation]. The second period was from the implementation of Đổi Mới onward. Focusing on this latter period, I will provide an analysis of place-making practices of cadres, and by extension, of the party-state, which in turn frames the significance of place in ways that strengthen the position of the nation-state. I will base my analysis on three ethnographic analyses: the temple reconstruction, narrative topology, and an official visit of a state delegation.

Constructing the Hùng Temple during a Period of Revolution (1945–1986)

In the mid 1940s, a complex political situation existed in Vietnam, with different political forces striving to rule the country, including: (1) those following the monarchical ideology of the Nguyễn king, (2) the French colonial authority, (3) the Japanese military occupation, and (4) various independent Vietnamese political movements. The September 1945 announcement of independence made by Hồ Chí Minh and Việt Minh forces marked the birth of a modern Vietnamese nation-state, the
Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). However, other forces were active at the same time, putting social conflicts and ideological contestations at the center of all the battles, in which every government sought means of legitimizing its leadership and promoting social integration. As shown below, the Hùng Kings and the Hùng Temple received the interest of the governments in both the North and South, as well as other political polities, for different purposes, in different ways. The analysis will focus on the communist state in the North in order to demonstrate the transformation of these cultural symbols and the shifting practices of the contemporary state agents.

As soon as they assumed power in 1945, the communist party and the government embarked upon an ambitious project to create a new socialist culture for Vietnam, though its implementation did not fully start until late 1954. The party and the government asserted a Marxist ideology. Marx and Engels recognized the basic point that cultural values often support the interests of powerful individuals or particular individuals or groups in society. The revolutionary government, therefore, took upon itself the task “to destroy or neutralise those cultural elements that reproduced the old order, and replace them with the new ideas and values to create a new order.”

The party’s ideology and its attitudes toward cultural management were well explained in the writings of top revolutionary leaders, such as Hồ Chí Minh and Trường Chinh. Achieving cultural change was determined to be an important battle in building socialism. Certain principles were emphasized for a revolutionary culture. Such a culture should be “collective” and “shared” and in opposition to “individual” and “private” interests; it should be “nationalist,” “scientific,” and “popular.” In implementing this process, cadres “desanctified” spaces, by such actions as leaving village communal houses in disrepair or in ruins. As part of an anti-superstition campaign, many sacred sites came to be regarded as mundane spaces. Cadres prohibited villagers from performing religious rituals while at the same time they created civil rituals and encouraged the population to engage in these rituals as a way to celebrate socialist culture and socialist ideology.

At the same time, the Hùng Temple still received a certain level of interest from the government. In 1946, the Hùng Temple Festival was recognized as a national holiday. During the Hùng Temple Festival of 1946, Vice President Huỳnh Thúc Kháng and his associates made a pilgrimage to Hùng
Temple. A document kept in Hùng Temple records: “Vice President Huỳnh offered to the Hùng Kings a sword and a map of Vietnam to report to the kings that the nation had gained independence.”62 Some elders in Hy Cương village recalled to me that they witnessed an encounter between the delegation of the Việt Minh and the delegation of the Quốc Dân Đảng at that same Hùng Temple anniversary, and Vice President Huỳnh gave a talk to temple visitors on that day, asking people to believe in Hồ Chí Minh and the Việt Minh’s leadership. A few years later, in 1951, Prime Minister Trần Văn Hữu of the Associated State of Vietnam and his fellow ministers made a pilgrimage to Phú Thọ Province to attend the Hùng Kings’ anniversary.63 These visits to the Hùng Temple show the attempts of different polities to articulate the symbol of the kings toward nationalist meanings, but for their own sake.

It was Hồ Chí Minh, the DRV’s first president, who played the most important role in highlighting the nationalist value of the Hùng Temple for the DRV government. He first visited the temple in 1954, when he was on his way from the war capital of Việt Bác to the official capital, Hà Nội. At the temple he talked with the Vietnamese soldiers of the Pioneer Division, who were in charge of entering Hà Nội and controlling the new capital.

**FIGURE 1:** Stone bas-relief at the Hùng Temple, depicting Hồ Chí Minh talking to soldiers. Photo by Ngô Thị Diệm Hằng.
(Figure 1). His visit was mentioned in communication channels of the government with a photo and the content of the talk. From his speech, one sentence was highlighted: “The Hùng Kings have the merit of founding the nation; you and I have to defend it together.”

Hồ Chí Minh was the leading figure interested in reconstructing the Hùng Temple. His statement made during his visit in 1954 later came to be considered a “must-know” lesson about the Hùng Temple. It fit well with his other teachings defining how and what it is to be Vietnamese. For instance, he wrote in an earlier poem, “The History of Our Country” [“Lịch sử nước ta”]: “The Vietnamese must learn Vietnamese history to understand the origin of the nation.” Or with students, he taught: “[to be a Vietnamese one must] love the nation, love the people.” He believed that one must also protect the nation-state of modern Vietnam, as mentioned in his well-known declaration of independence. At Ba Đính Square in Hà Nội, he said to the Vietnamese and a global audience: “This nation must be independent…. The Vietnamese commit to sacrifice everything for that right to freedom and independence.” Then, in the Hùng Temple at Phú Thọ, he restated to his soldiers that they had the responsibility of uniting to defend the nation. Hồ Chí Minh stressed in his second visit to the Hùng Temple in 1962 that it needed to be preserved and trees planted to be “solemn and beautiful, a park of history for our children to visit.” In response to Hồ Chí Minh’s statement, the local government appointed cadres to reside at and manage the Hùng Temple. They preserved the temple, continued to protect the surrounding forest, and set up some facilities for the management of work at the site.

Following Hồ Chí Minh’s lead in historicizing the symbol of the Hùng Kings and the Hùng Temple, the provincial cadres of Phú Thọ built up the scientific aspect of the Hùng Temple site by actively attracting mainstream scholars to do research on the temple site and the history of Phú Thọ. Folklorists collected oral and written texts about the Hùng Kings, while ethnologists took photos of village temples, recorded village festivals, and explored the symbolic meanings of ritual symbols and structures. These scholars concluded that the Hùng Kings have long been part of the spiritual life of people in the villages around the Hùng Temple area. The Hùng Kings are seen as the guardians of places, crops, and people’s lives. This was
further confirmed by archaeological studies that positioned Phú Thọ at the center of a Văn Lang kingdom in the ancient history of Vietnam. The goal of these studies was to find scientific evidence for Hồ Chí Minh’s statement that “the Hùng Kings had the merit of founding (the) nation” and to prove that “the Hùng Kings era did exist in Vietnamese history.”

As some scholars have noted, during that half century, under the influence of communist state-led nationalism, the invented traditions of the story of the Hùng Kings were made unchangeable truths.

From the 1960s through the 1980s, the Hùng Temple gained even more recognition as well as management from the state. It was recognized as a site of national heritage in 1962, which then led to the organization of an approval of commemoration of the Hùng Kings in 1976. According to a government decree in 1975, the festival to the Hùng Kings, as well as those to other national heroes, were to be preserved provided that all superstitious elements were eliminated. National heritage recognition of the Hùng Temple turned the site into the property of the state, which took on the responsibility to protect, preserve, and manage it. Thus, from the 1960s the temple site began to be managed by cadres who framed it as a national and scientific heritage site. They built a set of offices at the foot of Nghĩa Linh Mountain, set up water and electricity distribution for the site, and maintained the roads around and on the mountain. Late in 1980, a museum was built next to the offices, for exhibition activities. While focusing on the state-led practices of the DRV government in constructing the historical fact of the Hùng Kings and making the Hùng Temple a “historical park” of the nation’s past, it is worth emphasizing that during this period, other polities in Vietnam were also active in engaging with the Hùng King stories and related practices. In the case of South Vietnam, state representatives, especially under the Second Republic, organized and participated in the Death Anniversary of the Hùng Kings, delivered speeches about the kings, and called out the Vietnamese to unite as children of the dragon, grandchildren of the fairy. In some southern provinces, like Nha Trang, Khánh Hòa, Kiên Giang, Lâm Đồng, and Đồng Nai, temples worshiping the Hùng Kings were built by the donations of ordinary people. Olga Dror investigated how the myth of the Hùng Kings was articulated as a collective memorial fact by the First Republic, the Second Republic, elites, and organizations to invoke
a sense of Vietnamese oneness and to fight against communism, war, hippies, cowboys, and even Ngô Đình Diệm in the period of 1955–1975.79

In comparison, North Vietnamese officials attempted to manage the Hùng Temple and its related practices in such a way as to reflect how the party-state at that time categorized some practices as “backward superstitions.” Though revolutionary policies restricted the organization of ritual practices, the rituals on the Death Anniversary of the Hùng Kings were still performed at the Hùng Temple, but in simplified forms to avoid the performance of religiosity.80 As Mr. Cung, a retired official at the temple recalled, on the Death Anniversary of the Hùng Kings, a delegation including a team of students playing Western music, representatives of the local administration, and Youth Union leaders was formed to visit the temples on Nghĩa Linh Mountain and place flowers on the Hùng Kings’ tomb. However, there was to be no incense burning or ritual praying. Mr. Cung told me:

Most of the time, we welcomed the leaders of the province and the nation. In those years, all of the people we went with did the walk through all the temples but they did not burn incense or bring offerings. Uncle Hồ, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Lê Duẩn did it like that, although in 1977 Lê Duẩn called it “a spiritual visit” [di viếng]. General [Võ Nguyên] Giáp burnt the incense; a journalist who went with him intended to take a photo, but he stopped him and said: “These days there is still no clear separation between belief and superstition, so you should not take a photo of this.”81

Not using incense at the Hùng Temple is an example of the adjustments made by the temple managers and party and state representatives to keep practices in line with state ideology. I asked Mr. Cung whether his observation applied as well to ordinary people visiting the Hùng Temple at that time. He confirmed that it applied only to state leaders and state delegations, saying: “The people always burned incense, at all times,” and they all had big gatherings at the temple on the Death Anniversary of the Hùng Kings. General Võ Nguyên Giáp’s caution reaffirms that it was the state’s intention to re-model the people’s relationship with the Hùng Temple.

In this period of revolution, the stories of the Hùng Kings were clearly used to create a narrative of the nation. The Hùng Temple was researched and managed to serve as a reminder of the nation’s ancient polities and the idea of a shared origin. However, the two principles of “national” and
“scientific” significantly influenced the way the site was constructed. This construction consequently resulted in the production of a type of secular nationalism at the place. While the nationalist narrative would be enhanced, the secular performance was later transformed when the state’s attitude toward the Hùng Kings and the Hùng Temple shifted, as I will analyze in the following section.

Contemporary State-Led Place-Making Practices and the Production of Nationalism

Facing a poor economy, a crisis in socialist ideology, and many social issues after the wars, the Vietnamese party-state decided to conduct a major renovation of its political system and economic policies, Đôi Môị. Under Đôi Môị, the state saw a need to introduce an adjusted way of promoting social solidarity and state legitimacy. Under these challenging conditions, struggles for identity and development became the central focus of postwar nationalism. As a discourse of nationalism, for instance, the interpretation of the Hùng Temple that highlights the responsibility to fight against invaders, as I illustrated in the previous section, was no longer suitable for a country that has gained its peace and unity, and is now turning its attention toward development and global integration.

In response, the state strategically promoted cultural values that were meant to sustain the social fabric alongside the burgeoning market forces. On the one hand, cultural practices that were once categorized as superstition and hence were forbidden are now labeled “traditional.” On the other hand, the policies toward festivals and religious practices are more open; they leave room for an increasing part of the population to engage in religious life through ancestor worship, the Mother Goddess religion, Buddhism, and so on. While adding modifications to rituals and festivals, the state indicated a shift toward a culture supportive of development and national identity, which Hy V. Luong pointed out as the integration of developmental and cultural nationalism.

One of the state’s strategies in intervening in these practices has been to draw the Hùng Temple and worship of the Hùng Kings into a project of promoting a cult of national ancestors, to be interpreted as part of a common national identity. Therefore, the story of the Hùng Kings has been put
into school textbooks (standard textbook of literature studies, grade 6), as has information about the Hùng Temple and its festival on the Death Anniversary of the Hùng Kings (standard textbook of English, grade 8). As Dieu Thi Nguyen argues, “the tales of the Dragon Lord, the Immortal Lady, and the Hùng Kings have turned into mythologems inseparable from the birth-of-the-Việt-nation historical narrative.”

Especially from the mid 1990s to the present, the period that has been referred to by some scholars as “the third wave of nation building,”88 the state has repeatedly issued new policies to promote the temple site and the Hùng Temple Festival. An instruction from the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1995 designated the Hùng Temple Festival as one of the major national events of the year. This was promoted further by a decision from the political committee that was implemented in 2000, that the Hùng Temple Festival would be organized at the national level. The Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism took the leading role in organizing this “national anniversary,”89 with the participation of national leaders as well as delegations from other provinces. The Death Anniversary of the Hùng Kings became the only traditional ritual being held at the national level, and the temple itself was declared by the prime minister to be a “special national heritage site” in 2009.90 This significant decision marked the turning point when the Hùng Temple gradually started to become known by the population at large as a shared temple to worship the nation’s ancestors.

In another direction, but for the same purpose, the state has encouraged popular devotional practices to the Hùng Kings to spread all over the country. Temples devoted to the Hùng Kings in many southern cities and provinces were rebuilt, such as in Đồng Nai, Cà Mau, Kiên Giang, and Lâm Đồng; and new temples were also built, such as in Hồ Chí Minh City, following the structure of the Hùng Temple on Nghĩa Linh Mountain.91 The temple keepers in these temples often make pilgrimages to the Hùng Temple in Phú Thọ Province to take incense roots, soil, and water from there back to their temples in order to perform rituals in tribute to the original temple.92 An investigation in 2005 undertaken by the Ministry of Culture concluded that there was a total of 1,417 Hùng King shrines all over Vietnam.93 In 2007, a change to the labor code was approved, which gave
workers one day off with pay on the Hùng Kings’ anniversary. On this day, because the anniversary is observed at all temples worshipping the Hùng Kings throughout the country, people can either go to the Hùng Temple in Phú Thọ or to another Hùng Temple to conduct the anniversary ritual.

Reconstruction and Expansion of the Temple Complex
The reforming party-state used the heritage label given to the Hùng Temple to justify a construction and expansion process. In the decades of the 1990s and 2000s, the Hùng Temple underwent major reconstruction. The older structure was a complex of four temples, a pagoda, and a mausoleum built on a mountain named Hùng Mountain or Nghĩa Linh Mountain. There were three temples worshipping the Hùng Kings built at the foot, the middle, and the top of the mountain, named after their positions as the Lower, Middle, and Upper Temples. A main gate was built at one side of the mountain, opening a pathway leading to these temples. Another temple, named the Water Well Temple, was built at the foot of the other side of the mountain, behind the second gate. The old complex also included a pagoda next to the Lower Temple and a mausoleum near the Upper Temple.

In 1994, following a decision approved by the prime minister, the Hùng Temple heritage site was remapped to encompass an area of more than one thousand hectares, including thirty-two hectares of the old temples and more than nine hundred hectares of land from the surrounding villages. This decision turned the Hùng Temple into the biggest heritage site in the province. A series of construction projects involved a number of surrounding villages, thus incorporating them into the landscape of the heritage site. In 2005, two other decisions were approved by the prime minister relating to the Hùng Temple. One was a plan for a ten-year project to rebuild the Hùng Temple. The other decision enlarged Việt Tri city to cover the heritage site, with a vision to develop it as the city of the festival celebrating the origin of the nation. Under the former decision, over this ten-year period, a great amount of money was invested in replanning the Hùng Temple. As reported by the Hùng Temple Management Office, up to 2011, 1,542 billion VNĐ has been spent, of which the state funded 90.7 percent.

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw an intensive change to the site. The old temples on Nghĩa Linh Mountain were rebuilt with enormous
funding from the state or donations from other provinces (for example, Hà Nội donated to a fund to rebuild the Lower Temple, and Quảng Ninh funded the Water Well Temple, while the state invested in a project to rebuild the Upper Temple). The boundary of the site was expanded, and new functional buildings were built around the central site on Nghĩa Lịnh Mountain. This included office buildings, resting places, a square, parking garages, kiosks, restaurants, hotels, and so on. To paraphrase the temple manager’s words, the new construction was to meet the needs of the increasing number of visitors and to augment the sense of it being a “national historical site.”

In addition, new constructions for veneration were built. At the Upper Temple, a stone was set up for veneration. According to the Hùng Kings’ ngọc phả [sacred genealogy], King An Dương also buried two oath stones [hòn đá thế] in the middle of the mountain, declaring that they would lengthen the kingdom’s life and maintain the Hùng Temple, and that any betrayal of the temple would be punished by the supernatural forces. During a renovation in the 1960s, temple management staff found an old stone at the Upper Temple area; they set it up in front of the Upper Temple. Visitors gradually referred to it as the Oath Stone mentioned in the story; some burned incense at the stone, and gradually it became a sacred object. In 2007, it was replaced by a donated stone (Figures 2 and 3). Additionally, in the renovation during the 1990s, a stone stele engraved with Hồ Chí Minh’s 1954 teaching was set up and placed in the Stele House, replacing an older stele honoring a donor to the temple at the time of the 1917 renovation. Finally, at the foot of Nghĩa Lịnh Mountain, on a side of the T-junction leading to the main gate and the Water Well Temple, a large, flat concrete stage was built, with a huge stone sculpture of Hồ Chí Minh talking to the soldiers.

Also in the first decade of the twenty-first century, new temples were built within the expanded area of the heritage site. One is the Âu Cơ Temple, which is devoted to the legendary mother of the Hùng Kings. Another one is the Lạc Long Quân Temple, where people worship the dragon king who is said to be the father of the Hùng Kings in the legend of the origin of the nation. Not far from these temples, a memorial site was built devoted to local unknown soldiers of the modern Vietnamese wars. When I was conducting fieldwork there in 2013, the managers of the Hùng
Temple and the provincial leaders were talking about a plan to build a memorial house for Hồ Chí Minh within the site in order to worship him and to remember the times he visited the Hùng Temple. Through such processes, the Hùng Temple site has been transformed into “a spiritual center of the Vietnamese,” as a leader of Phú Thọ Province stated proudly.

This enormous investment of the state and state-related institutions into the reconstruction of the temple site highlights the significant role of the Hùng Temple in the cultural discourse around nationalism. Together with other official efforts to promote the symbol of the Hùng Kings, like putting lessons of their origin into schoolbooks, giving days off for the Death Anniversary of the Hùng Kings, and organizing veneration places throughout the country, the reconstructed temple site serves as the emplacement of a religious sentiment of nationhood.

**Narrative Topology**

The story about a site is always adjusted to please the will of the teller and the visitors. Each time visitors go to the temple, they listen to a different
story about what they are observing. The objects and places are displayed in a particular way at a particular time. That meaningful arrangement of things is the narrative topology of the site. The construction of this narrative topography helps visitors comprehend the significant meaning and value of the heritage site. As David Brett explains:

**FIGURE 3:** The Oath Stone being worshipped at the Upper Temple in 2012. Photo by Ngô Thí Điểm Hằng.
Narrative topology is, briefly, the arrangement of spaces and the connections between them such that they set up, suggest or assert relationships between whatever is displayed in those spaces. ... [W]hat I mean by it is best illustrated through the circulation patterns and hierarchies of spaces in typical buildings.

I borrow this definition to talk about the Hùng Temple story. The site has been arranged in a particular way and has continued to be rearranged over time to serve different purposes. As Brett asserts, visual displays have “a formative power over the content of the understanding.” He adds that “these conventions are a form of ideology.” In so saying, the author implies that there is a link between visualization and ideology, and the implication is that we can identify the ideologies used in certain displays.

At the Hùng Temple, I observed a system of signs designed to inform visitors of directions, names, and stories of landscapes and constructions. There were two types of signs, one resembling an older style and one following more contemporary construction techniques and fashions. The old signs are characterized by texts written in the Sino-Vietnamese [chữ Hán] script or by architectural decorations. For example, the whole Nghĩa Linh Mountain is marked as a site by two gates at two sides of the foot of the mountain. The gates are engraved with statues of guardian spirits, which reflect the belief that those spirits would protect the boundary of the sacred zone. A structure consisting of three temples—at the upper, middle, and lower positions on the mountain—and its circled pathway also reflect traditional religious cosmology and practice.

Also, a wooden sculpture featuring an engraving of two dragons moving toward a moon [lưỡng long châu Nguyệt] is a typical pattern of decoration, found on the top of the gate of the Hùng Temple or inside a temple. This is a symbol of the faith in natural forces. Throughout the temple site, there are wooden banners or parallel poems carved in Sino-Vietnamese characters. The banner at the main gate, for example, reads, “the beautiful path to the mountain” [cao sơn cảnh hành] (Figure 4). Because of its age, the gate with the engraving and Sino-Vietnamese script was carved into a Hùng Temple badge as a symbol of the temple.

Sino-Vietnamese is a script based on Chinese characters; it was used in Vietnam before being replaced by the official modern romanized writing
system, which is based on Latin characters. Today, the majority of Vietnamese people cannot read or understand Sino-Vietnamese. Similarly, the old architectural style with decorations imbued with imagery from Confucianism or Daoism is also difficult for the modern observer to understand. These signs at the Hùng Temple were valuable for the researchers and heritage managers to understand the history of the site as well as its meanings and values. Many books introducing the site have recorded all the existing Sino-Vietnamese texts that reference the site and have translations into modern Vietnamese.
Even the temple staff members who were responsible for interpreting the site for visitors found it difficult to remember the Sino-Vietnamese writings. From my observation, the staff tended to remember the meaning of the Sino characters even though they did not understand their exact equivalents. Or, while explaining the site, they just preferred to ignore those details if the visitors did not ask them specifically about their meanings.

To make the site friendly for modern-day visitors, the temple managers have added more signs written in the modern Vietnamese script. A system of signs with information about directions exists from the entry point on all roads leading to the site and at all the T-junctions and turning points of roads. For example, on National Road No. 2, at the point turning to the Hùng Temple, a big gate was built with the banner message “Hùng Temple, the national heritage of history and culture.” Throughout the site, there are stone slabs carved with commemorative or edifying texts. For example, “the birds have their nests, the people have their hometowns,” “[when you] drink water remember where it comes from,” “one tree cannot make a mountain; three trees united together would make a high peak.” At each temple, a board explains the name of the temple, the date of construction, and the story related to that temple.

The sound system is another tool frequently used to frame the meaning of the temple. A system of speakers is set up all over the main site of Nghĩa Lịnh Mountain. The radio was turned on during the opening hours of the temple. It broadcast either stories about the Hùng Kings or songs about the kings, the temple, or the original land. One staff member of the Hùng Kings Museum told me that it was an automatic and convenient guide for the visitors at the site. In addition, big LED reader boards were set up at two of the most crowded areas of the site, displaying information for the visitors.

Within this intentional visual display, paths at the Hùng Temple site are designed to lead visitors from one site to another. Visitors coming to the site first encounter the Hùng Kings Museum, where they can find out facts and figures related to the history and the place. The main gate of the Hùng Temple leading to the pathway up the mountain is located immediately at the exit from the museum. After more than a thousand steps is the Lower Temple. First visible are Hồ Chí Minh’s words in the Stele House. There is a new board written in Vietnamese, saying that the Lower Temple was the
place where national mother Âu Cơ gave birth to a sac of a hundred eggs, which turned out to be a hundred sons. They were the first inhabitants of the land and set up the first kingdom of the Vietnamese. The term for all Vietnamese people, *đồ bào*, originated from this myth. The path leads the visitors upward to the Middle Temple. There the interpretive sign tells a story about how the Hùng Kings used to stay in that place to meet with their vassal lords. In the front yard, a stone table and stone chairs are displayed as physical evidence of the story. At the peak of the mountain is the Upper Temple. The Lower, Middle, and Upper Temples have the same altar structure to worship the mountain spirits, the Hùng Kings, and the two princesses. On one side of the Upper Temple is a mausoleum for the Hùng Kings. Sitting in front of the Upper Temple is the Oath Stone, with a bowl of incense and trays of offerings before it. The temple yard is designed to be as large as possible to provide space for visitors to find a good vantage point to see the site and for photography. From here, there are other steps leading down the other side of the mountain to the Water Well Temple. The board at this temple tells the story of two princesses and the sacred well inside the temple. Exiting the gate along the lotus lakes, visitors are attracted to the stone sculpture of Hồ Chí Minh talking to the soldiers on the right-hand side of a big T-junction. From here, a visitor can either take the road that leads to the Âu Cơ Temple or the one to Lạc Long Quân Temple to finish the circular tour of the heritage site.

A map of this route with its specific order, stops, and introduction has been printed on a flyer and is reproduced in many guidebooks available at the temple. Tour guides working at the site also often guide visitors following this order. This aims to reinforce intended themes printed in the advertising flyers at the site. These include: “a pilgrimage to the past,” “an educational site,” and “a spiritual convergence place.” To borrow John Urry’s words, “such themes are designed to demonstrate national pride” and “such exhibitions operate as a technology of nationhood providing narrative possibilities for the imagining of national culture and indeed the national ‘brand.’”

Producing Nationalism on Official Visits

This section discusses official visits and the production of state-led nationalism at the Hùng Temple site. It analyzes the visit of a particular group of delegates
as a typical example. The visitors’ behavior and comments speak to the production of nationalism at the Hùng King Temple, which, as I will illustrate, follows the main themes set up from the previous period but with some adjustments. In the spring of 2013, I had the opportunity to accompany a delegation of Vietnamese ambassadors visiting the Hùng Temple before they went abroad to take up their new positions. The description of the visit I offer below is an example of how official delegations coming to the temple are taken through the site and how this frames their interactions with it.

The delegation was first welcomed at the meeting room in the Hùng Kings Museum. In the meeting room, people sat on luxurious wooden chairs arranged in a horseshoe. Mr. Tung, vice director of the department, introduced himself as the representative of the Hùng Temple. He greeted Mr. Túc, vice president of the province, who accompanied the delegation to the temple. He then greeted the ambassadors. Among them was Mr. Tộ, who served as head of the delegation. After the welcome speech, Mr. Túc then introduced each member of the delegation and gave a Hùng Temple badge to each guest. The Hùng Temple badge is a piece of metal with scripts on its face; it was designed in 2000 as a gift of the Department of Hùng Temple Management to visitors of the temple. Mr. Tung then introduced Mrs. Hồng Anh, staff member of the Office of Heritage, to be the guide for the day.

Leaving the meeting room, we went out of the museum and down the steps to the main gate, where two guards were standing with burning incense for everyone in the group. Each person, in turn, took the incense with their hands and made a prayerful gesture. They bowed three times toward the statue of the guardian spirits before placing the incense into a big bowl. After the first incense ritual, we continued up the stone stairs. There were stone slabs carved with texts along the way. Some delegates took photos of them with their mobile phones, but the delegation did not stop for any further explanation of those objects. When we reached the Lower Temple, the members of the delegation performed another incense ritual at a big incense bowl at the front temple door. The pathway led us up to the Middle Temple, where a guard was waiting for us, holding burning incense. The delegation gathered at the front yard to perform the ritual and then straightaway returned to the path without going inside the temple. The Upper Temple appeared in front of us not long after that. Everyone stopped
outside the temple for a short rest. Soon after, we all went inside. The smell of burning incense was in the air as we passed the outside hall, where a big incense bowl was placed. We moved through the big room toward another smaller room at its back. There were some other visitors in the temple. They were gathering in front of a big altar and its offering table, praying with their hands over their hearts. The temple keepers opened the doors of a secret room [thường cung] to let the delegates in one by one.

In the small room, there were four altars in aged ironwood, decorated with gold lacquer. Flowers and fruit filled trays on the altar tables, which were against the walls. Everybody touched their palms together in prayer while the temple keeper rang a bell three times and prayed.

As the delegates’ representative, the temple keeper prayed that they would work to the best of their ability, be loyal to the interests of the nation, and be loyal to the leadership of the party and the state. The temple keeper said the following: “Today a delegation of Vietnamese ambassadors burn incense…to remember the Hùng Kings’ merit. We promise to work for the benefit of the nation, [and to] contribute to enhance Vietnam’s position in the global community.”

After the ritual, everyone gradually moved out of the room, heading down to the Hùng Kings Mausoleum nearby for another incense ritual. Then the mission followed the stairs down the other side of the mountain. The way down from the temple was cool and shaded by the large trees along either side of the footpath. The area around the temple abounded with nature, adding a sense of seclusion from the outside houses and roads. After a while, we moved out of the forest and saw the final temple—the Water Well Temple. As we were walking into the temple, I saw Mrs. Hồng Anh waiting at the side of the altar. She introduced it by saying: “The water in the well inside this temple is believed to bring health and luck to people who drink it. Now the water is less plentiful, so we only offer it to very special guests.” As I observed during my fieldwork, water in this well is reserved for honoring delegations like this group.105

After Mrs. Hồng Anh said these words, the heritage manager of the Water Well Temple took a bucket. On cue, the temple’s guard team opened a metal screen covering the inside of the well. The heritage manager then put the bucket into the well and took out half a bucket of water to fill about thirty
small cups. Each person drank one cup, some nodding their heads and saying that the water was very fresh and cool. The delegates then bowed or prayed in front of the altar before leaving the temple. The next and last ritual was conducted at Lạc Long Quân Temple on the nearby hill.

After this final ritual, the head of the delegation asked Mrs. Hồng Anh for a copy of the ritual speech for each of the members so that they could take it with them on their work trip abroad. When exiting through the temple’s gate, I asked one member whether they would now go back to Hà Nội. He let me know that the program was to visit two places: the Hùng Temple—the birthplace of the Việt kingdom—and then Tân Trào in Tuyên Quang Province—the birthplace of the Việt Minh, the political organization that formed the contemporary state.

The visit I have just described was one among many similar visits of state delegations to the Hùng Temple that I observed during my research. The description has highlighted one purpose that visits to the temple serve. It illustrates how the Hùng Temple is politically significant for the construction of a state-framed nationalism. It shows how a structured site is “consumed” in a programmed way as people move through the various parts or places of the temple. The pathway the ambassadors’ tour followed was full of signs that relay to visitors the meaning and symbolism of the temples, as well as the value-laden landscape of which it is a part. The sequence of the stops on the tour was designed to add elements to make it a coherent narrative of the place. All the elements unite together to make the site purpose-built, including the temples, museum, the walkways, surrounding trees, the signs, and so on. Added to this was the introduction and commentary of the guide and the temple managers. This combination framed a particular narrative of the temple of the Hùng Kings that is significant to the modern nation-state, a narrative that helps to paint a state-sanctioned vision of national formation and common identity.

The prominent pattern of interactions by official visitors was to respond positively to the narrative topology and the visit agenda. Wearing the badge carved with the image of the national flower and the Hùng Temple gate, they agreed to mark themselves as honored visitors at the site, different from ordinary visitors. By following the set path, listening to the speeches and conducting rituals at approved places, they engaged in a collective practice
designed to convey a set of expected meanings and values that connected the symbolism of the place with a narrative of the nation.

The nature of the visit is much more complicated than that. The ambassadors’ visit was not voluntary but an obligation of work. It is reflected in the public media as “an action of the tradition of remembering origins” that “has been maintained for years.”106 If they were not ambassadors-to-be, they would not have been included on this trip. Therefore, interactions at the temple site were work-obligated performances. Besides some moments of entertainment and curiosity, members of the delegation followed the program seriously. In Brett’s words:

By engaging with the idea of “national heritage” we are imaginatively (as visitors) constituting the “nation” as a real entity, according to the underlying assumptions. We are, in play, enacting the creation and development of the concept of the “nation.”107

In contrast to the national leaders before Đổi Mới who did not use incense, these delegates burned incense and performed rituals. They conducted six rituals, one at each of the temples in the site, and the ones at the Upper and Lạc Long Quân Temples included prepared offerings and ritual prayers. While their feelings about the visit remained unclear, their actions were typical religious expressions: burning incense seven times, citing the ritual prayer at the Hùng Kings altar, and drinking well water.

These observations imply that the Hùng Temple is perceived as a place of veneration to the national ancestors. This is an obvious shift of the framing of the meaning of the site away from the previous scientific and militaristic perspective and toward a cultural and religious perspective. Instead of pride in national history, the visitors put more emphasis on the pride of the unique “culture” shared by all Vietnamese, even among all ethnic groups, and from that unique culture, extending to the current dominant political regime.

**Concluding Remarks**

This article has discussed place-making practices at the Hùng Temple through an investigation of how the state has framed a religious site for the consumption of a nation. The sections described how the state has manipulated the Hùng Temple and the symbol of the Hùng Kings for its
political purposes during both the revolutionary time and the present. I have argued that this manipulation has considerably changed the Hùng Temple and the symbolism of the Hùng Kings, giving them an emergent significance in the making of the nation.

First, the article illustrates that the Hùng Temple was constructed to serve as a national heritage site under the control of the state. I have shown how it has been renovated to promote a selective memory of the nation. I have also shown how new constructions expanded the meanings of the site and how modern instruments and technology have been employed to emphasize aspects of the identity of the place. Through the visual displays and the presentation of its narratives, the Hùng Temple evokes the memory of the ancestors and offers a physical bridge to the past—a past that the state very much wants its citizens to consume—as well as representing the values of the contemporary nation-state.

Second, while making the Hùng Temple site significant for the national narrative, there has been a shift of emphasis in place-making practices. Before Đổi Mới, the Hùng Temple was considered a symbol of the national past, which was based on a scientific approach and a rational consumption of the site. This ideology helped the DRV, and later the contemporary state of Vietnam, to call for its citizens to sacrifice in fighting for sovereignty, and in constructing the national present. After Đổi Mới, while still being reminded of the past-present connection, visitors instead used the themes of culture, values, and tradition to express their understanding of the nation. The changes in recent decades illustrate how the symbolism of the Hùng Kings and the Hùng Temple has been interpreted by the state, its officials, and mainstream scholars at a time of significant changes in the society and people’s lives. I have shown that the Hùng Kings have long been involved in the symbolic discourse of nationhood, but in recent decades, these mythical figures have emerged as a spiritual and cultural focal point for the construction of a new postsocialist national identity.

Throughout, the state has played a driving role in the development and promotion of the Hùng Temple as a national resource. However, the state itself faces internal conflict in managing its attitude toward the temple and the kings. The article initially highlights the effort to amass historical evidence about these figures and write them into a mythology of socialist
nationalism that de-emphasizes overt religiosity. But later it shows how the state has turned to recognize the spiritual characteristics of the Hùng Kings and praise the moral value in people’s devotional practice toward the kings. The meaning of the Hùng Kings and the Hùng Temple, therefore, has shifted from a memorial symbol to a spiritual power affecting the nation and people’s lives.

Third, when state delegations go to the Hùng Temple, they are expected to perform the notion of nation that is served to them. While absorbing the narrative topology, the delegates express their supportive response to its meanings. They burn incense and perform actions of religiosity to ask for the blessings of the Hùng Kings on national affairs. These are examples of cultural and religious nationalism, where nationalist sentiment is based on common religious belief and practice. Whether or not these actions reflect their inner feelings, they do acknowledge the veneration to ancestors as a “tradition” and highlight the model of nationalism that the state wants to impose upon the national population.

My analysis supports and adds to Kate Jellema’s argument on ancestor veneration and nationalism in Vietnam after Đổi Mới. The visit to the Hùng Temple, she argues, reflects the movement of “returning to origin,” which models a flexible “coming and going engagement with the nation.” While she argues that this new form of nationalism reflects the mobility of postsocialist society, my data suggests that this form of nationalism reveals a religious element that is increasingly significant in contemporary Vietnam. In both circumstances, the examples show the adjustment of the state’s official view in order to encourage a suitable sense of belonging to the nation. For this reason, the state delegation’s performance of worshipping the Hùng Kings at the temple is close to Reynold’s “civic religion,” suggesting a form of religious nationalism.

I have pointed out that the Hùng Temple has been continuously employed in the construction of national narratives of various political regimes for various purposes, and that in modern times, the driving force for this has been the state and influential state agents. From these various state-led interventions at the Hùng Temple site in post Đổi Mới Vietnam, especially in the nearly two decades of the twenty-first century, it is essential to note that this profound transformation is one aspect of a larger trend toward
employing the symbol of the Hùng Kings. As other scholars investigating the Hùng Kings’ stories have noted, “nowadays the Hùng Kings Epic motif, festivals, and temples have become an intrinsic part of Việt culture,” and that this is the “institutionalized” choice of Vietnam to build a nation-state identity across the country as well as throughout the world.

In 2018, the Death Anniversary of the Hùng Kings was organized by Vietnamese communities in four countries with the support of state institutions overseas. In 2019, on the same occasion, for the first time the “Global Vietnamese Ancestral Day” [ngày Quốc Tổ Việt Nam toàn cầu] was organized in five countries by Vietnamese state-related agencies overseas. Also, in Phú Thọ families were encouraged to make rice meal offerings to the Hùng Kings at their home, making it a new “record” of the event. What has been happening at the Hùng Temple in recent years reminds one what happened to the stories of the Hùng Kings, as noted by Malarney. The form of religious nationalism that I have illustrated is being taken further.

There is, however, “not an agreed ‘national’ narrative nor a set of representative strategies around which a…heritage could be constructed.” The visual displays that I have described still provide plenty of variations for visitors. Although the constructed narrative, including what I have referred to as the narrative topology, seeks to persuade visitors, that does not preclude people reflecting on what they are asked to consume. After all, “the identity that matters is the one we choose for ourselves.” At the Hùng Temple, despite the structured displays, visitors coming to the temple complex construct the site for their own purposes. That, however, is a topic for future research.

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Abstract
The concept of “religion” in Vietnam has long been linked directly with the discourse of state influence. This essay presents place-making practices at the Hùng Temple, exploring the manner in which certain apparatuses of the contemporary state exert control over the temple for the purpose of promoting a sense of nationalism. Drawing on chronological data from 1945 onward, this essay argues that the meaning of the Hùng Temple site has shifted from being known as a historical site of national origins to a spiritual power affecting the nation and people’s lives in contemporary Vietnam.

Keywords: State-led nationalism, place making, religion and politics, Vietnam

Notes
1. Doreen Massey, Space, Place, and Gender (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 1.
2. Yi-fu Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).
3. Ibid., 4.
4. Massey, Space, Place, and Gender, 8.
5. Ibid., 5.
6. Tuan, Space and Place, 5–6.
7. Massey, Space, Place, and Gender, 5–7.
13. Ibid., 15.
25. For the full version of the story, see Nguyễn Đông Chí, “Con rồng, cháu tiên” [Children of the Dragon and Grandchildren of the Fairy], in Bộ Giáo Dục Và Đào Tạo [Ministry of Education and Training], Văn học 6 [Year 6 Literature Studies] (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục, 2011), 5–7. This is my summarized translation of the story.
27. Keith W. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). These early texts were the writings of Chinese scholars recording their exploration of new lands and peoples around their kingdom. Some texts were the *Annotated Classic of Waterways* [Thủy kinh chú] and the *Treatise on Nam Việt* [Nam Việt chí]. Vietnamese scholars learned the Chinese language and later also wrote about their land. Some of their texts became early historical records of Vietnam, such as the *Outline of the History of Việt* [Việt sử lược]. Detailed discussions of these early documents can be read in Haydon Cherry, “Digging Up the Past: Prehistory and the Weight of the Present in Vietnam,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no. 1 (2009): 84–144; Liam C. Kelley, “The Biography of the Hùng Bằng Clan as a Medieval Vietnamese Invented Tradition,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 7, no. 2 (2012): 87–130;


29. *The Departed Spirits of the Viêt Realm* was a collection of tales of spirits edited by Lý Tế Xuyên in the fourteenth century CE. This collection recorded nearly ten stories about the Hùng Kings’ dynasty and the Van Lang kingdom. Lý Tế Xuyên, Lý Hưu Mục, eds., *Việt điện u linh tập* ( Sai Gòn: Khai Trí, 1961). *Selected Oddities from South of the Passes* is also a collection of tales, said to be written by Trần Thế Pháp. In the preface, the author states that he collected the tales in the book as told to him by ordinary people in the fifteenth century. This collection includes the story “The Stories of the Hội Bằng Clan” [*Hồng Bằng thị truyện*], which describes the Hùng Kings’ lineage (Nguyễn Hưu Vinh and Trần Đình Hoành, *Linh nam chích quái binh giải* [Analysis of The Wonderful Tales of Linh Nam], 2010, https://trandinhhoanh.wordpress.com/linh-nam-chich-quai/ (accessed April 22, 2014).


33. “Hùng đô thất bát thế thành vương ngọc phà cò có truyền” [The Document of the Eighteen Generations of Hùng Kings], translated as “Ngọc Phả cò truyền về 18 đời Hùng Vương,” in Phạm Bả KhREAM, *Dề Hùng và Tín ngưỡng thờ cúng Hùng Vương* [The Hùng Temple and the Worship of the Hùng Kings], (Hà Nội: Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2013), 57–80. This document, kept at the Hùng Temple, is said to have been written in the 1600s, copying an earlier version from the 1400s. However, this version is different from stories in other documents. For example, in *Đại Việt Sử ký toàn thư* [The Complete Annals of Đại Việt], the Hùng Kings were said to be defeated by King An Dương (Viễn...
Khoa học xã hội Việt Nam, 84), and there was no information in this document about building a temple to worship the Hùng King.

34. Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Thần, người đất việt [Spirits, People and Lands of the Viet], (Hà Nội: Nhà Nam Và Nhà Xuất Bản Tri Thức, 2014). According to Tạ Chí Đại Trường, this document is the An Nam chí, or An Nam chí lược [A Record of An Nam], written in 1335 by Lê Tắc, translated into Vietnamese by Ứy Ban Phênh Dịch Sưu Liệu Việt Nam [Department of Translation Work for Historical Materials of Vietnam] (Viện Đại Học Huế, 1961). This document suggests that an early form of worshipping the Hùng Kings was a cult of villages in Phong Châu (now Phú Thọ Province).


36. There are three villages that built temples on Nghĩa Linh Mountain: Triệu Phú, Hy Cương (also known as Cô Tích), and Vi Cương. The division from one village to three villages is partly mentioned in Khu Di tích Lịch sử Đền Hùng [The Department of Hùng Temple Management], Truyền thống Khu di tích lịch sử Đền Hùng, 50 năm quản lý, bảo tồn và phát triển [History of the Department of Hùng Temple Management, Fifty Years of Management, Preservation and Development] (Phú Thọ, 2012), 21. In Nguyễn Chí Bên, “Đặc điểm của tín ngưỡng thờ cùng Hùng Vương” [Characteristics of Worship of the Hùng Kings], Di sản văn hóa [Cultural Heritage], vol. 2, no. 35 (2011): 35–41, researchers have found some faithful documents about temple reconstruction assigned to the Vi Cương village, dating back to the years 1674, 1767, and 1785.

37. See Nguyễn Chí Bên and Bùi Quang Thanh, Tin ngưỡng thờ cùng Hùng Vương; Tạ Chí Đại Trường, Thần, người đất việt.

38. See, for example, Lê Quy Đôn’s work in 1777, Kiến Văn Tiểu Luc [Stories of Observed Knowledge] (Hà Nội: Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2007). In this collection of stories about culture, geography, history, tradition, procedures, and people that were observed and recorded by the author, book no. 10, named Linh tích [Sacred Relics], records some sacred temples, and one story was about “The Shrine of Hùng Kings, the Ancestral Spirit” [Miếu thờ Thánh Tố Hùng Vương]. Ibid., 512. There are also spirit records that have been found in some villages in Phú Thọ Province showing that the villagers worshipped the Hùng Kings as village guardian spirits.

40. Trần Quang Tăng and Trần Quang Khải, Sử-Nam bốn chữ [Four-Word Poems of the History of the South (i.e., Vietnam)] (Hà Nội: Imprimerie Thuc-Nghiep An-Quan, 1922); Quyền, Sử ký nước Nam [The History of the Southern Country (i.e., Vietnam)] (Quy Nhơn: Imprimerie de Quinhon, 1930).
41. For example, see Kỳ Hòa, “Cháu tiên con rồng” [Grandchildren of the Fairy, Children of the Dragon], Phong Hòa, no. 1 (1933): 5.
43. A Vietnamese translation of the stone stele, “Bia ghi về diễn lễ Miếu Hùng Vương” [Stone Marker about the Ritual Rules at the Hùng Kings Temple], at the Upper Temple can be found in Nguyễn Bá Kiếm, Đền Hùng và Tín ngưỡng thơ cùng Hùng Vương, 27.
44. Village principles [hướng úc] and records of spirits [thân tích] of the surrounding villages such as Hy Cường and Vi Cường that were collected by the French institution EFEO during the 1930s are the next early documents about the ritual days of the Hùng Temple. These materials just mention the tenth day of the third lunar month as the main ritual day; there is no mention of the eleventh day of the third lunar month. See Hướng úc Vy Cường [Vy Cường Village Principles], 1932, Phú Thọ Provincial Library, manuscript: ĐCVL 1156.
46. Phạm-Huy-Hồ noted: Since 1914, the Hùng Temple has been rebuilt, but only the people in Phú Thọ Province cared; most people from other provinces had not heard about Hùng Vương Mountain and its stories. In the second year of the reign of Emperor Khải Định, the Hùng Vương Festival day was chosen and the administration sent calls and invitations out to provinces of the whole region (Hùng Sơn ngọc phả, 15–16).
47. In 120 volumes of Phong Hòa magazine (1933–1936) there was one article on the Hùng Temple Festival, while articles about the Lim and Hương Pagoda Festivals appeared every year in the magazine at festival time.
50. Ibid., 118.
52. Dieu Thi Nguyen, “Mythographical Journey to Modernity.”
54. Xu Fangyu [徐方宇], *Yuenan Xiongwang xinyang yanjiu* [越南雄王信仰研究; A Study of the Beliefs in the Hùng Kings in Vietnam] (Guangzhou: Shijie Tushu Chuban Guangdong Youxian Gongsi, 2013), 11.
58. Trường Chinh, Đề cương văn hóa Việt Nam [Thesis on Vietnamese Culture], in *Văn kiện Đảng toàn tập, tập 7, 1930–1945* [Complete Collection of Party Documents, vol. 7, 1930–1945], ed. Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam (Hà Nội: Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2000), 316–321. Trường Chinh wrote this in 1943. The book was considered the party’s guidebook and was an essential reference for revolutionary cadres in asserting the new ideology for cultural practices in Vietnamese society in this revolutionary time.
60. Ibid.
61. See Decree (*Sắc lệnh*) 22C NV/CC on December 18, 1946, signed by the DRV’s provisional president, on “decision of festivals, historical, and religious holidays” in Vietnam. See also Phạm Bá Khiêm, *Đền Hùng và Tín ngưỡng thờ cúng Hùng Vương*, 11.
65. In Vietnamese: “Các vua Hùng đã có công dựng nước, bác cháu ta phải cùng nhau giữ lấy nước.”
67. Ibid., 5:356–357.
68. Ibid., 12.

71. Ngô Quang Nam and Xuân Thiêm, Địa chỉ Vĩnh Phú.


74. Trần Trọng Dương, “Kinh Đường Vượng로그,” 37–39; see also Dror, “Foundation Myth.”

75. See Decision 313-VH/VP, dated April 28, 1962, signed by the Minister of Culture, on ranking the historical and sightseeing sites of northern Vietnam [Quyết định về việc xếp hạng những di tích, danh thắng toàn miền Bắc].

76. Phạm Quyên Phương, “Tran Hung Dao and the Mother Goddess religion,” in Possessed by the Spirits: Mediation in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities, eds. Karen Fjelstad and Nguyen Thi Hien (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2006), 50. The Decree 56-CP of the Cabinet Council of the Government (Hội đồng Chính Phủ) issued on March 18, 1975, set regulations on organizing rituals such as festivals, weddings, and funerals, and also recognized some festivals dedicated to national heroes such as the Hùng Kings, the Trưng sisters, and Trần Hưng Đạo, which were to be preserved as long as the organizers eliminated all superstitious elements.

77. Dror, “Foundation Myth,” 8–11.

78. Phạm Bá Khiem, Đền Hưng và Tin ngưỡng thờ cúng Hưng Vương, 190–207.

79. Dror, “Foundation Myth.”

80. Malarney, Culture, Ritual and Revolution.
81. Field note from a conversation on April 4, 2013, at Hùng Temple.
85. Malarney, “Festivals and the Dynamics.”
89. From the year 2000, the Vietnamese state officially used the title “National Anniversary” [Quốc gió] for what was called “the Hùng Temple Festival” by the population.
90. See Decision 1272/QĐ-TTg on August 12, 2009, by the prime minister, on recognizing special national heritages. See also Khu Di tích Lịch sử Đền Hùng, Truyền thống Khu di tích lịch sử Đền Hùng, 105.
91. For example, temples worshipping the Hùng Kings were rebuilt in 2004 in Lâm Đồng; in 2006 in Cà Mau; in 2012 in Kiên Giang. Also, see more about rebuilt and newly built temples in Phạm Bá Khiêm, Đền Hùng và Tin nguyên thơ cổ cùng Hùng Vương, 190–207.

94. The change in the labor law was approval at the meeting of the Eleventh National Assembly of Vietnam in 2007.


96. Ibid.

97. Ibid., 15.


99. Ibid., 7.

100. The motif of a sacred site located on the mountain is found throughout Vietnam. The mountain is considered sacred landscape as the reflection of the center of the universe. Circumambulation around a sacred mountain is a part of the pilgrimage to a mountain or prayer there. This has been considered to be the influence of Buddhism on Vietnamese indigenous theology. See Đức The Dao, “Buddhist Pilgrimage and Religious Resurgence in Contemporary Vietnam” (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, Seattle, 2008).

101. In Vietnamese: “Chim có tổ, người có tổ,” “Uống nước nhỏ nguồn,” “Một cây làm chẳng lên non, ba cây chửm lại nên hòn núi cao.”

102. “Đồng bào” literally means people who come from the same womb of a mother. This is a Vietnamese word that has its origins in the Chinese word “tongbao.”


104. Not every visitor to the Hùng Temple is offered a temple badge. During my fieldwork, I observed that staff of the management department often gave it only to members of state official delegations or VIP guests.

105. Some temple keepers told me that they do provide bottles of water to normal visitors, but that they take the water from outside resources and make a ritual to the deities before serving the bottles to common guests. Author’s field notes, 2012.


107. Brett, Construction of Heritage, 156.


109. In Jellema’s research, “về nguồn” or the “returning to the origin” movement refers to Vietnamese who have migrated away from their village and return to
pay tribute to their hometown or village, or are bringing money home or
investing in the home place. See also Jellema, “Returning Home.” A visit to the
Hùng Temple is also interpreted as an action of “returning to the origin.”


11. See Phuc-Anh Nguyen’s online review of Xu Fangyu, 2019, https://har-
vard-yenching.org/features/study-vietnamese-beliefs-hung-king (accessed
July 15, 2019).

12. This is separate from the Hùng Kings’ anniversary that has been maintained
for years in some countries by Vietnamese refugees and political organizations
related to the Republic of Vietnam.

13. From the initial idea of journalist Dr. Bích Yế, who was working at the
Vietnamese embassy in Poland, the project of the “Vietnam Ancestral Global
Day” has been approved and has been running since 2016. In 2019, the
Vietnam Ancestral Global Day started with the organization of the Death
Anniversary of the Hùng Kings (Ngày Giỗ Tổ Hùng Vương) in five countries,
including Laos, Thailand, Japan, Poland, and Canada. Information from
a telephone interview with Dr. Bich Yen on July 28, 2019. See also “Vietnam
vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-ancestral-global-day-to-be-celebrated-in-three-
continents/150935.vnp (accessed November 7, 2019). Also see the official
Facebook page of the project: www.facebook.com/Cội-nguồn-Việt-Nam-
global-154923675071230/.

14. Thiên Điều, “Hơn 500.000 mâm cỗ cúng vua Hùng ngày giỗ Tổ” [More
than 500,000 Meals Offered to Hùng Kings on the Ancestral Death
Anniversary], 2019, https://tuoitre.vn/hon-500-000-mam-co-cung-vua-
hung-ngay-gio-to-20190413192803164.htm (accessed April 19, 2019).

15. See Malarney, “Festivals and the Dynamics.”


17. Ibid., 138.