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War Elephants, Aura, and Agency:
The Study of Animal Commemoration and Nation-Building in Vietnam

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Southeast Asian Studies

by

Chari Hamratanaphon

June 2020

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Dr. Christina Schwenkel, Chairperson
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Dr. Sally Ann Ness

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The Thesis of Chari Hamratanaphon is approved:

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

War Elephants, Aura, and Agency:
The Study of Animal Commemoration and Nation-Building in Vietnam

by

Chari Hamratanaphon

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Southeast Asian Studies
University of California, Riverside, June 2020
Dr. Christina Schwenkel, Chairperson

Elephants are significant animals in Vietnamese war history. One can see this with elephant statues, which are installed in certain temples for commemoration. In this regard, this research aims to study the role of elephant commemoration practice within spatio-temporal contexts to understand the relationship between people, objects, and animal patriotic imaginaries in Vietnam. It does so through the application of Benjamin's concept of aura and Gell's concept of social agency. Voi Phục Temple and Voi Ré Temple are the main research sites in this field study, which also included interviews and participant observation as methods of data collection. The research found that elephant commemoration does not blur the boundary between human-object and human-animal worship, but introduces a new hierarchy of respect and a new form of practices toward

sacred objects. Certain animal statues, like elephants, maintain their secondary agency, which is transmitted from the power of human deities. The agency has a spiritual, historical, and political effect on worshippers. Moreover, I suggest that the aura of a ritual object is not inherently created through the authentic production process or the object itself, as Benjamin suggests, but is socially constructed and interpreted by worshippers, influenced by the historical imaginaries and the sacred environments of the temples. The mythical and historical narratives involved in creating the aura and agency of the elephant statues are tied to Vietnamese nation-building process, while other external factors, like gender and generation of the worshippers, also affect the meanings and attitudes toward ritual objects. Studying the diverse roles and meanings of elephants not only offers deeper insights into Vietnamese animal symbolism, but also provides an alternative understanding of Vietnamese society on the whole.

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Introduction

"What do you think about elephants?"

I started with a simple question I had prepared, looking at Vân's face while shaking my cup of iced tea. We were sitting on short plastic chairs at a drinks stall located at Voi Phục Temple, Hanoi. Hà, the stall owner, prepared the drinks, putting some ice in a cup, and then handed it to Vân, the female temple caretaker I was talking to. After I informed her that I was a foreign student doing research about elephant statues in Vietnam, the lady kindly replied to me. "Elephants assisted our ancestors in fighting against the enemies (*đánh giặt*) and protecting (*bảo vệ*) Vietnam."

I continued asking about the statues in front of the temple, pointing to them. "What are the elephant statues (*tượng con voi*) at the gate for? Do Vietnamese worship (*thờ*) or commemorate (*nhớ*) those elephants?"

Vân described that the elephant statues were initially built as a representation of the legendary elephants that brought Linh Lang, the main god, to this temple when he was a human military general serving the country long ago. The god is widely worshipped in the area, and the elephants are also respected (*tôn trọng*) by the temple visitors. Vân added that incense sticks, a common ceremony material used in Vietnam, would be burned and placed in front of the statues in order to show reverence to the elephant spirits.

"These elephants *có công* then we worship them." Hà, the drinks stall owner of the same age as the caretaker, joined the conversation and pointed out that *có công* is a shared quality of reverend objects for the Vietnamese. The word *công* interested me. In

the nationalist sense, this Vietnamese word literally means an accrual of meritorious contributions or military services that a person, or a certain kind of animals, yielded in wars (Schlecker 2013, 86-87). Obviously, this word is attached to a nation-building implication.

I walked back to the gate where an elephant statue stood on either side. The statues, in a kneeling posture, were placed under roof covers, with an incense burner in front of them. Plastic money plates, similarly to the plates on the altars to gods, were put next to the burners, with some small amount of money on them. A middle-aged man walking pass the gate made a nod to each of the elephant statues. The action showed that the temple visitor acknowledged and recognized the existence of the statues. This action made me wonder: How do people commemorate and interact with statues of elephants? What are some significant attributes of the elephants that urge people to show respect to them? And do these statues bear any spiritual, historical, or political meanings to the Vietnamese who visit the temple?

Tượng Ông Voi: The Study of Aura and Agency of Elephant Statues in Vietnam

In this thesis, I argue that some groups of people in certain places in Vietnam practice elephant commemoration. The visitors of those places commemorate the elephants by practicing "*chào*" gestures. This consists of placing their hands together in front of the chest to greet the statues in a respectful manner. It also consists of putting incense sticks in the burners in front of elephant statues, or making other offerings. Elephant statues are the medium that links Vietnamese visitors with the spirits of war

elephants, as embedded in their historical past. Each year, elephant statues are a part of the ceremony to commemorate national heroes, like in Hai Bà Trưng Temple, Mê Linh District in Hanoi.

Elephant commemoration is an interesting spiritual practice in Vietnam due to several unique reasons. First, elephants played an enormous role in history, culture, and religious belief in Vietnam (Cao 2011, 104). In national legends, elephants were used during ancient wars to bring many historical figures, like Hai Bà Trưng, Bà Triệu, and Trần Hưng Đạo, to victory in fighting against foreign enemies. Thus, the images of elephants are always depicted in association with national heroes (Cao 2011, 104). Moreover, elephants historically symbolized the royal families in Vietnam (Hoàng 2014; Hồ 1996; Nguyễn 2000). Therefore, the representation of elephants in contemporary society, and how people perceive, remember, and interact with them, are some good issues to look at to understand ritual practices today. As Mertz (2007) suggests that analyzing systematically the meanings of things within a social context allows anthropologists to understand more deeply about what people spiritually, culturally, and politically value, studying the elephants' representations might be an alternative way to look into Vietnamese society and culture.

Secondly, although elephants are considered an endangered species and not commonly seen in Vietnam today (Do and Sanriapillai 1991, 4) except in the highland areas (*cao nguyên*), elephant commemoration is still continually practiced in some temples and historical places. Interestingly, most of these commemorated elephants are battle elephants from ancient wars. Many of my informants admitted that they mostly

knew elephants from historical war narratives. Besides these war narratives, there are not many detailed stories concerning elephants except in folk tales and songs sung by children; for example, a song called *Chú Voi Con Ở Bản Đôn* (Little Elephant in Bản Đôn). This implies that elephants are relatively minor historical figures that are generally recognized and associated with war. Since war narratives, in many cases, are promoted for the state's nationalist ideologies (Roszko 2012), I therefore argue that elephant commemoration is deeply connected with Vietnamese nation-building projects.

Based on the significance of elephant commemoration in Vietnam, the study aims to answer three research questions by determining 'aura' and 'agency' of the elephant statues that are commemorated in temples within their spatio-temporal contexts, as the following. What roles do war elephants play in animal commemoration or ritual practice in Vietnam? What roles do the elephants play historically and symbolically in Vietnamese nation building and how have the attitudes toward elephants changed over time? And what is the relationship between the elephant statues (objects), Vietnamese people (humans), and the sociocultural context in which they are emplaced?

The research methodology for this study was ethnographic. It consisted of interviews with Vietnamese temple caretakers, temple visitors, and local residents. In addition, it involved participant observation at temples, and archival research regarding war elephants both in local libraries in Vietnam and online archives. I conducted a one-month field study at two temples: Voi Phục Temple, Hanoi, in northern Vietnam, and Voi Ré Temple, Huế, in central Vietnam.

In what follows, I base my analysis on Benjamin's notion of 'aura' and Gell's theory of 'agency' of artwork, and apply these ideas to the analysis of practices of elephant commemoration. Although Benjamin (1969) proposes that the aura resides in original objects, I argue that the aura of the elephant statues is neither originated from the traditional production process nor inherited in the particular authentic object itself, but is socially and culturally constructed by the spatial conditions of the temples themselves. In other words, the aura is place-based. This means that visitors actively interpret the meanings of the elephants, depending on their locations at religious sites and the historical narratives to which they were connected. Gender and generation of visitors also strongly influenced the meanings they attached to the elephants as ritual temple objects.

In terms of agency (Gell 1998), I suggest that the elephant statues maintain their status as 'secondary agents,' non-self-sufficient agents that borrow their agency from external sources, like primary agents, e.g., human gods (Geertz and Jensen 2014, 233). The statues bridge people and the historical elephant imaginaries together. The efficaciousness and spiritual agency are partly transmitted from the human deities of the same space. The agency has spiritual, historical, and political effects on visitors. In addition to being both objects and animal representations, the elephant statues introduce a new form of commemorative practice toward sacred objects that differs in particular ways from the practices for human deities.

In addition, based on my findings, war narratives retold in Vietnamese society have radically strengthened the elephants' aura and agency as depicted in the viewpoints of the temple visitors, similarly to the role of spirit mediums in some studies (Kendell,

Vũ, and Nguyễn 2010; Lin 2015). This research affirms that animal commemoration takes part in Vietnamese belief system, and plays a strong role in Vietnamese nation-building process by supporting the ideology of nationalism, heroism, and patriotism through historical narratives that are given expression through religious beliefs and ritual practices.

Elephants are backdrops in Vietnamese history as shown in some historical narratives and legends. But most attention to animals focus on the four mythical creatures (Chonchirdsin 2016; Minh 2015; To 2013). Scarcely studied by scholars, elephant commemoration thus introduces a new form of spiritual connections between the Kinh[1] population and legendary animals. This research shows that non-mythical animals are also recognized in sacred spheres, especially for their contribution to serving the country, based on Vietnamese moral systems. Compared to the mythical animals, different meanings are given to elephants, however. In addition, this study provides details about commemorative practices in Vietnamese folk religions, including deification process, agency, religious beliefs and rituals practiced by local people. It suggests that animal spirits have their own certain level and kind of agency.

Besides religious aspects, this study offers a new perspective on nation-building strategies in Vietnam as tied to spiritual practices. The Vietnamese state has long promoted anti-superstition campaigns, banning spiritual practices, which they view as obstacles against modernization. However, commemoration of national heroes is allowed,

[1] **Kinh** is the majority ethnic group in Vietnam today. According to the Vietnamese government's demographic data in 2019, 85.3 percent of the population of Vietnam is ethnic Kinh (Thành 2019). The term can be used interchangeably with "Viet" people (*người Việt/dân tộc Việt*) (Taylor 2002, 86).

and indeed promoted, because it supports the nationalist ideology (Kendell 2011; Roszko 2010; Schwenkel 2018). This study on elephant commemoration emphasizes the connection between the state and commemoration, showing that reproducing 'sacrifice' discourse politically benefits the nation-building process in Vietnam, and the state seems to support commemoration practice of both human deities and non-human spirits who served the nation in warfare (Kean 2013; Schwenkel 2018). Elephants are included, I argue. Animals, according to my findings, become new characters in Vietnamese nation-building projects, in addition to human heroes.

Animal Symbolism: How Are Studies of Animals Important to Vietnamese Studies?

Anthropologists have long been studying the symbolic meanings of animals, suggesting that animal symbolism reflects human attitudes, experiences, and societies across time and space, not only for small communities but also for complex societies (Herrmann et al. 2013; Lawrence 1995, 302; Löfgren 1985, 207). According to Lévi-Strauss (1962, cited in Benavides 2013), animals have been used by humans to "handle or overcome the contradictions, ambiguities, and oppositions perceived in the surrounding environment." Therefore, stories of animals and how humans perceive of or interact with animals, and their representations have implications for the socio-cultural environment, human practice, and belief system in specific cultures.

Animal symbolism has been presented in all cultures and takes part in many aspects of human life (Löfgren 1985, 207). In most societies, animals receive a variety of social and religious responses, "ranging from worshipful admiration to ambivalence to

revulsion" (Herrmann et al. 2013). Animals are connected with humans in multiple ways, especially in myths, folk stories, and some visual forms (Benavides 2013; Hermann et al. 2013). Besides reflecting human societies, animals have been used for different purposes; for example, in the study of Benavides (2013), the images of animals are represented through folk narratives for environmental and educational purposes. These anthropological studies show the significance of animal symbolism studies; there are social and semiotic implications hidden behind the animal images we perceive in everyday life.

Vietnamese society is not an exception; animals also play a significant role in cultural practices, especially in religious beliefs. In fact, Vietnam has rich animal symbolism. For example, similar to other Southeast Asians, many Vietnamese people, believe in mythical and sacred animals. The four significant ones are the dragon, unicorn, turtle, and phoenix, which symbolize power, intellect, longevity and nobility respectively. The images of these four sacred animals, as integral parts of Vietnam's culture and identities (Nguyen 2015), can be found on various objects in Vietnam ranging from imperial edicts and paintings, decorative figures in palaces and temples, to clothes and utensils (Chonchirdsin 2016; Minh 2015; To 2013). There are also many Vietnamese legends or tales which are related to these sacred animals, like *Lạc Long Quân's story*, which tells about a dragon prince who was the Vietnamese's ancestor, and the *legend of Hoàn Kiếm Lake*, in which an emperor returns the magical sword to the turtle god.

Besides the four sacred animals, temples in Vietnam are decorated with other images of symbolic animals. For example, tiger images are always placed next to dragon

images, based on the concept of Yin and Yang in Vietnamese belief. In some cases, tigers and dragons are worshipped with incense sticks and some fruits, as I found in Quan Đế Temple in Hanoi's old quarter, while they are used as decorative images on the gate of Ngọc Sơn Temple, also in Hanoi. Bats are another common image in religious spaces, which are always displayed on the upper part of main buildings in temples, symbolizing good fortunes.

The examples show the strong connection between humans and animal symbols in Vietnam. These sacred animals are treated like the potent amulets in Tambiah's study (1984) that people place in cars to mitigate the anxiety of travel insecurity. Similarly, sacred animal representations in Vietnam, as suggested by Lévi-Strauss (1962, cited in Benavides 2013), are used to cope with the uncertainty people are facing. The auspicious and positive meanings given to each animal in sacred spaces mirror people's desires for peace, prosperity, and stability.

Some Vietnamese people pay their respects to non-magical animals. According to a young museum curator I met in Hanoi, Vietnamese farmers revere (*thờ*) water buffaloes and cows for their hard work after the planting season ends. Phương, one of my interviewees, also stated, "The Vietnamese revere water buffaloes or cows, but not in a spiritual way." The interviews illustrate a different form of human/non-human relationship. In this case, agricultural contribution, which is included as human moral code of reciprocity, is the key reason for reverence that allows the animals to be given a higher status than humans' for a certain period of time. This implies that animals are not

only associated with human cultural systems, but that human and animal worlds are integrated, mutually interdependent, and co-constitutive.

Elephants, the main subject of this study, also underline the relationship between humans and non-humans in both aspects presented above; they are commemorated for their contributions in wartime[2] and also for their spiritual agency, which allows people conquer uncertainty and feel more secure in everyday life (Cao 2011, 104). Because they are though to possess agency and power, as I found at the research site, some people asked the elephant statues for happiness and success, not unlike the elephants' own success in war. That is, the animals' good deeds and accomplishment are then transferred to the supplicants as their magical potency. In addition, I propose later in this paper that elephants are viewed as temple guardians that people need to greet (*chào*) before entering the temple. This shows the complex connection between temple visitors and elephants as shaped by Vietnamese culture, which reflects collective needs of nation building and individual needs for betterment, success, and well-being.

Elephants also exemplify a particular manifestation of animal symbolism in Vietnam that differs from the four sacred creatures. Because of their size and might, elephants symbolized power, prestige, and prosperity of royal families in the past.

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[2] In this case, the wars are ancient wars. Elephants also played a role in contemporary wars; for example, in the battle of Quan Trung (Nguyễn Thái Huệ) against Chinese troop in the 18th century or in the World War II (Cao 2011). However, they are not commonly mentioned in historical narratives.

In the history of *Hổ Quyền*[3], for example, the elephant-tiger fighting arena located in Huế, elephants had never lost to tigers, which symbolized enemies (Phan 2000, 167). It was reported that if someone killed elephants or caused their deaths, that person would be punished (Association des Amis du Vieux Hué 1922). The symbolic prestige of elephants indicates the status of royal families in the past. However, as only one of my interviewees mentioned, because of the revolution and the overthrow of feudalism, this meaning—and the importance of elephants more broadly—has largely disappeared, together with the significance of Vietnamese royal families.

In brief, I argue that the study of elephants in the framework of animal symbolism offers an alternative approach to understanding changing beliefs in Vietnamese history and contemporary society. As Benavides (2013) and Kean (2013) suggest, the way non-human sentient beings are represented tell us about the human life and cultural practice because animal images are made up from, or influenced by, human conditions, ethical rules, and aesthetic systems throughout the world.

Thesis Overview

In what follows, I present my detailed findings, explanations, and analysis. I begin with a *theoretical overview*, in which I discuss the main theoretical frameworks applied to the study of elephants in Vietnam: that of Benjamin's notion of aura (1969) and Gell's

[3] **Hổ Quyền**, or Tiger Fighting Arena, located in Huế, can support this idea. The royal arena was built in 1830 to host gladiatorial battles between elephants and tigers for the entertainment of the emperors and their courtiers. Elephants symbolized power and prestige of the royal family as they were always used in warfare. Because of this, tigers, symbolizing enemies, had never won over the elephants they fought with. It is said that tigers were constrained without food. People removed their fangs and claws to ensure that they would not beat the elephants. The fight became popular among royal families, especially in the reign of Minh Mạng.

concept of agency (1998). This is followed by a brief review of other related studies of art and ritual objects, Vietnamese religious beliefs, and animal commemoration that have influenced my analysis. The subsequent section on *research methodology* describes my research methodology and my fieldwork experiences, including my main research sites. I also critically reflect on some of the research limitations affecting my field study.

The details on my research findings and analysis are divided into three main sections, discussing levels of commemoration, place-based aura, and time-based agency, respectively. In the first section, I describe the general picture of elephant commemorative practice in my research sites, and argue that elephants are treated on a different level from human deities and ordinary animals in what I call a '*chào*' manner based on a unique linguistic terminology. In the subsequent section on *place-based aura*, I demonstrate the relationship between elephant statues and the spatial contexts in which they are emplaced as temple guardians. Here I emphasize *relationality*, that is, the potency of sacred elephants is dependent on, and in relation to, the sacred places that they inhabit. In the last section on *time-based agency*, I focus on the agency of elephant statues as an effect of time; that is, I show how historical narratives affect the way people interpret, value, and interact with the elephants. I suggest that the efficacy of elephants in historical wars is transformed into spiritual agency, giving the ability of elephants to grant specific wishes to people.

Lastly, to conclude the research results, I recapture some ideas presented in former sections and connect my findings with a larger context of animal commemoration and nation building, and the importance of these narratives for Vietnamese Studies.

Theoretical Overviews

Since the research focuses on the relationship between worship objects and people's perception, I review in this section some related theoretical frameworks and research works, which shape and inspire my way of thinking and analyzing. The studies and theories can be divided into three groups: (1) Theories of ritual objects relating to aura and agency, (2) Studies on religious beliefs and worship of spirits in Vietnam, and (3) Studies on animal commemorations and different forms of animal representations. Benjamin's concept of aura and Gell's concept of social agency are emphasized as the main theoretical frameworks of this study.

Theories of Ritual Objects Relating to Aura and Agency

Anthropologists, philosophers, and scholars have long written about ritual objects. However, in this research, I determine Benjamin's concept of aura and Gell's concept of agency as the main theoretical frameworks. This is because elephant statues, as the main subject of the study, maintain their status as an artwork, a religious object, and also a history-related object.

Walter Benjamin (1969), in his well-known article entitled *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, discusses mainly about mechanical mass-production of artworks. In this article, Benjamin demonstrates several changing images and forms of artworks in several aspects as results of technology, such as authenticity, aura, and art production development over time. The idea mentioned and cited by many scholars is the

concept of ‘aura.’ The authentic aura is attached to an original handmade artwork, which cannot be reproduced. Without the aura, an object loses its high aesthetic values.

Benjamin introduces and defines the term ‘aura’ of any artwork as follows:

> The definition of the aura as a “unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be” represents nothing but the formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of space and time perception. Distance is the opposite of closeness. The essentially distant object is the unapproachable one. Unapproachability is indeed a major quality of the cult image. True to its nature, it remains “distant, however close it may be.” The closeness which one may gain from its subject matter does not impair the distance which it retains in its appearance. (Benjamin 1969, 21)

For Benjamin, *aura* is a unique aesthetic characteristic attached to an original work of art, especially in ritual spaces. The aura comes from the uniqueness and authenticity of the particular work. He argues that the original version of an artwork seen in the right place and proper time is the authentic art which has an unreproducible aura. In addition, by comparing original objects or arts to reproduced ones, he argues that mass production decays the aura. For example, in stage plays, the aura of the performance is destroyed when people watch the play through the camera lens, as it is in photographs, films, and paintings.

Based on Benjamin’s work, ‘aura’ arises from two key factors: place and time. Each of these factors has its specific description that we need to interpret carefully. First, *place*, as mentioned in his endnote, means distance between the object of art and the viewers. He gives an example of a mountain range’s aura; we experience the aura of the mountain because of the unique phenomenon of distance. In other words, since the viewers cannot approach the original work of art, aura exists. On the contrary, the mass-

produced artwork, aimed to bring the artwork spatially close to the viewers, loses its aura because there is no distance between them. For Benjamin, "reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by unarmed eyes" (Benjamin 1969, 5). In this case, the right place, which leads to the aura construction process, means unapproachability of an object.

Time is another factor in creating the aura of an object. Time and authenticity come together. According to Benjamin, "the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to the testimony of the history which it has experienced." In other words, the aura of an authentic object exists because the situation of the object can be traced back to its origin, history, handmade production and the change of ownership (Benjamin 1969, 4-5), which is contrary to Marx's idea of commodity fetishism which focuses more on the use value and the exchange value of the mass-produced commodity. Mass-produced artworks are not attached to history, which is an aspect of time, leading to a lack of authenticity. In this case, the concept of *authenticity* could be considered as one important key term when it comes to aura. This authenticity supports the idea that the original art object wields a kind of irreplaceable authority.

The concept of 'aura' has been directly mentioned in many studies of ritual arts and sacred objects, for example, the studies of Vũ (2008) and Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn (2010). Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn, in *Beautiful and Efficacious Statues: Magic, Commodities, Agency and the Production of Sacred Objects in Popular Religion in Vietnam* illustrate the relationship between people and sacred objects, especially statues

of gods. According to the ritual masters they interviewed, meticulous and pure production methods can make religious statues more powerful. The authors argue that complicated modern markets after anti-superstition campaign allows people to have choices to consume spiritual objects, and describes some conflicts between ready-made statues and traditionally made ones, which possess more magical power (*linh*) and aura. According to them, the production process, including producers, materials used, and purity, affects the efficaciousness of the objects. They show the relationship between people's faith, sacred images, and social events in each area. Moreover, the authors observe differences of the meanings between animated and activated sacred objects that show two different levels of efficaciousness. The aura in this study comes from Benjamin's theorization that the aura is connected to an authenticity deriving from traditional production processes. Ready-made objects have less efficaciousness, aura, and magical power compared to traditionally made objects.

Similarly, Vũ (2008) in *Amulets and the Marketplace* mentions the problematic differences between mass-produced amulets and traditionally made ones. The author mostly focuses on arts and designs by talking to many ritual masters about the amulet-making process, their attitudes and opinions about Vietnamese amulets, and changes in the amulet market. Vũ describes her own experience in using amulets as a customer. Main form of amulets she studied is woodblock printing. Her article discusses the use of amulets based on the ritual masters she interviewed. She argues that amulets first rose to prominence because of people's feelings of instability. Although the society has changed, people still need amulets to deal with modern problems, such as economic or health risks.

The author illustrates how the cult of amulets is associated with state permission and anti-superstition campaigns during 1957-1958. In addition, the process of making amulets, the strict practice of ritual masters, and amulet elements are described in detail. She also mentions a conflict between mass products and amulets made by ritual masters, in terms of efficacy, ingredients, and prices, while ritual masters adjust themselves to respond to the market demands. In other words, amulets traditionally made by the ritual masters contain more 'aura' and efficacy.

Considering related studies conducted outside Vietnam, Tambiah (1984) in *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism*, also discusses the issue of efficaciousness of Thai amulets. In his study, Tambiah specifically examines the amulets of Thailand (most of which are made by, or connected to, Buddhist monks). He specifically studies the different categories of amulets as well as the hagiography of the forest saints portrayed on the amulets and the use of amulets in different purposes. The author particularly focuses on the hagiography part, comparing and interpreting the stories behind the amulets in interesting ways; narratives are a main factor of the amulets' efficaciousness. Although Tambiah does not mention the concept of aura in his book, we can assume that people use 'amulets' because of their spiritual aura. The aura, according to Benjamin, always comes together with efficaciousness. In this case, aura can be found in original objects made by sacred figures. The aura resides in a particular object, as the author mentions that people also place amulets in vehicles to protect them when traveling. The concept of authenticity is still applied here, although the *place* of the object can be questioned.

On the other hand, some theorists disagree with the idea that aura resides in art objects; it instead resides in social contexts. For instance, Adorno (1997, 127-128) proposes the concept of truth content of artworks. He states that the spiritual value of an artwork cannot be identified through its physical form; it needs humans' interpretations to give it meaning. As he notes, "[w]hat transcends the factual in the artwork, its spiritual content, cannot be pinned down to what is individually, sensually given but is, rather, constituted by way of this empirical giveness" (1997, 129). According to Adorno, the aura might not reside in the object itself; rather, it is socially constructed.

Another theoretical framework that informs my thinking on social agency is that raised by Gell (1998). Gell describes the connection between agents and patients, in relation to humans and society. The agents and patients can be divided into two positions, active and passive, with four sub-elements: index, artist, prototype, and recipient, which can describe all the interactions between art objects and things. He mainly discusses artifacts' status, proposing that art objects can be considered as a potential social agent who exercises social agency depending on the relational context (Gell 1998, 7). Therefore, objects like elephant statues in my study can be well-treated as social agents.

According to Gell's description, *agency* "is originated from objects which are seen as initiating causal sequences or events, caused by will or intention, while an *agent* is "the one who 'causes events to happen' in their vicinity" (Gell 1998, 16). In the case of art objects, certain events transpire from the interaction between people and the objects. For instance, Gell argues that religious objects contain an "index of agency" which makes people react to and believe in them. Idols in Hindu temples are an example; each devotee

"allows his or her attention to be attracted to the index, and submits to its power, appeal, or fascination, responding to the agency inherent in the index" (Gell 1998, 31). The devotees are the *Recipient* (A) and the god images are the *Agent* (P) who exhibits passive agency (Gell 1998, 129). In this case, the agency of the idols is spiritual.

The hierarchy of social agency is an interesting point Gell makes. Based on this theory, art objects are 'secondary' agents in relation to certain human associates. This second-class agency is acquired when the objects are "enmeshed in a texture of social relationship" (Gell 1998, 17). In addition, external and internal strategies also take part in creating objects' agency (Gell 1998, 128). Rethinking ritual objects, the objects are not 'self-sufficient' agents as humans are, but secondary agents bridging the worshippers with other things like, in the case of Vietnam, spirits, gods, or national heroes.

Anthropologists working on ritual objects and spirits use Gell's theories of art as the foundation for their theoretical frameworks. For example, Lin (2015) studies agency in the god statues and the role of spirit mediums in Taiwan as the main significant material forms of deities, analyzing the power of a deity from the perspective of materialization. Using Gell's framework, Lin argues that the dynamic existence of the spirit mediums and the static god statues confederate to react to contingencies and devotees' needs. The ability in serving the needs is agency. She points out that cultural mechanisms, personification, and localization bestow power and efficacy (*ling*) upon a god statue (Lin 2015, 51). Interestingly, Lin brings up internal and external agency mentioned by Gell to discussion, exemplified by two rituals relating to the statues of

Chinese gods: the carving rituals (internal agency) and the birth rituals performed by the villagers (external agency).

In the same way, Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn (2010) emphasize the agency of the wooden temple statues, together with the role of spirit mediums. They thoroughly describe the production process of rendering the statues in order to create animated, sacred, and agentive attributes. They find, as a result, that the devotees spiritually experience the agency and obey the social rules laid down for the statues. The concepts of static statues and dynamic spirit mediums are also portrayed in an interview (Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn 2010, 62).

According to Gell's model and other related studies, topics associated with agency of objects require rethinking; for example, the relationship between agents-recipients, the concept of secondary agent, hierarchy of agency, external and internal agency, and other additional factors involved in creating social agency in relation to the temporal context of animal commemoration. Considering the elephant statues, it is interesting to ask whether the statues are also treated as social agents that connect the worshippers with either other historical entities or larger abstract concepts like national independence—concepts that exist beyond the static objects themselves. In addition, Gell's concept of agency asks how ritual objects affect or relate to the recipients, and what other factors involved in the creation process of agency are. I suggest later in this paper that historical narratives are one of the factors playing a role similar to the spirit mediums stated in the above-mentioned studies.

Studies on Religious Beliefs and Worship of Spirits in Vietnam

"The Vietnamese can worship anything. We believe that everything around us has *linh*. Big trees have *linh*. The statues of white horses and white elephants also have *linh*. Then we need to pay respect to them, by putting the incense sticks like this." Hùng, a temple caretaker sitting in a worship building at Huyền Trân Temple (*Đền thờ Huyền Trân công chúa*) in Huế, told me after I asked him about the white elephant statue placed in front of the building.

The word *linh* impressed me each time I talked with Vietnamese informants about the reasons for their worship. This word literally means "efficacy" or "spiritual power" (Đỗ 2003, 10). Like in many Southeast Asian countries, a big old tree is believed by Vietnamese people to have either spiritual power or a protective spirit residing in it (Arhem and Sprenger 2016, 128-134; Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn 2010, 74). I then realized that, besides gods or historical heroes, many Vietnamese people pay respect to anything they believe to have *linh*.

The first things Vietnamese people would think about when I asked about *linh* are gods (*thần* or *thánh*) and sacred places like temples (*đền* or *miếu*). Gods with efficaciousness are said to be sacred (*linh thiêng*). Since the elephant statues, my research subject, are placed in temples as sacred objects—especially the ones at Voi Ré Temple, which symbolize historical elephants as gods—it is necessary for me to review previous studies on religious worship practices in Vietnam.

Đỗ (2003) describes religious phenomena in Vietnam thusly: millenarianism, deification, Sinicization, Vietnamification, etc. He illustrates that Vietnamese gods are a

mixture of multiethnic religious narratives and figures, as we can see some common practices between Vietnam and other countries in mainland Southeast Asia, especially Thailand and Cambodia. This demonstrates religious relationships and influences between countries and the significance of historical and mythical narratives.

Phạm (2009) discusses Trần Hưng Đạo[4] as both a historic hero and a high-leveled god worshipped among the Vietnamese, especially the northern people. Phạm indirectly shows how folk cultures, like spirit possessions, legends, and religious practices, have been challenging and changing in this dynamic world. To clarify, Trần Hưng Đạo, as a historical figure, became a god figure of worship, representing the relationship of historical and religious spheres in Vietnam.

Similarly, Schwenkel (2018) studies historical figures worshipped in two religious places: Quang Trung Temple and Ông Hoàng Mười Temple, showing a blurry boundary between *nhớ* (secular memory) and *thờ* (divine worship). She argues that late modernity is shaped by spiritual beliefs, and sometimes the state 'turns a blind eye' to superstitious practices for political benefits as it affirms the legitimacy of Vietnamese national history and helps construct Vietnamese cultural identity.

Referring to the three studies mentioned above, historical aspects and historical narratives take part in the process of gods' image creation. However, local legends, whose origins cannot be proven, also support god creation. In some cases, the images of gods are not in the form of human-like statues, but in other forms like rocks or stones.

[4] **Trần Hưng Đạo** was a well-known military commander in the 13th century who protected Vietnam from the Mongol invasions under Kublai Khan. He was respected by Vietnamese descendants as a great national hero.

Nguyễn (2017) in *Stone Symbol in Vietnamese Legends* studies stone worship in relation to the Vietnamese legends of Kỳ Thạch phu nhân and Thai Dương phu nhân, and the creation of rock goddess ("mother" deity). In this study, she analyzes the formal narrative structure of the Vietnamese legends along with the practice of stone worship. Based on her findings, the borrowing of stone nature gives new meaning to the characters in the legends. The legends also demonstrate a complicated harmonious combination of all religions and other cultures in stone symbol, leading to stone-worship in different ways. This raises an interesting question: Do the narratives of historical elephants affect the way people perceive the elephant statues?

Studies on Animal Commemoration and Forms of Animal Representations

Various representations of heroes are mentioned and studied by anthropologists, but not many people pay attention to animal commemoration (Kean 2013, 238).
A majority of studies on animal commemoration are unavoidably connected to wars since warfare seems to be the space when animals' contributions most meet human moral standing, and where sentiment toward animal sacrifice is mostly created. This leads to the practice of remembrance. In Europe, war animal memorialization is officially promoted in some certain countries in dedication to their meritorious contributions in contemporary wars, raising questions on patriotic moral boundaries and human-animal relationship in war (Johnston 2012; McLennan 2018; Snyders 2015).

Some significant studies elucidate the ways that animal commemoration creates a new class of patriotic heroes in wars and merges the boundary between human/non-human worlds in public remembrance. Johnston (2012) discusses the relationship

between patriotic culture and animals, pointing out the sacrificing roles of animals, including dogs, horses, elephants, and mules, forced to serve in human warfare. According to Johnston, animal commemoration practices blur the boundary between human and non-human by merging animals into the patriotic moral and political orbits. As he notes, "[w]ith animal memorials, a new manifestation of sacrifice and a new class of 'heroes' enter the patriotic universe" (Johnston 2012, 361). In his study, animals could be treated in the same moral standard of humans, although there are some limitations.

Following Johnston, Snyders (2015), studying war carrier pigeon memorialization aimed to commemorate the pigeons' contribution on their own merits during the First World War, argues that the pigeon commemoration "broke new ground in terms of the subject that it honoured"; it further represented the special relationship between humans and animals, whose "destiny [is] unavoidably tied to human affairs" (2015, 146). The promotion of non-human war commemoration started from the human moral obligation "to equally commemorate the wartime sacrifices of non-human animals and to affirm their 'equal moral worth'" (Snyders 2015, 138). However, despite the official installations of traditional monuments for the pigeons like the ones in France and Belgium, pigeons were recognized as 'unknown soldiers,' and criticism leveled against non-human animal memorialization also arose.

Another important study is the study of McLennan (2018), who discusses the concept of public remembrance of non-human animals, exemplified by a case study in Ottawa, Canada, wherein military animals were commemorated for their contributions in wars. In this case, as in the previous two studies mentioned above, the commemoration

practice raises some significant questions on the basis of moral standing and moral boundaries whether human and non-human are equally treated on the same standard (2018, 74). In addition, interestingly, McLennan notes that although people hold animals at a lower status compared to human beings thanks to speciesism, certain species of animals, like military animals, are included in the 'tribe' (2018, 79-80). This later note means that people can commemorate certain levels of animals that are imagined as existing in between humans and ordinary animal classes. This matches with Löfgren (1985: 199-200) who suggests that new moral hierarchies of the animal world (introduced in the 19th century) make some kinds of animals better for people to identify and empathize.

While Johnston and McLennan demonstrate the blurry boundaries of moral agency between animals and humans, Kean (2013) proposes that the practice of animal memorialization represents unequal agency between humans and animals. Focusing more on human agency over war animals, she notes that animals seem to have their agency recognized through the committing of heroic actions in wars; they are described as 'having no choice' to participate in the wars. Animal representations are also sometimes used as a narrative device for recounting the experiences of soldiers at war. Further, animal memorials are trapped under the discourses of 'service and sacrifice', and the commemorated animals are only the animals that serve and die with love, loyalty, and faith, alongside the military forces (Kean 2013, 248). Nevertheless, Kean leaves the interpretation of animal commemoration open, as she suggests that the meanings of

animal commemoration are differently conveyed, depending on forms of commemoration and location.

Previous scholarship on human-animal relations raise certain questions on human and animal agency in commemoration practices, particularly with regards to temporal and spatial contexts. Here, it is important to determine not only the relationship between humans and animals in wars, but also classes, social hierarchy, and the intimacy levels of the commemorated animals. Using Gell's framework, I would ask the following questions. Where on the range of classes could war elephants in Vietnam be placed? And what could the commemorative representations of elephants, like statues or historical narratives, tell us about animal or human agency in sacred spaces?

Studies on elephant commemoration are scarce. According to a local researcher I met in Huế, there has been a limited amount of research done on elephants because nowadays, people fail to realize their importance. Most research on elephants has been conducted outside of Vietnam. In an important study, Chaiyarat (2017) examines the diachronically changing image representation of elephants in Thai society from both historical and contemporary aspects. Further, he explores the impact of imported western ideas on the changing process in order to understand the problem of representation in people's perception. He specifically explores how people reconstruct, experience, and respond to the elephant images portrayed through simulation and representation. In his research, Chaiyarat demonstrates the complex symbolic system of relationships between people and animals, especially elephants. He notes that elephants, that once played a big role in Thai ancient warfare, have gradually become living objects for tourism and

entertainment. Representations of elephants can be found everywhere in Thailand in the forms of paintings, sculptures, and souvenirs, as such representations have been reproduced to serve consumers' needs. People have recreated some superficial information about elephants to educate or entertain themselves through cultural media and technology. Finally, Chaiyarat argues that tradition, culture, and religion become powerful mechanisms for creating an invisible chain of representation around the animals; for example, worshipped elephant tusks are believed to have sacred power, representing elephants as auspicious animals. Chaiyarat's research shows the relationship between image representations of elephants, people' perceptions, and external factors like western ideas or media and technology. He also mentions elephants in religious and historical contexts. As Vietnam also used elephants in ancient wars, and because some images of elephants have still been installed or portrayed in particular places, Chaiyarat's findings could be comparable to the situation of elephant commemoration in Vietnam in some regards.

In *Thai Elephant Historical Museum*, Pahontap (2012) studies the designs of the elephant museum in Thailand, concluding that the museum uses historical narratives to present important roles of elephants toward the nation and elephant-human relationship. The design of the building and the exhibition spaces encourages people to adopt good attitudes toward Thai elephants after visiting the museum. Pahontap's research presents another form of elephant image construction, indicating the relationship between animals, objects, people (visitors), and historical narratives.

Concerning historical and mythical narratives in portraying roles of elephants, Wongkird (2011), similarly to Pahontap (2012), emphasizes the role of narratives in creating elephant images and connecting them to local people's perceptions. She illustrates the beliefs, symbolic meanings, and mythical values of elephants conveyed through the folktales of Kui people in Surin Province of Thailand to understand how young adults in the village perceive the beliefs about elephants—for instance, the Buddhist origin of elephants, the protective elephant gods, or some elephant-related spells. Wongkird determines the contents of eleven folk tales through conducting in-depth interviews with elephant trainers, scholars, and young adult groups. The researcher finds that those beliefs have been transferred from one generation to another through oral tradition, image representations, performances, ceremonies, and daily-life practices. The younger generation has adopted the practices and appropriated them to fit into the modern world. Moreover, Wongkird suggests that folk tales with superstitious elements play a significant role in connecting animals, nature, and humans together, and transferring cultural legacies to the younger generation in the society.

In conclusion, the reviewed literature raises several key questions for my study on elephant commemoration. The majority of related studies engage with art objects, comparable to the elephant statues I focus on, and provide a wide range of approaches to think about the relationship between people, objects, and historical imaginaries. First, considering the issue of aura, the literature questions the origin of aura. In my opinion, the aura and the efficacy of elephants statues do not internally inherit in the art object itself or depend on authentic/traditional production processes, as some anthropologists

have proposed (Benjamin 1969; Kendell, Vũ, and Nguyễn 2010; Tambiah 1984; Vũ 2008), but are rather culturally tied to human interpretations within some certain spatial and temporal contexts (Adorno 1997). In other words, the respectful aura and the spiritual power as well as the meanings of the elephant statues, based on my study, are socially constructed by the worshippers' imaginaries, resulting in the creation of object agency.

Agency of a sacred animal-commemorated object is another significant point to be included in the discussion. The elephant statues may be viewed in human moral codes (Johnston 2012), but do not receive the same level of commemoration compared to the human heroes (McLennan 2018; Snyders 2015). This might be because they are categorized not only as static objects (Kendell, Vũ, and Nguyễn 2010; Lin 2015) but also as powerless animals (McLennan 2018), which are marginalized in spiritual and memorial practices. Therefore, the concept of "secondary agent" (Gell 1998) can be used to describe the limited agency of the elephant statues in the sacred spaces. Moreover, I am inspired by the idea of hierarchical structures of agency and commemoration to introduce a new form of commemoration (Johnston 2012) in addition to the previous forms found in some studies on Vietnamese commemoration (Schwenkel 2018), which also indicates a different level of intimacy between people and commemorative spirits.

Some reviewed studies raise certain questions about agency acquisition, both internally and externally. Although the agency of elephants statues is not fulfilled by the roles of spirit mediums like the case of some human gods (Kendell, Vũ, and Nguyễn 2010; Lin 2015), I consider narratives as a big supporter of elephants' agency. This is consistent with some scholars' notions that narratives significantly affect Vietnamese

spiritual practices and attitudes toward deified heroes or figures (Đỗ 2003; Nguyễn 2017; Phạm 2009). It is also worth considering the role of third parties, like the state, in restricting spirit rituals and reproducing the narratives and the discourse of animal sacrifice for political purposes (Kean 2013; Schwenkel 2018; Vũ 2008).

Lastly, the reviewed literature also encourages me to explore the connection between other peripheral factors involving the creation of agency. These factors include intergenerational communities of worshippers (Wongkird 2011), elephant representations that have shaped people's imaginaries (Chaiyarat 2017), and specific local contexts (Pahontap 2012) of Vietnamese society, which I would elaborate later in the next sections.

Stepping Into the Field: Research Methods

"Why elephants?" A male curator of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology[5], in his late thirties, asked me when I visited him in one morning of July 2019, then added, "Elephants are not popular (*phổ biến*) here in Vietnam. They all are living in the Central Highlands, or just existed in history." I smiled back and started explaining why I was interested in studying elephant commemoration in Vietnam. It seemed more understandable when he knew that I was not going to study live elephants, but elephant statues and commemoration practices in temples.

The curator was not the only person who questioned me during my fieldwork in Hà Nội and Huế, my main research sites. Many temple visitors also asked me similar

[5] **Vietnam Museum of Ethnology** (Vietnamese: *Bảo tàng Dân tộc học Việt Nam*) is a museum in Hanoi, which focuses on the 54 officially recognized ethnic groups in Vietnam. There is an exhibition on elephants in the Central Highlands (*Tây Nguyên*) of Vietnam, a well-known area for many endangered animals, especially elephants. Recently, the museum has provided a large building for a Southeast Asian cultural exhibition.

questions when I introduced my research. For most Vietnamese people I talked to, elephants have neither influence nor special meaning in their daily living. Based on my interviews, elephants are usually remembered and mentioned only in historical legends regarding ancient wars against foreign invasions, mostly from Chinese dynasties.

These reactions from Vietnamese people challenged my expectation since images of elephants have been portrayed along with Vietnamese national heroes in many historical narratives in textbooks, paintings, and handcrafts as representations of Vietnamese history of wars from the first to the eighteenth centuries. Besides their special connection to the royal family, Bernanose (1922) in a colonial French document mentions some ceramic statues of elephants and sacred horses in the temples of Vĩnh Yên City where they were placed as guardians at the pagoda's entries because these animals signified the sacrificing roles of Vietnamese national warriors. These kinds of statues were also placed on each side of the front gate in other temples. I therefore assumed that there would be many elephant statues in Vietnam, especially in temples.

Besides the representations of elephants mentioned in the historical records, some present-day temples were named with the word "elephants" (*voi*) thanks to the elephant statues placed in the particular temples. These temples include Voi Mẹp Temple in Hà Tĩnh, Voi Phục Temple in Hanoi, and Voi Ré Temple in Huế. The narratives regarding courageous elephants in wars (like Hai Bà Trưng, two well-known Vietnamese heroines) are also reproduced through time. Because of this, 22 elephant statues were installed in the temple of Hai Bà Trưng, in Mê Linh District. Like other religious objects in the temples, these elephant statues are respected with some incense sticks and food offerings

put in front of them. At this point, we could not easily conclude that elephants, despite their current unpopularity, hold minor roles in the Vietnamese's life. I then came up with more questions: How are elephants in secular areas different from elephants in religious areas? What is the significance of the elephant statues in temples to people? And why were only the statues of war elephants tied to historical war narratives portrayed?

Despite many other temples with elephant statues like A Sào Temple or Hai Bà Trưng Temple, to answer my questions, I needed to choose more specific temples to ensure that the places are strongly connected to elephants. In other words, the elephants for my study needed to bear a major role in the historical narratives of the temples rather than a minor one. Two temples were therefore selected for the field research with the following criteria: the name of the temples must contain the word "*voi*"; elephants take important roles in the temple narratives; and the temples must be well known among local people, or at least appear in the name list of important Vietnamese temples in local records. The temples that met my criteria were Voi Phục Temple (*Đền Voi Phục*; Linh Lang Temple) in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam, and Voi Ré Temple (*Điện Voi Ré*; Long Châu Temple) located in Huế, the Vietnamese imperial city. Thanks to my preliminary research, the targeted temples were mentioned through online sources and in some French records, especially the latter one. Two months after planning, I flew to Vietnam to conduct my one-month fieldwork starting from the first day of July 2019.

Field Study at Voi Phục Temple in Hanoi

Anthropologists are trained not to focus exclusively on archival works, but to go to observe, interview, experience, and learn *with* people in the field. As my research topic

required site observations and interviews with local people, I took the bus number 9A from a small hostel in the old street area of Hanoi to Voi Phục Temple, located in Thủ Lệ District.

This temple shares its fence with the entertainment zone of the nearby zoo. The images and sounds of playing machines contrast with the peaceful temple area. Two crouching elephant statues sit on either side of the temple gate with an incense burner and a money plate in front of each statue. According to some archival documents (Lê and Lê 2000; Nguyễn 2015, 196-198; Phòng bảo tồn bảo tàng sở văn hóa Hà Nội 1971) and the information provided on the description board of the temple, Voi Phục Temple, so called Linh Lang Temple among local people, was built in the reign of King Lý Thánh Tông (1054-1072) to worship Hoằng Chân Prince (Linh Lang). He was the legendary national military figure who helped his father fight against invaders from the Chinese Song Dynasty, and sacrificed himself on the banks of Nhu Nguyệt River. There are many different versions of the legend regarding Linh Lang. A version tells that Linh Lang was a heaven's child (*con trời*) who came into the world to help protect the Vietnamese. He asked the king to send the troops and two elephants to fight against the enemies. When the elephants arrived, they knelt down and took Linh Lang to the battlefield before he sacrificed himself in the battle on the riverbank. Another legend tells, the elephants took Linh Lang back from the battlefield. He was successful in defeating the enemies before passing away from sickness (Lê and Lê 2000; Nguyễn 2015). The name "*Voi Phục*" (kneeling/crouching elephants) was derived from the legend, supported by the elephant statues portrayed in kneeling positions. It is interesting that elephants were

evidently mentioned in the narrative as significant supportive characters playing an important role in taking Linh Lang to the battlefield and choosing the location to stop by.

At Voi Phục Temple, I started with site observation. Behind the front gate with the elephant statues, there was a long pathway leading to the main worship buildings. Many men, both young and old, were fishing by a small lake adjacent to the temple. A middle-aged woman set a drinks stall on a spot to serve the needs of those men. She also sold some worship sets consisting of incense sticks, candles, red paper sheets, and snacks. Another temple gate constructed in traditional style was located next to the stall. The main worship buildings, the preparing area, and a small sacred pond were behind this gate. Female caretakers and a few security guards walked in and out of this inner area. I thoroughly observed the people's interactions, temple activities, and commemorating practices. Such practices were directed toward gods' images and sacred objects, especially the elephant statues at the front gate. I describe the above in greater detail later in this paper.

The drinks stall and one of the main worship buildings became my main locations for conducting interviews. On the first day, I stopped at the small drinks stall, asked for iced tea (*trà đá*) (a common drink in Vietnam), and started an informal interview with the stall-owner about her opinions regarding elephant commemoration and temple information. Gradually, other people joined us at the stall. The stall owner, being a friend of the temple caretakers, had stationed her stall here for more than ten years. This made me frequently stop by at the stall to talk to the owner and other temple visitors. I began each interview by introducing myself as a Thai graduate student from a U.S. university

who was there to conduct research on elephant commemoration in Vietnam. I then asked each would-be interviewee for a short interview. Seeing me as a young Asian-looking foreigner trying to speak in Vietnamese, most people were willing to give me their information and opinions. However, as domestic visitors had limited time to talk, I was limited to asking only general questions. These questions related to their temple visits, commemorating practices, and opinions or perceptions about elephants or elephant commemoration. An interview with a temple visitor lasted around 5-20 minutes on average. Longer interviews were taken with the temple caretakers, security guards, and regular visitors. These regular visitors were willing to give more details or further information, and to share their personal experience about the topics. Each interview with this group of informants took 30-60 minutes, starting from general information about the temple, their daily activities in the temple, and their opinions toward elephant commemorations. I decided not to use any voice recorder to avoid making my participants uncomfortable in sharing their opinions. Instead, I took on-site notes, including my daily notes made after I finished my activities at the temple each day. Language limitation occurred here, but was not a serious problem. Most interviewees were kind enough to clarify some difficult words for me.

I found that the busiest day of the temple was the festival day on the 1st and the 15th day of the lunar month because the people usually came to do some ritual practices (*đi lễ*) at the temple to make a wish from the main god called *Linh Lang Đại Vương*. On other days, especially during weekends, the temple was almost empty. Initially, the security guards were suspicious of me due to my regular visits. But after learning that I

was a research student from their neighboring country, they cooperated more readily and even invited me to talk, and accompanied me to observe the rituals in the main hall. It is worth noting that I did not interrupt any worship rituals. I started conversations only with people who were sitting outside the main hall and waiting for their ritual process to be finished.

To avoid gender and age bias in the research, I tried to select my interviewees, both male and female and young and old, as equally as possible. However, I could not control some gendered factors involved in the fieldwork. For example, all caretakers were female while all security guards were male. Most visitors I talked to were males since men tended to wait outside the main hall while women performed rituals in the halls.

I left my two week-long fieldwork at this temple with some gifts for the people who had been very kind and helpful to me, and promised to visit them sometime. Xuân, a helpful caretaker, walked me to the front gate where I put my hands together at the chest to pay respect to the elephant statues. She then said, "You're a good girl. You know what to do and this is called '*tình cảm*' (sensibility)."

Voi Phục Temple in Thủ Lệ District is not the only temple bearing this name in Hanoi. There is another "Voi Phục" Temple in Thụy Khuê District not far from the former temple. Compared to the one in Thủ Lệ, this temple is much smaller with only one main worship building claimed by the bigger one as "minor shrine" (*đền phụ*). I also visited this temple. Similarly to the one in Thủ Lệ, an elephant statue was fixed at either side of the temple gate, but portrayed in a normal standing manner and covered with a small banana tree. There were two old caretakers looking after the temple with no guards.

I spent only three days at Voi Phục Temple in Thụy Khuê because it was just a small shrine. I had an interview with the two caretakers, but they seemed reluctant to communicate. In addition, not many people visited the place, providing me with limited chance to interview any visitors. As the temple was not my main research site, I ended with only an observation of the place and its visitors as well as one 15 to 20-minute informal interview with both caretakers.

Field Study at Voi Ré Temple in Huế

From Hanoi, I took a night-train trip to Huế, the ancient imperial city and old capital of Vietnam, for my destination, "Voi Ré Temple" (*Điện Voi Ré* or *Long Châu Miếu*). Voi Ré Temple is preserved as a historic monument in Huế. Its name means "the temple of roaring elephants" based on a local narrative. The temple was built by Gia Long, the first emperor of Nguyễn Dynasty, in around 19th century CE in dedication to Ô Long, a legendary elephant that died of exhaustion after grieving over the death of its master killed in the battle during Trinh-Nguyen War (1627-1673). The grieving elephant ran from the battlefield back to Huế and died of exhaustion on a hill in Truong Da Village (Đào 2012; Hoàng 2014; Hồ 2006; Nguyễn 2000; Phan 2014). This legend is also mentioned in some French records like Association des Amis du Vieux Hué (1922), which states that the temple was the highest honor for the elephants that had served well for their country. Moreover, the temple is located next to two elephant tombs where the legendary elephants are believed to have been buried by local people in the village at that time. Voi Ré Temple was also dedicated to four courageous elephants killed in the battles: Ré, Bích, Nhĩ, and Bôn. According to Doling (2018, 339-340), Voi Ré Temple is

an old shrine with only one main worship building, constructed in the imperial twin house style. It is said that the place houses the ancestral tablets of 15 famous war elephants that contributed to the Nguyễn forces' great victories. In their honor, there are several commemorative elephant statues installed inside the temple, which has been under the conservation of Huế Monuments Conservation Centre as a part of Huế Monument Complex[6] (Hoàng 2014).

From my hotel in the center of Huế, I rode a rented bicycle for almost six kilometers to Voi Ré Temple. Unfortunately, I realized upon reaching the place that the whole temple, as a part of Huế Monument Complex, was closed for a renovation, making it so both tourists and domestic visitors were unable to enter. Aluminum fences were put across the gate, and there was nobody inside the buildings. The Tiger Arena (*Hổ Quyền*) nearby was also under the renovation project. An officer of Huế Monuments Conservation Centre informed me later that the temple had been closed for many years due to land problems that had yet to be resolved. Due to the closure, I could not get inside for any observation.

I changed plans, and managed to interview some locals around the temple area, asking them general questions about the religious site. However, those people gave me little useful information. A middle-aged man at the sugarcane stall located at the main path leading to the temple did not even know that the temple had been closed for several

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[6] **Huế Monument Complex** is located in the city of Huế. The complex was recognized by UNESCO as an important cultural site, and was added to the list of UNESCO world heritage sites in Vietnam in 1993.

years. This, along with the language barrier (my knowledge of the local dialect was limited), briefly impeded my efforts to collect field data.

Figure 1: An elephant statue at Voi Ré Temple under its enclosure for renovation (Photo by: Chari Hamratanaphon)

In addition to the above-mentioned sites, I found a surprising number of elephant statues at other temples and historical places like Huyền Trân Temple and the royal tombs in Huế. I got some interesting historical narratives about war elephants from Thanh, one of my key informants (who was raised in a historian family and graduated with a degree in local tourism) as well as from some caretakers of the temples we visited. While there, I accidentally met a local scholar working on Vietnamese history for the national government. The data and information I gained from Huế were mostly from informal conversations with locals and a two-hour interview with the local scholar, which I recorded. I also collected important information from the archives of several local libraries (Huế Provincial Library and a library in the University of Huế). In most cases, however, I did the same as I did in Hanoi, taking notes in a small notebook in order not to

interrupt the conversations. I conducted further archival research at the national library in Hanoi after I returned from Huế.

I visited additional historical places related to historical elephants, some of which were recommended by my research participants, to get as much information as possible. The locations included Hai Bà Trưng Temple, Ngự Mountain, Imperial Tombs, and cultural and historical museums. In total, I spent 28 days in Vietnam—14 days in Hanoi and 14 days in Huế. I mostly jotted down all data on my notebook, and then digitally transcribed my notes into my laptop[7]. One limitation during my fieldwork is that I could not communicate well in the Huế dialect, which caused insurmountable limitations whenever I tried interviewing locals. Time was also a constraint. However, I was certain that I could collect adequate data to answer my main research questions.

Thờ Ông Voi: The Practice of War Elephant Commemoration in Vietnam

> A little child walked past the elephant statues, pointing to one of the statues, and innocently shouted, "Elephant (*voi*)!" The woman who came with the boy stopped him from pointing.
>
> [Fieldnotes, Voi Phục Temple, 3 July 2019]

Before I discuss in greater detail the elephant commemoration practices, it is necessary to define the term 'commemoration' in this study. Anthropologists have similar definitions about the term. For instance, Calow (2007, 105) explains commemoration in general as ritual acts of remembrance or collective performances of remembering within specific historical frames. Meanwhile, Dwyer (2004, 435) defines the term as a type of

[7] Every name used in this thesis paper was made up for security purposes while the real names were all censored. The general information, together with pseudonyms, of the main informants is listed in the appendix.

symbolic accretion when narratives are articulated on and through a place, promoting memorial discourses. In most cases, various stakeholders, like states, religious institutions, and local communities participate in the memory work (Frost et al. 2009, cited in Reeves, Bird, and Stichelbaut 2015, 3). The subjects of commemoration are not limited to humans, as certain kinds of animals are also recognized and remembered for their contributions in wars (Johnston 2012; Kean 2013; McLennan 2018; Snyders 2015).

Referring to the reviewed literature on commemoration in Vietnam, scholars agree that wars and memory are the key foundations of the practices. Commemoration, as a result of the memory process, is an act of honoring and remembering significant people, places, and events. People who deserve commemoration, in a nationalist sense, are those who sacrificed (*hy sinh*) themselves for the nation. That is, one's indebtedness and contribution in warfare are recognized and remembered through the practice (Schlecker 2013). Commemorative figures are attached to war narratives of sufferings, contribution, and indebtedness. Newly erected shrines in temples and monuments (*tượng đài*) are common forms of public commemoration in contemporary Vietnam (Endres and Lauser 2011; Schwenkel 2009, 107-109). Roszko (2010) adds that the commemoration of historical figures has been integrated with the familiar practice of ancestor worship in Vietnam.

Based on these meanings of commemoration, my definition of war elephant commemoration in this study is a practice or action of remembering or showing respect to war elephants through means of a special action, ceremony, or specially created object. It is important to note that special actions include religious acts like putting hands

together to pay respect, making a wish, putting incense sticks, or worshipping with any offerings. The case study of Voi Phục and Voi Ré Temples fits well into the definitions. A sense of respect is tied to the commemoration. Thus, considering the fieldnote excerpt I posted at the beginning of this section, the child was stopped from pointing at the elephant statues because pointing fingers was considered a disrespectful act toward commemorative objects. The innocent child was not aware of the attributes of the elephants that garnered respect but the mother was because she, as an adult, might have been taught the importance of the elephants or the etiquette of the commemorative practices. In brief, these anecdotes exemplify how elephants are held in high regard, and how commemoration practices are based in socio-cultural rules taught by the society.

Transferred Memory: Remembering by Names, Narratives, and Ritual Practices

When I asked the temple visitors about how they interacted with the elephant statues located in the temples, I received varied answers and reactions. Most of my research participants at Voi Phục Temple in Hanoi accepted that they paid respect only to the elephant statues at the temples while elephants elsewhere were considered unimportant to them. This is unsurprising; although elephants have still been used for tourist purposes in Vietnam (Cao 2011, 104), they are not a kind of animals that can be found or used in everyday life, and for the interviewees, there is no special meaning attached to general elephants.

The image of elephants in Vietnam nowadays is connected to nature and the highlands. Less attention is given to elephants, different from buffaloes and cows, which are still used in farming, especially in rice fields. In addition, since buffaloes and cows

are more useful, people organize ceremonies to pay respect to them in the rice-harvesting festival each year. Many interviewees recommended me to observe rituals on live elephants at *Tây Nguyên*, a hinterland area of Vietnam, where elephants are still raised by some ethnic minority groups. Notably, elephants are linked with primitivity and backwardness, as a result of othering of ethnic minorities in Vietnam, who live in highlands. This reminds me of buffalo sacrifice practice mentioned in Condominas's study of M'nông people (1977); animal-related rituals and ceremonies seem to be anti-modern, far from the image of Vietnamese modern state.

In addition, a limited number of elephant statues as well as the practice of commemoration are found in the country. One interviewee, in his early thirties, noted that when talking about elephant statues, he would think of *Ganesha* in India or some elephant statues in Thailand and Laos, rather than any elephant statues in Vietnam. Conversely, Long, a 70-year-old man, told me that elephant statues could actually be found in many places in Vietnam, like in *Côn Sơn Kiếp Bạc*. He added, "I remember there are two large elephant statues placed there with Emperor Quang Trung. However, those statues are different from the ones here in Voi Phục Temple. These ones are historical heritage, much older." In other words, although elephant statues can be found in some places, commemoration of elephants is not usually practiced in Vietnam except for the elephants that contain historical values.

Two keywords that make elephants deserve recognition and commemoration are history and ancient wars. According to Phương, a middle-aged hostel owner in Hanoi, the Vietnamese have never respected or worshipped any elephants, except those ones rode by

the Vietnamese heroes. Similarly, Tuyển, a museum curator, confirmed that the most familiar elephants for Vietnamese people were the historical elephants associated with certain Vietnamese heroes/heroines (like Hai Bà Trưng and Bà Triệu). These elephants supported these figures in battle, and their notoriety is exemplary of the significance of elephants in Vietnam's war history. A male visitor of Voi Phục Temple also mentioned the historical significance of elephants: "I must say that they were animals used by the emperors for going here and there in the ancient time, and for fighting against the enemies." These indicate that elephant images are portrayed, reproduced, and valued only in historical and war contexts. In accordance with the thesis title, therefore, the commemorated *elephants* I talk about in this study are all war elephants.

Based on my fieldwork findings, one explicit form of commemoration is installing elephant statues in both temples. Besides the statues at Voi Phục Temple, which I described earlier in this paper, Voi Ré Temple houses several elephant statues. Looking from the closed gate of Voi Ré Temple, I found two damaged elephant statues in standing position placed in front of the main hall and under cement shelters. The tusk parts of the statues were missing. In front of the statues were two incense burners with some old incense sticks left, indicating that the statues were previously worshipped. Although I did not witness the events, a trusted document indicates that these statues were of four admirable elephants killed in battle: Ré, Bích, Nhĩ, and Bôn.

In addition to installing elephant statues, other major forms of commemorating the war elephants include naming temples after them, retelling their narratives, and conducting ritual practices. These forms of remembrance figure elephants as important

historical figures that need to be respected, which thereby strengthen the aura and agency of the installed statues.

Elephants are remembered by the names and legends attached to them. The elephant commemoration can be traced back to the name of each temple like *Voi Phục*, which means "kneeling elephants." When the temple was built under the reign of Emperor Lý Thanh Tông (1054-1078), it was originally called Linh Lang Temple, following the name of the main deity worshipped at the temple. The latter name, *Voi Phục* originated from the kneeling elephant statues at the temple gate and the legend of Linh Lang, as a historical record states: "Outside of the temple, there are precious elephant statues (*đắp hình voi qúy*). Thus, people always call the temple as *đền Voi Phục*" (Phòng bảo tồn bảo tàng sở văn hóa Hà Nội 1971, 4-7). The elephant statues are connected with the legend of Linh Lang, which tells that Linh Lang, a son of Emperor Lý Thánh Tông, requested for troops and two elephants from the emperor to fight against the enemies from the Song Dynasty (China). When they arrived at the area of Thủ Lệ District, the elephants knelt down for Linh Lang and his generals and took them to the battlefield. They killed many enemies and the survivors ran away, and a victorious Linh Lang led his troops back to the district. The prince later died of sickness[8] (Nguyễn 2015; Phòng bảo tồn bảo tàng sở văn hóa Hà Nội 1971; Vũ 2002). In this case, the temple was named after Linh Lang's elephant, and the re-narrated legend can be considered as a part of war elephant commemoration of this temple.

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[8] In some versions, Linh Lang sacrificed himself at the Như Nguyệt River (Nguyễn 2015, Lê and Lê 2000).

Like Voi Phục Temple, the legend and the temple name also take part in the elephant commemoration practice at Voi Ré Temple. The name *Voi Ré*, meaning "crying elephant," was inspired by the temple legend. To summarize, Ô Long, a legendary war elephant lost its owner, Đàng Trong, in the battle between the Nguyễn and the Trịnh Dynasty. The grieving elephant ran back to its hometown in Phú Xuân, then stood on Thọ Cương Hill and roared in anger and resentment toward the heaven before dropping dead. The villagers, touched by the animal's loyalty to its master, buried it at that location and called the spot Voi Ré (Đào 2012; Hoàng 2014; Hồ 2006; Nguyễn 2000; Sở văn hóa thông tin thừa thiên Huế 2003). Retelling the narratives reminds people of the war elephants' stories and supports the worthiness of their merits in the battlefields. The narratives, in both cases, are not only recorded in written forms but also retold verbally, as I found that some of my interviewees at Voi Phục Temple could re-narrate the legends back to me despite some different details depending on the versions they had heard about. They accepted that naming temples after famous elephants and retelling the elephants' narratives were essential methods for commemorating them. These practices represent the connection between the important historical war elephants and the respected, worshipped historical figures like Ling Lang. Moreover, the legends epitomize certain valued moral characteristics associated with elephants, including selflessness and loyalty. This is the reason why these elephants deserve commemoration.

Besides these previously discussed commemorative practices, temple visitors conduct some ritual practices to commemorate the elephant statues (even though these statues are not the temple's main religious attractions). While sitting near the front gate of

Voi Phục Temple where the elephant statues were located, and observing how people interacted with them, I found that people mostly showed their respects to the statues in the same way as they would to the gods of the temple. On the busiest day of Voi Phục Temple during my field study, 3 July 2019 (the first day of the lunar month (*ngày mồng một*)), I was able to observe and compare the interactions of different people when the temple was crowded with visitors during the day. It is worth noting that people always organize the semimonthly ceremonies at the temple on the first and the fifteenth day of the lunar month. The following are my fieldnotes of that busiest day:

> At the front gate of the temple, all visitors needed to walk past the elephant statues. Some stopped in front of the statues paying respect to each of them by putting their hands together at the chest, slightly shaking the hands, and then bowing their head. Some of those did this impetuously. Some put some small [amount of] money, 1,000 or 2,000 VNĐ banknotes, on the plates in front of the statues before entering the temple. It might be their usual tradition to do so since they also did the same toward other statues and god altars in the temple. For example, right behind the gate, there was an altar of a god called "*bạch hổ*" (white tiger). After paying respect to the elephant statues at the entry, the visitors did exactly the same to the "*bạch hổ*" altar, as the sign of respect.
>
> Some people put incense sticks they had prepared in front of the elephant statues, and then put their hands together at the chest for a few minutes. It seemed that they were making a wish, praying, or thinking of something. A middle-aged woman squatted down with her hands pressing together at the chest, making a wish in front of the statues, similarly to what she did in front of other god altars as if the elephants were also gods or sacred objects. However, a few visitors ignored the existence of the elephant statues.
>
> [Fieldnotes, Voi Phục Temple, 3 July 2019]

As stated in the fieldnotes above, the majority of visitors paid respect to the elephant statues in different ways. Several people made a wish from the elephants.

Hà, the drinks stall owner, said, "The visitors here come from both nearby and distant areas because this temple is quite well-known for its efficaciousness and the history. The efficaciousness includes those in work, study, and love. The people always make a wish from God Linh Lang, but they ask *ông voi* at the gate for good luck too."

In addition, they put some offerings for the elephant statues. Hà informed me that the most popular items used to worship the elephants were *hương thắp* (incense sticks) both in stick and circle forms, and red candles contained in a glass. She added, "They also put money on the plates in front of the elephants. Some put dollar notes! This is because they can make a wish to visit foreign countries." However, Xuân, the temple caretaker, had a different opinion. She thought that the money was not for the elephants, but for making merit in general. Therefore, the money would be spent for repairing or renovating the temple buildings, and running temple activities. This shows different meanings attached to ritual practices deemed "commemorative."

Figure 2: Elephant commemoration practices at Voi Phục Temple, Thủ Lệ
(Photo by: Chari Hamratanaphon)

Regarding incense sticks, they are generally used to pay respect to spirits, sacred objects, or gods in Vietnamese culture, as previous studies in Vietnamese rituals have mentioned (Fjelstad and Nguyễn 2006; Jellema 2007). At many different temples, people use incense sticks for revering elephant statues. At Hai Bà Trưng Temple, Hai Bà Trưng District, Hanoi, I observed that two elephant statues were installed right in front of the main worship building with an incense burner placed on the back of each statue. At Voi Phục Temple, Thụy Khuê District, I noticed incense burners in front of the elephant statues at the main gate. And despite it being closed at the time of my visit, I could see two old incense burners in front of the elephant statues at Voi Ré Temple. The white elephant statue at Huyền Trân Temple in Huế was also respected in a similar manner. According to Hùng, the caretaker, a narrative tells that a white elephant was sent from Champa as a marriage dowry. I assume that associating with human figures is a requirement for an elephant to be commemorated.

Figure 3: Elephant statues at Hai Bà Trưng Temple, Mê Linh (left)
and Phổ Giác Temple (right)
(Photo by: Chari Hamratanaphon)

Not all elephant statues are commemorated with incense sticks and offerings. For example, I noticed that the visitors did not put any offerings for the elephant statue at Phổ Giác Temple in Hanoi or for the elephant statues at the imperial tombs in Huế. In short, elephant statues are 'conditionally' respected depending on the places. I note that this might be because elephant statues in those places are not considered important or specific 'enough' to deserve commemoration. Case in point, the elephant statue at Phổ Giác Temple was installed to indicate that the figure who rode it, Ông Phan Cảnh Điệp, was a talented elephant trainer under King Lê-chúa Trịnh, and to communicate that the temple area used to be an elephant training school (NCCong 2016a). The elephant statue at this temple was therefore not an admirable one in the historical army. The elephant statues at the tomb faced a similar situation; they were included as part of animal followers at salutation courts (*sân chầu*), and were not installed to refer to any specific war elephant (Phan Thuận An 2000, 98).

The case of 22 elephant statues at Hai Bà Trưng Temple, Mê Linh District, is another example of how elephants are included and excluded based on their association with human figures. The caretakers placed incense sticks along with other offerings and some money for only two white ceramic elephant statues (which were shown in the parade for annual Hai Bà Trưng commemoration) and ignored the other 18 stone elephant statues located along the way leading to the main worship buildings. One caretaker at the temple with 18 years of experience told me that he viewed those 18 elephants as only decorations representing the historical elephant army. However, the reasons seemed

arbitrary to me as I noticed that the two other bigger elephant statues at the main building door (which symbolized the historic Hai Bà Trưng's elephants) were also ignored.

On special occasions like the first and the fifteenth day of each lunar month, I witnessed the elephant statues at Voi Phục Temple receive special treats. During those days, many visitors carried fruits, snacks, and fresh food as offerings to the main god of the temple. Some were packed in boxes, containers, or plastic bags. The necessary items were certainly incense sticks and candles which the visitors could also purchase at the temple gate. After arriving at the temple, the visitors entered the ceremony preparation area (*nơi sắp lễ)* to arrange their items onto plates before taking them to the respective worship hall. Each ceremony lasted around 20 minutes. Although the elephant statues were not included as part of the ceremonies, many people put some sugarcane as offerings to the statues. Hà said, "This is because elephants like eating sugarcane." Bringing fruits as offerings for elephant statues is another form of showing reverence. At Voi Phục Temple in Thụy Khuê District, people grew two small banana trees in front of the elephant statues (assuming that elephants like bananas). At Hai Bà Trưng Temple, Mê Linh, people offered unmilled rice, water, and cassavas to the elephant statues. These offerings intentionally mirrored the dietary patterns of elephants in real life. These commemorative practices demonstrate the care and attention that Vietnamese people bestow to elephants compared to other sacred objects. But what makes some elephant statues more highly regarded than others?

One unique ritual practice I found in this study is elephant deification. Voi Ré Temple, the other research site, which was closed for a major renovation at the time I

entered the field, is another place proving that Vietnamese people commemorate war elephants in many forms and patterns. The temple was specifically built by the great emperor Gia Long in around 1817, and was dedicated to war elephants. Specifically, he built the temple to worship deceased war elephants, and to pray for the protection of those ones currently serving in his army. According to Hoàng (2014), the emperor *deified* the deceased war elephants and worshipped them as main gods of this temple, called *vị voi* (elephant gods). An elephant shrine house and elephant statues, symbolizing the heroic elephants, were also built.

Throughout the 19th century, deceased war elephants, one after another, were treated as deities, and ceremonies were organized at Voi Ré Temple twice a year (in spring and autumn) to worship the elephant gods. Those elephants still in service of the court were given very special treatment, with the veterinarians of the Royal Hospital looking after their well-being. After the arrival of the French in 1946, the temple was later used only for ceremonial purposes by imperial guards (Doling 2018). I found no information that specified when these ceremonies stopped being practiced. However, the historical records indicate that establishing the temple, worshipping war elephants as gods, and organizing annual ceremonies are all forms of elephant commemoration. Importantly, the elephant gods were given names and titles as Ré, Bích, Hùng, and Nhị. This contradicted the information I got earlier from Phương, the hostel owner, who told me that Vietnamese people did not name the elephants. Ô Long, the legendary elephant, is also remembered by its name.

Another form of elephant commemoration at Voi Ré Temple that surprised me was Ô Long's burial grave located on the hill behind the temple. The ancient tomb was built in 1844, in a floating rectangular shape, 2.5 x 1.4m size, marked by a stone stele stating "Grave of Ô Long" (*Ô Long Tượng Mộ*). During the French-Vietnamese war, French troops were stationed at a nearby post. French soldiers, misunderstanding that the grave was a weapon burial ground, plowed the Ô Long's tomb. Soon after, the local people strongly protested and protected other graves (Hoàng, 2014; Hồ, 2006).

The record shows that people took the elephant cemeteries as a practice of commemoration, in addition to the installation of elephant statues, which are the main subjects of my research.

In conclusion, commemoration practices at Voi Phục Temple, Voi Ré Temple, and other elephant-related temples show that elephants are commemorated through different forms: retelling related legends, naming the temples, and conducting ritual practices. Elephant statues are a central point of ritual activities, but at different degrees. The different degrees of commemoration are implied by my notions that the elephants at Voi Ré Temple were worshipped (*thờ*) as deities while the interaction of people toward the ones at Voi Phục Temple were rather ambiguous. In the next section, I discuss the degrees of commemoration.

Thờ, Nhớ, and Chào: Different Levels of Commemoration in Vietnam

> A 35-year-old male visitor from Nghệ An Province told me that Vietnamese people did not worship elephants generally, except the ones that *có công*. He described, "Our family comes here because it is *a must* in Hanoi. Here, they worship the elephants. I don't know the exact reason but I guess it's because the [main] god rode the

> elephants to fight." When I asked repeatedly whether people really *nhớ* (remember) the elephants, he corrected me, "We do not only remember them, we *thờ* (worship) them."
>
> [Fieldnotes, Voi Phục Temple, 14 July 2019]

In my fieldwork, I found that at Voi Phục and Voi Ré Temples, elephant statues were commemorated in similar ways: they received offerings and incense sticks, and were the recipients of various physical actions. However, I noticed that the words people used to refer to the commemoration practices were different. From the above excerpt, *nhớ* and *thờ* were used to describe the man's attitudes and interactions toward the elephants. In addition, some visitors I met used the word *chào* to describe the practices, which implies that the commemoration practices are expressed differently in degrees.

Although the words *thờ* and *nhớ* are used alternately in some cases, their exact connotations are dissimilar. Schwenkel (2009, 109; 2018) differentiates the meanings of the terms *nhớ* and *thờ*, which are two different forms of commemoration. According to Schwenkel, *nhớ* refers to secular remembrance of historical figures who made contributions to the state while *thờ* is an act of devotional worship to ask for favors or protection, mostly from deities or protective spirits. In some cases, national heroes, like Trần Hưng Đào, who were deified to be local gods are both secularly remembered and worshipped at the same time by some groups of people[9] (Phạm 2009). At Voi Ré Temple, elephants are clearly both remembered (*nhớ*) and worshipped (*thờ*). Case in point, Hoàng (2014, 104-105) describes how a cemetery was built to remember the faithfulness (*lòng*

[9] According to Phạm (2009, 165-166), Hồ Chí Minh, a Vietnamese political hero, is both secularly remembered (*nhớ*) and worshipped (*thờ*) by some groups of people, based on the model of Trần Hưng Đào cult. However, Schwenkel (2018) argues that the cult of President Hồ might be only an excuse for people to continue their superstitious practices without being suspected from the state. For Schwenkel, President Hồ is only *nhớ*, not *thờ*.

trung nghĩa) of the legendary elephant Ô Long before Emperor Gia Long went on to build the temple to worship Ô Long and other four elephant deities (*4 vị voi*).

The case of Ô-Long shows the blurry boundary between the two forms of commemoration. In contrast, at Voi Phục Temple, some visitors I talked to refused to use the word *thờ* toward the elephants. I found some contradictions in the people's attitudes and interpretations. While the caretakers and security guards as well as some of the visitors at the temple accepted that the elephant statues were worshipped (*thờ*), a few visitors expressed that elephants meant nothing to them in a spiritual aspect; they saw a clear divide between the commemorated elephants and the worshipped gods. According to my language advisor, *thờ* can be used only with holy spirits that a person has deep faith in, such as the Buddha, holy spirits, or ancestor spirits.

Chào is another word some people used to mention the practice. Compared to *thờ* or *nhớ,* I found during my fieldwork that the elephants were more referred to with the word *chào.* Tý, an 87-year-old man, told me a story about the Voi Phục Temple before it was burned down: "Formerly, the temple was very respectful (*đáng tôn trọng*). Whoever passed by the temple had to *chào* the elephants. At that time, the Japanese soldiers encircled the area, setting a military base up here. When they saw the elephant statues, they also needed to *chào*. If they did not *chào*, people would consider them as bad, outrageous guys." Literally, the word *chào* means to bow, to greet, or to salute someone in a respectful manner. *Chào* requires neither deep adoration nor a faith in the person, it is rather a courteous behavior that one is supposed to do to show respect to someone of a higher status/class. *Chào* is less intimate than *thờ*. Interestingly, in Vietnamese society,

chào as a greeting act is usually performed toward human beings only, but in this study, the word is also applied in reference to elephants. This means that elephants are treated like humans, but are not regarded as the same status as deities. I theorize that this is because elephants are still considered as animals and did not take dominant roles in wars compared to human figures who are more intimate and familiar to the worshippers. Therefore, some visitors only greet them to show respects but not devotionally or spiritually revere them as deities.

The status of elephants remains ambiguous for some people. Bùi, a 28-year-old visitor, insisted that people did not *thờ* elephants, while using the word *chào* in referring to the elephants instead. She said that people needed to *chào* the elephants, who were the temple guardians, to ask for permission before entering the temple. However, I noticed that some hesitations were expressed when she said, "But sometimes we *khấn* the elephants." *Khấn* is an action of praying or making obeisance to spirits. The word *khấn* is more associated with *thờ* than *chào*. Therefore, I propose that the war elephants are placed in a higher status than common animals. This status lies in between humans and holy spirits, as shown in the following diagram.

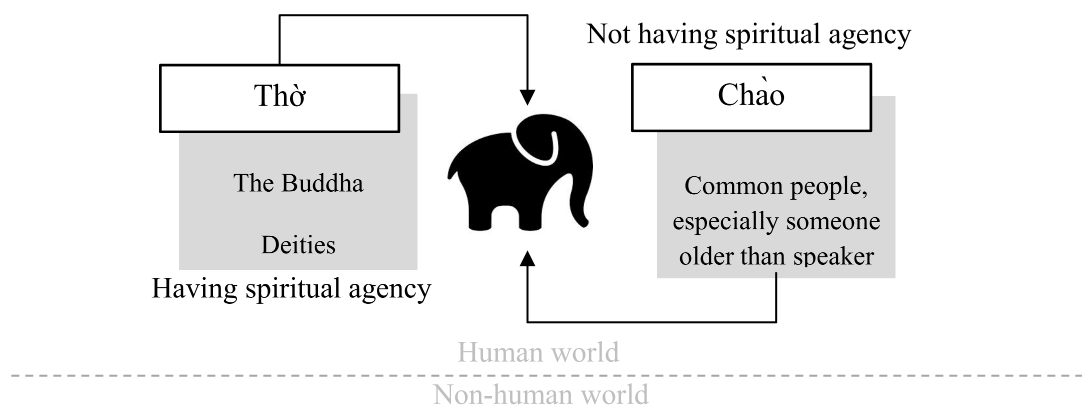

Figure 4: The status of war elephant spirits in relation to the words *thờ* and *chào*

From the diagram, *chào* indicates a unique degree of commemoration that is limited to the war elephants, showing that the elephants' status is comparable, or even higher, than that of common humans. In other words, war elephants are put into human moral frameworks, blurring the human-animal boundary (McLennan 2018; Snyders 2015) and creating new hierarchies in the animal world (Löfgren 1985). Nevertheless, although the status of war elephants is raised to the top of the animal hierarchy through commemoration practices, being lower than human deities represents unequal agency between humans and animals (Kean 2013). For example, Voi Ré Temple, which houses the elephant deities, is categorized as *miếu* in some historical records (Nguyễn 1997, 105). The word *miếu* refers to a smaller shrine for "venerating spirits at the lower echelons of the pantheon," compared to *đền*, which refers to a temple dedicated to deities and deified legendary figures (Đỗ 2003, 21). This shows that war elephants, despite their status as deified legendary heroes, have never been placed at the same level as human gods.

The higher status of elephants was also shown when I asked a question, using the word *con voi* to refer to the elephant statues. Vân, the caretaker of Voi Phục Temple, corrected my words, "We call them *ông* voi, not *con* voi." Compared to English, Vietnamese has different levels of language indicating specific politeness and the relationship between first, second, and third person references. According to Helmbrecht (2013, par. 3), Vietnamese has a large class of kinship nouns which are frequently used in pronominal function. The pronominal affix *ông* in Vietnamese can be considered as a part of this system. *Ông* is a pronoun used to call a male senior to the speaker, and also a

pronominal affix used for respected or higher-classed figures; for instance, *ông thủ tướng* (the president) or *ông vua* (the king). In addition, *ông* is used for male gods: *ông thánh* (god) or *ông địa* (earth god). However, the affix *con* I used in the question indicates general living creatures; for example, con người (human) or con ngựa (horse), with no respectful connotation attached. Regarding animals, in some cases, magical animals considered as gods in any legends can also be called *ông*. Another example here is *ông rùa*, the turtle god in the legend of Hoàn Kiếm Lake, who came up from the lake to get the magical sword returned by King Lê Lợi. Thus, calling the elephant statues as *ông voi* implies that the caretaker did not view them as animals, but respected spirits.

Many visitors respect and commemorate the elephant statues, especially at Voi Phục and Voi Ré Temples by for both their historical and spiritual values. As discussed before, the elephant statues contain some agency, efficacy, or spiritual aura which makes them more respected or sacred for many of my interviewees. Some interesting questions emerge. How are the aura and agency created? And what role does the commemoration play in Vietnamese society? As Reeves, Bird, and Stichelbaut (2015, 3-4) suggest, the commemoration is different from other forms of physical remembrance like cemeteries and museums; as "it is situated in a place at a specific time," spatial and temporal factors are important to analyze in order to understand elephant commemoration practices. These 'place' and 'time' factors play a key role in creating the aura and agency of the elephant statues at both temples. In other words, aura and agency are place-based and time-based, which I will describe in the following section.

Place-Based Aura: Elephant Statues in Sacred Space

When I asked how and why people paid respect to the elephant statues, many informants accepted that elephant statues seemed to have some religious connotations attached to them; some added that the elephants had some special connection to gods. The practice of paying respect underlines that elephant statues are deemed respectful in the eyes of temple visitors. In this case, I consider the respectful attribute of the elephant statues as a form of 'aura,' the term used by Benjamin (1969) to describe the authenticity of an art object.

Based on Benjamin's concept, the aura of an object exists because of its uniqueness and originality in production process (1969, 4). In this regard, some of my interviewees prove that the historical characteristics of the elephant statues are determined by the worshippers, and they affect the sacredness or the aura of the statues. A discussion on the uniqueness of the elephant statues between Voi Phục Temple in Thủ Lệ and Voi Phục Temple in Thụy Khuê can helpfully illustrate this point. Long, an old visitor of Voi Phục Temple in Thủ Lệ, stated that there were actually many elephant statues in Vietnam. However, those statues were not greatly respected like the ones at Voi Phục Temple. He added, "These elephant statues are very old. One day, a large company requested to build new statues for the temple, but they definitely failed and needed to go back because the statues are Vietnamese historical objects." This explanation reveals how replacing the elephant statues with newly made ones is impossible because they are unique and antique. Their value as spiritual objects partly lies in the fact that they have been emplaced at Voi Phục Temple, a historical site recognized by the state, for around a

hundred years. Following Benjamin's idea of authenticity via the aura, these old elephant statues, in other words, are highly regarded for their originality, which gives them historical value.

To my surprise, Lan and Sơn, two old caretakers with almost 30 years of experience working at Voi Phục Temple in Thụy Khuê, also acknowledged the originality of the elephant statues, which connects them to the temple's long-time history: "This temple is a small temple but it is well-known as a significant historical place[10]." Then they went on to say, "The state (*nhà nước*) hires people to take care of the temple and provides some financial support. The elephant statues here are over 800 years old. They were dug up and then installed here as temple guardians. The statues were made of carved rock, dissimilarly to the cement ones in Thủ Lệ District. The ones here are more valuable." Pointing out the authenticity of the statues' production process, Sơn emphasized, "The elephant statues at this temple are not only harder to produce, but also older."

According to historical records, one day in the early 17th century during the Lê Dynasty, villagers were digging a well at this area where once stood an old palace when they found a pair of stone elephant statues underground. These statues have been standing in front of the temple ever since (NCCong 2016b). Besides their historical significance, the statues are also valued as hand-produced objects for their craftsmanship, as the

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[10] Voi Phục Temple in Thụy Khuê located in Hanoi is recognized as an important historical site due to its long-time history. It underwent a major renovation by the state in 2010. The temple was built to worship the god called Ling Lang, like Voi Phục Temple in Thủ Lệ. The area is believed to be the birthplace of the deity, as I learned during one of my interviews. Another well-known characteristic of the temple is that it houses nine 700-year-old trees (NCCong 2016b).

caretakers further emphasized. For Benjamin, hand-produced objects have a certain aura that mass-produced objects do not have. In brief, the authenticity (Benjamin 1969, 4) of the elephant statues derives from their status as antique and handmade objects. This authenticity is central to how the statues are as temple guardians.

Based on my observations from my interviews, it is the uniqueness and antiquity of the elephant statues that make them valuable. Referring, once again, to Benjamin's argument, the authentic value of an object is "transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (1969, 4). In other words, the more antique an object is, the more religious and historical value it can hold (Kendell, Vũ, Nguyễn 2010). According to my interviews, the original quality of the statues in Thủ Lệ was regarded as better and more valuable than the any replacement from a big company. This is because the powerful aura lies in the authenticity and originality of historical objects; new replacements cannot substitute the aura. Regarding the statues in Thụy Khuê, besides their antiquity, the statues are unique in their production and materials.

Figure 5: Antique elephant statues at Voi Phục Temple, Thụy Khuê
(Photo by: Chari Hamratanaphon)

Although the examples above demonstrate how the Benjaminian concept of the aura can helpfully describe the relationship between a sacred object and the people that commemorate it, the authenticity is not the only quality of an object that carries spiritual significance. Referring to the interviews and my observations, I found that the visitors tended to describe the elephant statues in relation to the space they inhabited as well as to the main temple deity; my interlocutors' descriptions of the statues gave less emphasis to the statues' production process and long history. Only a few people mentioned the statues' production and history, possibly due to a lack of awareness. I therefore assumed that the aura of the elephant statues is place-based and is tied to spatiality rather than forms. In other words, the elephant statues can hardly maintain the spiritual aura if they are installed or kept in any other places than in religious spaces.

My definition of *place* in relation to aura is different from Benjamin's concept which refers to the distance between the object and the viewers. For me, the *place-based* aura is defined as an aura which exists only when the object is put perfectly at a certain place or in the right location and environment, affected by spiritual and historical values of its surrounding objects located in the same space. The aura does not individually reside in the object itself. Studying the elephant statues offers this perspective of seeing the relationship between three main things: people, objects, and space. I therefore intend to explain the place-based aura by using the elephant statues as an example.

Right There in the Temple: The Emplacement of Aura

Initially, I theorize that the spiritual aura is originated from and attached to the place or the location where the particular object is emplaced, especially if the place is a

religious space. In this study, both research sites are *đền* (or *điện*) and *miếu* in some records, which refer to popular religions' temples or shrines built in dedication to local deities or commemorated historical figures (Đỗ 2003, 21; Schwenkel 2018, 10). These places are religious spaces. Thanks to the sacredness of the space, every object placed within the area seems to be respected as sacred. This notion is exemplified in people's interactions with the elephant statues, particularly in how visitors pay their respect to the elephant statues in similar manners to other sacred objects or altars in the temple: putting hands together near the chest in a respectful manner, placing incense sticks and offerings, and making a wish. Briefly, the sense of religious space at the temple makes an object sacred even though people may not know anything about that object.

I observed that the temple visitors tended to regard anything they found in the temple as bringing good fortune. Even in cases in which people were unaware of the significance of an object, they perceived the object as sacred and automatically paid respect to it. People paid respect to altars of the Earth God, the God of Agriculture, and a white tiger with the same gestures. They similarly paid respect to a pair of horse statues. One female visitor, aged around 45, told me that she visited Voi Phục Temple for the ceremony on the first day of the lunar month. As part of her visit, she made a wish (*cầu may*) to the main deity. The woman stated that she did not know any legend of the temple: "I have heard this name of the temple since I was born. I do not *thờ* (worship) the elephant statues, but I see some people do. I do not interact with the statues. However, I think people just pay respect to the elephants as they do to other things in the temple, not intending to ask for specific things."

Her opinion suggests that elephant statues have no special meanings attached to them; rather, they are merely 'temple' objects, thereby illustrating relationship between the statues and the temple space. Similarly, Tý, an old informant I mentioned earlier, connects the respectful aura of the elephants with the sacredness of the temple. According to Tý, as Linh Lang, the main deity, is worshipped here at the temple, the temple becomes very respected (*đáng tôn trọng*). Because of this relation, people need to greet (*chào*) the elephant statues located at the temple gate too. Tý also *chào* the statues every time he visits the temple. This shows that the reverence people feel toward the temple, as well as the sacredness people associate with the temple, affect how they interact with the elephant statues.

Generational differences in ritual practices are also worth pointing out here. In comparison to Tý, the younger visitor expressed that the elephant statues had no spiritual significance unto themselves. She therefore paid no respect to them, while the older visitors acted in a different way, showing respect by greeting the elephant statues. This implies that the younger generation might perceive sacred objects and their aura differently from their older counterparts. This disparity could be due to different sets of knowledge and different understandings of history. It could also be due to different affective connections toward the sacred space (Wongkird 2011). Tý, the old man, shares parts of his life history with the temple, and has been maintaining these spiritual practices for years. Therefore, he is more familiar with the *chào* practice. I also noticed similar generational disparities in Huế, the other research site. Thanh, a 26-year-old tour guide, accepted that she did not know Voi Ré Temple, and did not think that people would

worship elephants as deities. However, her mother, as a historian, could tell the exact location of the temple when we called her to ask for directions.

Religious traditions are other possible reasons that make visitors pay respect—or, in some cases, worship—the elephants. As previously mentioned, many Vietnamese people believe in *linh*, the magical and spiritual aura that resides in temple objects (Đỗ 2003), ranging from statues to big trees. According to several testaments from visitors, some people tend to revere (*thờ*) everything in the temple. Since the temple is a sacred place, they follow the tradition to respect (*tôn trọng*) the temple objects. According to Hùng, the caretaker at Huyền Trân Temple, *linh* does not exist in general objects, but in the "things" located in a particular religious space. An elephant statue can be considered as a simple decoration if it is placed in a garden, while an ordinary rock can be considered auspicious and important when it is put in the temple. Lý told me about a sacred stone: "In the past, there was a sacred stone placed near the stairs. It was used in ceremonies. People would raise the stone up and make a wish." This implies that the emplacement and the location of objects help create their respectful aura.

Some might say that the uniqueness of an object is still the defining characteristic of the aura, as Benjamin (1969, 5) describes aura as a unique phenomenon of distance. However, there are significant contradictions within Benjamin's definition of the aura, which I will demonstrate by discussing the elephant statues at Minh Mạng and Tự Đức Tombs, built in 1840 and 1867 respectively. Those elephant statues, along with several statues of royal officials and horses, were constructed to commemorate the royal army, and were installed in the salutation court in front of the main throne hall of each tomb

(Phan Thuận An 2000, 98). These life-sized elephant statues are eternally in the standing position; on their skin appear natural stains and scratches—markers of their antiquity. These statues predate those at Voi Phục Temple. However, for both domestic and foreign visitors, the statues are more like "interesting" historical objects rather than "sacred" objects with auras. Notably, I witnessed that the uniqueness of these elephant statues did not provide a sense of inaccessibility while visitors touched and took photos with them playfully. Besides disrespecting the statues, they did not keep any distance from the statues. This is inconsistent with Benjamin's figuration of the aura, but is consistent with Errington's analysis of tourists' interactions with Borobudur in Indonesia (1993, 49). The tourists, influenced by world tourism, climbed and touched the sacred object freely, not hesitating to approach it or keeping 'distance' as was the norm for previous generations of visitors. This shows that the tourists do not view Borobudur as 'sacred' anymore. Elephant statues in the royal tombs face a similar situation. Once the tombs were changed and recognized as tourist attractions, the aura of the historical statues was destroyed and cannot be sensed by the visitors anymore. On the contrary, the aura of the elephant statues at Voi Phục Temple is still maintained since they are located in the temple. This indicates the powerful influence of spaces on the aura of the objects. My hypothesis is that only particular spaces have the ability to incite the phenomenon of aura.

Elephants, Relationality, and Temple Guardianship

The particular location of an object in an area affects the way people perceive the aura of the object, especially when it is connected to other objects in the same area. Considering my study at Voi Phục Temple, installing elephant statues in front of the

temple gate or the entrance of the main worship hall gives more spiritual meaning to the statues. Both sides of the temple gate are usually reserved for temple guardians, while the front of the worship hall is for the main gods' servants, which are worth revering. My interviewees frequently mentioned the connection between the objects and the temple gods.

Because of their location at the gate, the elephant statues perform the role of temple guardians. This role imbues them with a sacred aura that people are able to sense. Although the caretakers of Voi Phục Temple focused on telling the legend of Linh Lang and his elephants when talking to me, it seemed that the legend was not well known among visitors. I observed that temple visitors considered the location of the statues when determining which objects were deserving of their respects. As Bùi, a 28-year-old visitor of Voi Phục Temple opined, "The elephant statues at the temple are only protective guardians or the security guards of the temple." She accepted that she also paid respect to the statues at the front gate. When I asked why, Bùi said, "Seeing the shrine as a big house, if you want to visit the house owner, you need to pass the security guards first. In this case, you need to pay respect in order to request permission to enter the temple." Bùi's answer illustrates how some Vietnamese visitors perceive and respect elephants as guardians rather than the war elephants in Linh Lang's legend.

For many people, the image of elephants as guardians is more familiar than as figures in legends. Long, pointing to the horse statues at Linh Lang's worship hall entrance, said that he worshipped (*thờ*) the elephant statues as well as the couple of horses (*ông ngựa*): "If we worship the god (*thánh*), we must worship the god's animals

too, because these animals serve our god." For Long, worshipping (*thờ*) everything located at the temple gate is a Vietnamese tradition. The animals installed in temples, whether they were portrayed in narratives or not, are considered related to god(s). Therefore, the sacred or religious significance of the elephant statues derives from their location in the temple area in relation to the main god.

A further example of how the sacred or religious significance of elephant statues derives from their location in the temple is when Lan and Sơn, the caretakers at Voi Phục Temple in Thụy Khuê, insisted that elephants had no big roles in the Linh Lang legend. After agreeing to an interview about the elephant statues at the temple gate, they elucidated that the elephant statues were installed at the temple gate due to the strong characteristics associated with animals. Such characteristics made them appropriate guardians. Lan, the 71-year-old lady, stated, "Naturally, the important characteristic of elephants is strength (*khỏe mạnh*), so the elephant statues were put here to protect the temple." She emphasized the disconnect between the elephants and the god: "The elephants were not directly related to Linh Lang since, based on the true story, Linh Lang and his army went to the battlefield by boat, on the rivers, on waterways. They did not use any elephants." I noted that Lan and Sơn do not consider elephants as historical figures, but as temple guardians. Without related legends or narratives, the elephant statues have their own religious aura, and the visitors still worship the elephant statues, offer incense sticks, and make a wish from them. On special days, the visitors offer some sugarcane for the statues and pay respect to them, even though the elephants did not take any part in the historical war of Linh Lang, the main god they worship.

In this case, some might say, the originality of the ancient elephant statues dug up from underground is the most important factor that allows the existence of the aura. However, I am trying to argue that, although the uniqueness of the statues are central to their aura, the statues' placements in relation to the temple are also significant. The two caretakers repetitively emphasized the elephants' role as guardians. Similarly to Bùi, Sơn, the 87-year-old caretaker, used a house metaphor to describe the importance of paying respect to the temple guardians: "Elephants are like gods, guardian gods of the temple. Similarly, when you want to enter someone's house, you need to ask the guards first. Elephants and horses are not the only animals that are placed at the gate. Other animals can be placed there too."

Different animals bear different meanings. While elephants and horses represent strength, dog guardians represent honesty. From Sơn's explanation, whatever statues are installed at the temple gate, the people will pay respect to them due to their role as guardians. The guardians are always placed at both sides of the entrance, which supports my argument that the aura is place-based or location-based.

Although the status of the temple guardians does not require any special and direct connection between the main god and the elephants in the narratives, the relations between them are still forged; the location implies that the elephants are *god's animals* or *servants* instead. For example, at Voi Phục Temple in Thủ Lệ, a number of my interviewees mentioned the elephant statues in relation to the god. When asked why they worship the elephants, nobody talked about the elephant statues alone, but included other

things located within the temple area. “We worship (*thờ*) the god as well as the elephants, his servants, with the incense sticks,” said Vân, one of the caretakers of the temple.

I noted that the reverence the elephants receive partly derives from their relationship with the main god and the sacredness of other religious objects in the temple. That is, the object’s surroundings and relation to other objects shape the object’s aura. In this sense, the aura of an object cannot be found in the individual object itself, but in its relation to other objects. Regarding the hierarchy system of the temple, the main god holds a position at the top rank of sacredness and power, full of aura, both abstractly and concretely. This emphasizes the status of the elephants as *secondary agents* (Gell 1998) that receive and mediate aura and agency from a higher sacred figure, like the god.

Bringing Good Luck: The Place-Based Agency of the Elephants

> The visitors come here to worship Linh Lang, but they need to pay respect to the elephant statues at the gate first in order to get access to the temple. Paying respect to the elephants brings good luck. If we do not revere the statues, we may face some misfortunes. If you do not ask the animals [at the temple gate] before getting inside, you are not good. We also make a wish, asking for good luck.
> [Interview with Long, Voi Phục Temple, 3 July 2019]

The elephant statues are expected to have agency to determine a certain level of the temple visitors’ destiny. They have the ability to bring good luck or dispel bad luck and to grant some general or specific wishes. Long elucidated during our interview that the elephants’ status as temple guardians as well as social agents requires him to pay respect to them. During my observations, I saw some visitors put their hands to their chest in a standing position to make a wish in front of the statues for a few minutes before they left. I asked Vân, the temple caretaker, whether the elephants had ever made the

wishes come true. She said, "Sure! But if the person is a bad guy, the elephants will not give them any good luck. Besides, the people must have a spiritual belief (*tâm linh*) in them first." Following Gell's (1998) proposal that an art object can possess certain forms of agency, I consider elephant statues as social agents through their abilities to grant wishes. I therefore raise the following questions. How do the elephant statues acquire the agency, in relation to the place and the surrounding environment? At what level is this agency given to the elephants, a kind of animal spirits? The elephants' abilities to grant wishes as well as visitors' offerings to the elephants are my main focuses in this section.

The main deity, Linh Lang, is an important sacred figure that helps create the elephant agency in granting wishes due to his connection with the elephants. According to my informants, Linh Lang is the main god who protects *Thăng Long*[11], making Voi Phục Temple one of the four sacred temples. These four temples are located in the four directions of Hanoi: Voi Phục Temple, Kim Liên Temple, Cao Sơn Temple, and Bạch Mã Temple. This male deity is worshipped in over two hundred temples in Vietnam (Vũ 2002). The aura of the main god has influenced the people's attitudes toward the elephants, which are viewed as his supporters in the legend, and as his servants indicated by the location of elephant statues in the temple. Without the god, the existence of the aura in the elephant statues can be blocked. A group of visitors also told me some more details: "We worship elephant statues in many places because the animals are found in many Vietnamese legends. The temple at Thụy Khuê also has two elephant statues which

[11] **Thăng Long** is the old name of Hanoi during the 11th-13th centuries. The city name means "flying dragon," while a dragon symbolizes prosperity and power.

are revered (*thờ*) by the people too. The duties of these elephants are to serve the god (*phục vụ thần*). It is therefore necessary to revere them as well.” This illustrates how the elephants gain respect through their proximity to the main god. That is, the existence of the god’s aura as a sacred object results in the existence of aura in the elephant statues, and vice versa. This human-dependent aura is matched with Snyders’ (2015) and Kean’s (2013) notions that the commemoration of animals are inevitably connected to human affairs. The aura of the elephant statues in this study is not an exception.

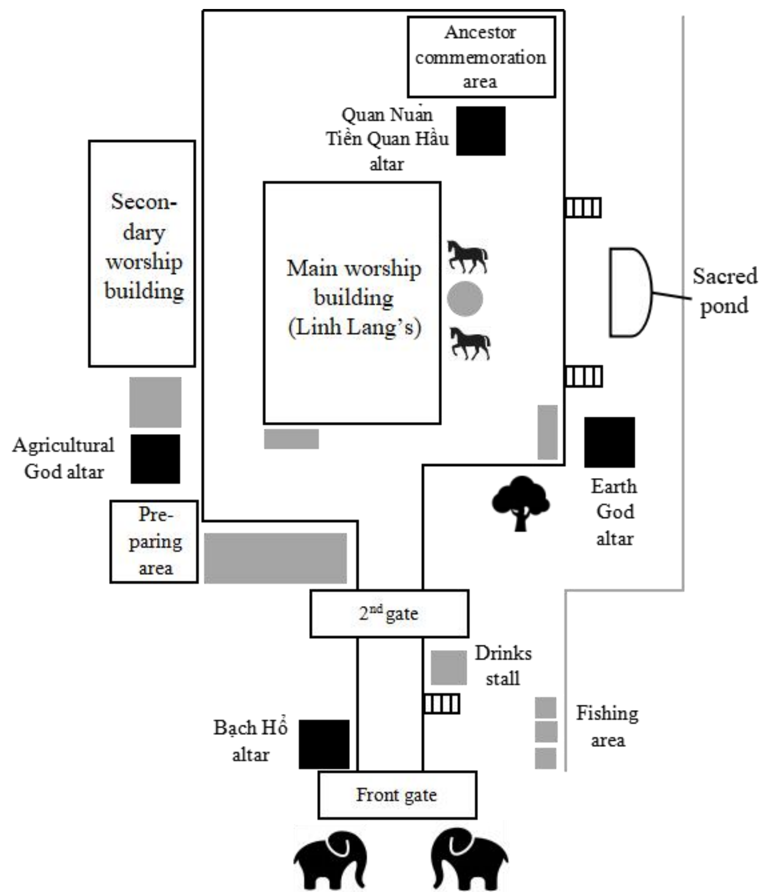

Figure 6: Voi Phục Temple plan
(Drawn by Chari Hamratanaphon)

Considering the Voi Phục Temple plan, the secondary agency of the elephant statues may be related to the proximity between their location and the main worship building. The statues are excluded from the sanctuary area. The sanctuary here refers to the area around the god altar. It is the most sacred space in the temple since it is physically close to the god. The sanctuary located in the middle of Voi Phục Temple is surrounded by walls and gates, separating inside and outside areas. The exclusion of the elephant statues from the area means providing only limited agency to the statues as well as the other sacred objects within the temple area, like secondary altars, the old tree, and the horse statues. Different offerings presented in both inner and outer areas prove the difference in agency. Full sets of food, fruits, and elaborated candles are usually offered to the main god, while other spirits in the outer area are offered only small amounts of money, incense sticks, and some water. In contrast, the elephant altars at Voi Ré Temple are included as part of the main worship building (Phạm 2012), showing higher status, compared to the ones at Voi Phục Temple. This implies that the location of an object informs its aura and agency.

In conclusion, the surrounding environment of an object, especially its location and relation to other sacred objects, affects the way people perceive that object. In the case of the elephant statues, their aura exists because they are installed at the main gate, next to the altars and the old tree, of Voi Phục Temple, which the people consider as a well-known respectful temple. In addition, the sacredness of the main god, Linh Lang, has influence on how people perceive the elephant statues, which become worshipped as the god's servants or vehicles. As Gell (1998, 68) notes, "many indexes are crude and

uninteresting artifacts, whose importance rests solely on their mediatory function in a particular social context." The elephant statues might be viewed as uninteresting objects for some people, especially the youths. However, they are revered and important in the religious context of the sacred spaces where they are located since they act as mediators between the temple visitors and the deity. Narratives and beliefs also take a part in the aura-making process by connecting the main god with the elephant statues, and bestowing secondary agency of the elephant statues to grant wishes or bring good or bad luck to the visitors to a certain degree. I argue next that the elephants' agency is not only place-based, but also time-based.

Time-Based Agency: Elephant Statues and What 'We' Have Passed Through

"Why do you study elephants? Are you studying Vietnamese history?"

I was frequently asked these questions in the field; these questions reveal how people associate elephants with wars. The word 'elephants' reminded some of Vietnamese historical wars and the narratives of national heroes. Several people recommended that I visit history museums. For most Vietnamese, elephants are more related to Vietnamese history, as they are hardly found in everyday life, especially in big cities like Hanoi and Huế. According to these notions, besides the context of war, elephants are nonentities. History seems to be frequently used as a key term in describing the roles of elephants. In other words, 'important' elephants for Vietnamese people mean 'war' elephants. I then intend to find answers for the following questions: What attributes make people worship or commemorate elephants, besides their relationships to other

temple objects? What gives the elephants ‘meanings’? And when people show respect to elephant statues, which elephants are they thinking of?

As Gell (1998, 7, 21-22) proposes that objects should be considered as entities with context-dependent social agency, time is another significant characteristic involved in the agency-making process. Time, in this study, refers to history, collective memories, and past experience that Vietnamese people have perceived and passed through. I argue, in accordance to Gell, that the elephant statues with their temporal agency is a medium or an instrument connecting people to national histories, collective memories, and national heroes. These connections cause a series of social actions. The victory in ancient wars, as a mark of national independence, takes part in the process of creating and maintaining the efficacious agency of the elephant statues. In addition, elephants have meanings because of their historical roles in the nation-building process. This emphasizes the historical time-based characteristic of agency.

Based on my findings while doing fieldwork, there are two levels of elephant representations portrayed through the commemoration practice: (1) representation of the specific mythical elephant characters in the temple legends, and (2) representation of war elephants taking part in defending the country. When asked about the elephant statues, people often think of both specific elephants and war elephants in national narratives. The general war elephants, attached to a nationalist sense, may fit into what Gell (1969, 25-26) calls ‘the prototype’ of an index, the ideal image that an object represents.

First of all, although they are sometimes regarded as interchangeable, I need to differentiate the terms ‘legends’ and ‘historical narratives’ mentioned in this thesis paper.

Bennett and Smith (1993, 18) define a legend as “a story told as the truth or believed to be true.” Some legends are treated as a historical account. Meanwhile Dégh (2001, 29-49) notes that a legend is commonly connected to physical objects that contain some supernatural elements according to folk beliefs. These legends create archetypal cultural narratives. The reviewed literature shows that legends are often regarded by people as historical, but unauthenticated, stories. A legend of one particular event or person can be told in many different versions thanks to the characteristics of oral literary traditions. Therefore, the stories of Linh Lang (Voi Phục Temple) and Ô Long (Voi Ré Temple) which tell mythical events of the specific figures, are categorized as legends in this study. For historical narratives, they refer to mainstream narratives about the history of places, events, and individuals, which are officially recorded in historical accounts with no supernatural elements; for example, the heroic stories of Hai Bà Trưng or Bà Triệu who resisted against foreign invasions (Roszko 2010, Sutherland 2012). In this sense, by the term ‘historical narratives’, I mean official national narratives. Both legends and historical narratives are related to time, showing people’s attitudes toward things and experiences worthy of notice and remembrance (Pentikainen 1973, 218-220)

Legends and historical figures are inseparable. In Vietnam, heroes are attached to relevant narratives (Phạm 2009; Taylor 2004) while legends are created to legitimize the agency of each figure (Roszko 2010). The elephant statues, both at Voi Ré and Voi Phục Temples, are attached to legendary narratives. For example, at Voi Phục Temple, the elephants played key roles as the god’s vehicles in the legend, which tells that two elephants knelt down for Linh Lang, who later became a god, to get down from their

back. It should be noted that, in some versions, the elephants knelt down for the god who rode them to the battlefield, or they knelt down at the temple area on the way home after they gained the victory over the Chinese army (Ngô 2007; Vũ 2002). One informant even mentioned the magical power of the elephants, such as their ability to fly in order to transport the god to places. Different informants offered different versions of the legend of Linh Lang when I asked about the elephant statues, even though sometimes I did not request them to tell the legend at all.

In the field, I learned that certain people worshipped or paid respect to the elephant statues at the temple front gate because of the war elephants' roles in the legend of Linh Lang. For instance, a male visitor said to me, "People respect them because they are battle elephants (*voi chiến*), fighting against the enemies. There is a legend (*sự tích*) telling that they lied down here for the ruler to come down from their back." He pointed out the importance of the elephants in the legend as the god's vehicles, which was similar to the version of the legend I found written in the library collections in Hanoi. The meanings of the elephants are different from those as the temple guardians, which are related to their spatial context. The cultural significance of the elephants as the god's war vehicles was created and reproduced through the legend, thus connecting the elephants to a particular temporal context. Elephants, despite being minor characters that could be dropped out easily when the legend is orally passed through generations, still exist. Re-narrating the legend, in words and in print, makes the elephant characters important both historically and mythically in local people's imaginations. Additionally, emplacing

the elephant statues in the same place as Linh Lang's statue supports the belief in the legend.

Apparently, some special elements regarding the elephants were added into the legend to increase the extraordinary senses, and to highlight the importance of the elephants. Xuân, a temple caretaker aged 73, told me that after Linh Lang, the main god, conquered the Chinese troops, he rode the elephants back to the city. At that time, he did not point out the destination for the elephants to stop. But when they passed by this area, they then stopped and knelt down, inviting the god to get down at the location where Voi Phục Temple was later built to commemorate Linh Lang. She emphasized, "The battle elephants were very clever and intelligent (*khôn và thông minh*). They were the ones who chose the place (*voi chọn chỗ*) [to stop]." Besides the elephants' role in assisting the god to defeat the enemies in the wars, the intelligence, a new attribute, of the elephants was added to the story, giving the elephant intentional agency to make a choice or decision. As the elephants take part in choosing the place, they are important enough to be worshipped or commemorated.

The legend of Voi Ré Temple in Huế City represents similar or even higher attitudes toward war elephants. Ô Long, the mythical elephant, bears many admired qualities which can also be reflected in an ideal citizen, namely loyalty and readiness to sacrifice himself. Ô Long played a sacrificial role in the battlefield to protect the army before it died of grief at the loss of its master, representing its loyalty toward a human. The legend emphasizes that the villagers admired the elephant's good deeds; they then built a grave for Ô Long. The loyalty, as a human moral value, is applied and transferred

to the elephant, bringing the animal into the human moral system (Johnston 2012; Snyders 2015). The sacrificial choices Ô Long made to assist its master and other humans in the war exemplify the agency of the animal, which many find worthy of commemoration. In addition, it reflects some kind of virtues that people are supposed to emulate (Wong 2018). These admirable qualities shown in the legend of Ô Long inspired Emperor Gia Long to build Voi Ré Temple. The temple commemorated and worshipped Ô Long and other war elephants as gods to protect other living war elephants and the royal army (Hoàng 2014). The practice of elephant commemoration continued up until the temple was physically damaged. This shows that the war-related agency is connected to the efficacy or potency of the elephants in sacred spaces, developed from the legend. The moral attributes legitimize the elephant to be commemorated and worshipped at Voi Ré Temple. In addition, the ability to protect the army in wars also transformed to the protective efficacy as elephant gods.

At Voi Ré Temple, some gendered magical elements were added into the main legend. Hùng, the caretaker of Huyền Trân Temple, narrated that, in the past, women could not walk passed the temple without covering their face with cloth. It was said that a lady went into the temple, and then an elephant statue squeezed her with its trunk, raising her up into the air to punish her. The potency of the elephant here is merged with the pre-colonial Vietnamese traditional practices that restrict access into certain religious and ritual spaces on the basis of gender and status (Drummond 2000). These practices restrict women from entering particular places. Interestingly, the elephants have both protective and punitive power, similar to some human gods, like the Mother Goddess (Kendell, Vũ,

and Nguyễn 2010). This supernatural story makes the elephants more sacred in local people's imaginations, and supports the notion that the elephant statues maintain spiritual agency. In brief, I suggest that legends help construct and legitimize the agency of the war elephants. They take part in shaping how people think, perceive, and give meaning to the specific elephant characters portrayed in the legends.

The images of war elephants portrayed through national historical narratives are the second kind of elephant representations. To clarify, here, I am referring to war elephants more broadly; I am not referring to any specific ones mentioned in the legends and which are attached to the stories of national heroes, wars, Vietnamese victory, and national independence. The elephant statues, with the agency, play a role as mediums reminding people of the long-time war history of Vietnam, including both ancient and contemporary ones. Considering the elephants within Gell's framework, the elephant statues are secondary agents that are not self-sufficient. That is, the statues do not have agency in themselves but gain their agency from other primary agents, who are their makers or users with intentionality (1998, 17-19). I argue, in this case, that the primary agents are the people who initially narrated the historical narratives, and the statues get their agency by mediating between the historical narratives, national heroes, deities, and temple visitors within "a texture of social relationship" (1998, 17). The mediated war images that people remember, coupled with the virtues and significances that people attach to war elephants, increase the intensity of the statues' agency and the sacredness as religious objects (Tambiah 1987, 219). Importantly, the makers of the elephant statues had never been mentioned in the interviews.

The distinction between revered elephant deities and typical, commonplace elephants is made by a crucial criterion: contributions in wars. From my informal interviews, the people claimed that the reason why they paid respect to the elephant statues was that the war elephants made a contribution to the nation (*có công*) in ancient warfare. For example, a 30-year-old security guard at Voi Phục Temple told me that he worshipped (*thờ*) the elephants because they took part in assisting emperors in fighting against the enemies in wars to protect the country. The elephant statues, then, epitomized the importance of elephants in warfare. Another 35-year-old man from Nghệ An stated, "Vietnamese people do not respect general elephants. But if they *có công*, yes, we'll do." By this statement, the elephants they intend to pay respect to are not only the specific ones in the legend of Linh Lang, but also other elephants that have made certain contributions to the country. This shows that the elephant statues also refer to other war elephants that people recognize from historical narratives.

Sacrificing and helping protect the Vietnamese nation are the main themes of historical narratives regarding elephants and wars. Pelley (2002, 159) argues that historical narratives are framed by the way Vietnamese ancestors defended the nation from foreign invaders and protected the frontiers. As indicated by a number of my informants, all elephants protecting the nation deserve to be worshipped (*thờ*) or commemorated (*kỷ niệm*), especially the war elephants connected to particular historical heroes. According to Minh, the security guard of Voi Phục Temple, the elephants are worshipped because of their nationalistic contributions; for example, the elephants rode by Trưng Trắc-Trưng Nhị are worshipped because they helped the Trưng ladies fight.

Another male visitor confirmed, "The elephant statues in other temples, like the temple of Hai Bà Trưng, are also worshipped because they took part in helping protect (*giúp bảo vệ*) the nation." The past is constructed through these narratives of "fighting spirits" to articulate anti-colonial and nationalist sentiments (Pelley 2002). Borrowing from Gell, the images of the elephants fighting for the country (i.e., for the Vietnamese national independence) are the active "prototypes" (1998, 19, 25), or the images recognized by the visitors dictate the way the people interpret the meaning of the elephants statues and interact with them.

As the assistants of the emperors' national heroes who are regularly worshipped by local people, the elephants also deserve respect. This relationality is found in both a spatial context (as I discussed in the previous section), and a temporal one (through historical narratives). Elephants were always referred together with the masters, heroes, emperors or gods, in the past (Association des Amis du Vieux Hué 1922; Cao 2011), showing the relationship between war elephants and revered human figures. One informant told me that elephants were even treated as the emperors' officials. Tambiah (1984, 249) discusses Thai amulets that the potency and efficacy of an amulet are transferred by the monk(s), as maker(s), to the amulet during the rituals of sacralization. The more efficacious the monk is, the more sacred the object will be, independently from its form and intrinsic nature. In this study, I argue that a main factor determining the efficacy of the elephant statues is their relation to the main heroic deity. As the people admire the deity, they also admire the elephants for being a part of Vietnamese triumphs over Chinese invaders. The repetition of the discourses made by temple visitors assures

me that historical narratives on war elephants play a large role in establishing agency in the elephant statues in the temples.

Although the elephants are mostly requested for general wishes, some specific wishes are granted due to the role of elephants in wars. Hà's statement affirms this by stating that people worship the elephants because they brought the victory and independence back to the nation. The triumphs in wars, which gave credit for both human figures and war elephants, lead to some visitors' interpretation of the elephants' specific potency. Hà, the drinks stall owner, said, "People ask for success (*thành công*) because the elephants helped us win in the battles (*làm chiến thắng*). I think people worship them because they learn from history. History exists, sacredness then follows." Besides the influence of national history on the visitors was stressed, the interview implies that historical representation meets the religious needs of the people who worship them: the term 'victory in wars' is connected to 'achievement in lives.' The historical agency gives the elephant statues the ability to grant wishes. Notably, elephant statues are sacralized by the visitors' interpretation in relation to history. The agency is the combination between historical imaginary and the local belief, blurring the boundary between history and religion.

The elephant statues determined in this study are not the only case that represents the transformation of historical figures to religious icons. Many Vietnamese national heroes have been worshipped in the same way. Trần Hưng Đạo, a Vietnamese general who defeated the Chinese invaders in the 13th century is revered as an efficacious god, so called *Thánh Trần* (God Trần), in Vietnamese folk religion (Phạm 2009). Since the

general is famous for his great victory over the Chinese enemies, people worship him for success, similarly to the elephants. Tran (2017) illustrates that, in the 18th century, some Vietnamese military worshipped and made religious sacrifices to the past heroes including Trần Hưng Đạo "in order to procure victory" (92-93). This affirms that efficacy is partly constructed by history.

In addition, the historical narratives of the elephants help perpetuate the 'us-them' boundary between Vietnam and foreign invaders. I note that the elephant statues indirectly remind the interviewees of wars, which emphasizes how the elephant commemoration practices be understood as part of the Vietnamese nation-building project. This is reflected through the word choice the informants used in expressing their opinions on the elephant statues. They frequently used the terms 'our nation' (*nước ta*), showing the collective sense of the nation's ownership, and 'against the enemies' to describe the ancient wars. These phrases represent the people's notion of the nation and the existence of 'we' against 'them,' i.e., the invaders or villains in these historical narratives (Polley 2002).

Interestingly, although the informants mainly focused on the ancient wars against the Chinese armies, 'wars' in this context sometimes include the contemporary ones in the twentieth century when elephants were no longer used as fighting vehicles, but played a small part in commuting provisions and weapons (Cao 2011). This was made clear to me when the informants mentioned recent wars during our conversations. The concept of sacrificing 'us' (the victim) against 'them' (the invaders) was reproduced many times

during my interview with Xuân, the caretaker of Voi Phục Temple. I share below some parts of the conversation in my fieldnotes:

> Xuân, sitting on a chair next to me in a worship building, illustrated her opinions that elephants were used mostly in battles since they had abilities to protect the army due to their large body structure. Elephants, for her, made merits in wars while they protected and maintained the peaceful land (*làm đất lạnh*). The animals took a big role in assisting the Vietnamese army in defeating Chinese enemies. "The elephants *có công* and have *tâm linh* (spirits)."
>
> Unexpectedly, Xuân linked the story of elephants with the contemporary wars: "We became Vietnamese today because many heroes sacrificed themselves to protect the land to be peaceful. Vietnam was ruled over by the Chinese (*Tàu*) and the French (*Pháp*). We always had wars. Lots of people sacrificed (*hy sinh*) themselves; many people protected the country. You see, how many people died in the war with the Americans? Our victory was the result of people's sacrifices for our nation."
>
> [Fieldnotes, 2 July 2019, at Voi Phục Temple, Thủ Lệ]

From the stories Xuân told during my interviews with her, she emphasized a strong border between Vietnam and other nations (China, France, and the U.S.) when we were talking about the elephants. She referred to the Vietnamese as 'victims' bullied by stronger 'enemies.' She also discussed the negative experiences from the contemporary war (American war) and the damages Vietnam faced while the people did their best and sacrificed themselves for the nation. Apparently, the discourses of war, sacrifice, and independence were reproduced, implying that elephant commemoration practices connect people with ancient wars; further, the ancient wars remind them of the war experience that they directly passed through. Since some people, especially elderly women and widows, shared the collective sufferings caused by the wars (Ito 2016, 167-168), the contributions of elephants in wars are valued and commemorated. The concept of time,

again, can be found here. The current object that people see in the present is valued because it refers to the historical event that happened in the past, no matter when it happened.

The notion of 'us' against 'them', according to Winichakul (1994), is a negative implication of constructions of nationhood because it emphasizes the differences between nations. In this regard, this notion of 'us' against 'them' can be considered as a part of the nation-building project. Although Voi Phục Temple is under the supervision of the state, and the narratives regarding the elephants and the gods (heroes) fighting against the enemies were found on the state-made sign at the temple, I would not argue that installing the elephant statues at the temple is directly related to the state's nation-building project. However, I suggest that the elephant statues and the elephant narratives themselves partly create a sense of nationalism among people who see, interact, worship, and commemorate them as a representation of Vietnamese war histories. As the Vietnamese state approved hero worship for political benefits (Phạm 2009; Schwenkel 2018; Taylor 2004), war elephants that fought alongside the national heroes should be also considered as a part of nation-building process. In return, those war memories strengthen the existence of the aura, attracting people to pay respect to and worship the elephant statues.

Before ending this section, I aim to recapture and clarify some significant points I have made about the time-based agency of the elephant statues at Voi Ré and Voi Phục Temples, using Gell's theories of art and agency. The concept of time is mainly related to history, narrated through legends and historical narratives of wars. I point out that the war imaginaries and collective memories shape the way people imbue meanings and values to

the elephant statues, while the elephant statues mediate their interactions with history. I suggest that the agency is created and acquired from their virtues, contributions in wars, relations to religious deities, and their connections to the discourses of war, sacrifice, and national independence that are portrayed through the narratives. Without the history recognized by the people, an object may not be able to maintain its efficacy and agency. In addition, the historical agency gives the elephant statues the spiritual agency to grant specific wishes for their visitors (Tambiah 1987). All of these imply the influence of time or temporal context in relation to the elephants' agency.

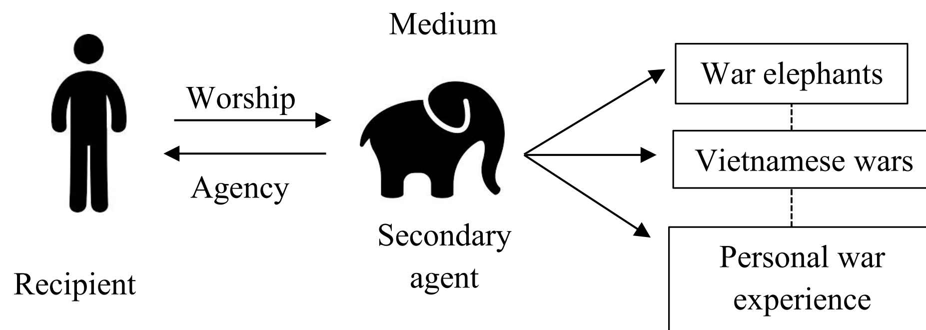

Figure 7: The role of elephant statues as a medium or a secondary agent, mediating Vietnamese people's war memories

The complex relationship between people, object, and history can be understood through Gell's model of Recipient, Agent, Prototype, and Artist. According to Gell, in the situation when people worship an image, people are the Recipients (Active) who see the images or the Agents (Passive), and interpret them. By contrast, the elephant statues are Agents (Active) who have the ability to grant wishes to the Recipients (Passive) who ask the elephants to serve their secular desires (1998, 31). The elephant statues contain an "index of agency" (1998, 66) which makes people react to and believe in them.

The elephant statues are not self-sufficient agents, but secondary agents with no direct intention to cause actions. In this case, they acquire the secondary agency from other sources, like the historical narratives and their relation to gods. The statues bridge their iconic characters with the Prototype (Active) of war elephants, which are connected to war imaginaries: the sacrifice of heroes, wars, and national independence (1998, 25-26). According to the diagram above, artists are missing from the relationship simply because the interviewees never mentioned them. Instead, the initiators who shape the way people interpret the meanings of the elephant statues are legends and historical narratives which have been reproduced in the society.

Elephant commemoration is a part of Vietnamese national hero commemoration. Most war elephants commemorated are related to important historical wars, battlefields, and Vietnamese heroes or gods. Besides serving the psychological and spiritual needs of the temple visitors, the elephant statues also play a role in the Vietnamese contemporary nation-building project. As a result, historical time and present time are connected via these commemoration practices.

Conclusion: Aura, Agency, and the Nation-Building in Vietnam

> [R]ituals of commemorations, … due to their capacity to shape national memory, constitute a powerful project of the representation of the past in modern Vietnam. (Roszko 2010, 2)

Roszko (2010) and many researchers in Vietnamese Studies (Endres and Lauser 2011; Pelley 2002; Phạm 2009; Schwenkel 2009), propose that commemoration practices of historical figures, as political and historical tools, take part in constructing the national past memories through narratives and physical objects, like monuments or rock steles.

Some commemorations of historical figures are integrated into religious spaces, blurring the boundary between secular remembrance and spiritual worship (Phạm 2009; Schwenkel 2018), showing the relationship between religious practice and the state nation-building project.

In the previous section, I discussed elephant commemoration in Vietnam, using Benjamin's concept of aura (1969) and Gell's notion of agency (1998), to represent that, despite their animal status, commemoration of elephants takes part in nation-building, efforts in ways akin to human figures. The elephants are valued not only because of their statues' authenticity, but also because of their relations to religious spaces and historical time, which are socially constructed. In terms of spatial context, I argue that the emplacements and relationalities (between the elephants and other surrounding sacred objects in the temples) create the aura and the agency for the elephant statues. For temporal context, I suggest that the elephants' agency is transferred and legitimized by legends and historical narratives that emphasize their important contributions in wars. Besides bearing religious values, these spatial and temporary aura and agency create a sense of nationalism among the Vietnamese people. That is, historical, political, and religious values of the elephant statues are symbiotically co-existent, representing a blurry line between them. In addition, I propose that humans, the temple visitors, play a role as connectors who interpret and connect the history and religious beliefs together, as shown in the diagram below.

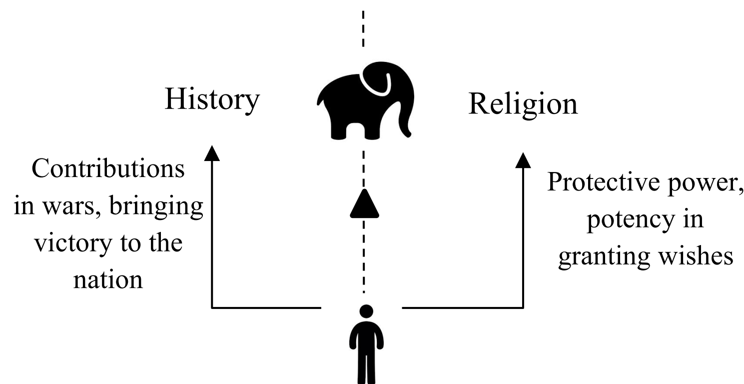

Figure 8: People as a link
between the historical and religious values of the elephant statues

To conclude my research findings, I aim to recapture the ideas I discussed earlier in order to rethink what the aura and agency of the elephant statues reflect with regards to animal commemoration practices and the Vietnamese nation-building project.

Animal Commemoration as a Nation-Building Project

Some Vietnamese people believe in or worship certain animals, especially the four mythical animals (To 2013) mentioned earlier. Animal representations can be found in sacred spaces; for example, four mythical animals are included as elements of the main god altar in Bạch Mã Temple, Hanoi. As elephants are not commonly respected animals in Vietnam, my initial question for this study was: Why do Vietnamese people commemorate and worship elephant statues in some particular places like Voi Phục and Voi Ré Temples?

Based on my informants, people commemorate the elephants because they *có công* (make a nationalist contribution) by assisting warriors in ancient wars like human historical heroes (Schlecker 2013, 86-87). This suggests that *có công* discourse

reproduced through the practice of commemoration can be considered as part of the nation-building project that creates the sense of 'nation' and collective feelings among worshippers. In other words, the existence of elephant statues reminds the people of wars, perceived through historical narratives that create the negative distinction between 'us' and 'them,' the enemies. The concepts of nation-building (Winichakul 1994) and imagined communities (Anderson 1983) can be applied here. People indirectly experience the collective sense of nation through mythic narratives and physical objects like the elephant statues. The relationship between elephant commemoration and nation-building raises another question: Are other mythical animals also related to the state project?

Considering the nation-building issues in a broader context of legends and animal commemoration, we can see the similar pattern repeated in stories of other magical animals. The theme of wars against invaders that brought insecurities to the nation-state has been reproduced through animal commemoration practice. The legend of Hoàn Kiếm Lake is a good example. Emperor Lê Lợi used the magic sword to defeat Chinese invaders, regaining national independence, before the sacred turtle took them back to the dragon god (Nguyễn 2015). The story underlines that Vietnam was invaded and ruled by the Chinese, the powerful enemies of Vietnamese people. The turtle plays a role as a god servant, coming to take the magic sword back, which implies that the god is on Vietnam's side. Similar to the elephant legend of Voi Phục Temple, the turtle legend makes a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them,' heroes and enemies, or good guys and bad guys, in the imagination of listeners or readers.

In addition, like the elephants, the gold turtle is also commemorated through a physical form. In 2011, local newspapers reported the death of the legendary turtle, so-called *Cụ Rùa* (the great turtle), in Hanoi. Influenced by the legend, the news brought abundant sadness and grief to Vietnamese people who believed they had already lost the important sacred figure forever (Ives 2016). They stuffed the specimen and installed it at Ngọc Sơn Temple, together with another one from Hoàn Kiếm Lake, for other people to worship and commemorate.

Figure 9: The stuffed turtles at Ngọc Sơn Temple, Hanoi
(Photo by: Chari Hamratanaphon)

Both stuffed turtles and elephant statues are physical objects that evoke a sense of national pride among Vietnamese people. The magical powers added to the animal characters in the legends further instantiate the nationalist message hidden within the story. Similarly, the religious aura and agency of the elephant statues in a sacred environment cannot completely undermine the fact that the statues are attached to war narratives. Interestingly, the concept of nation and sacrifice that the Vietnamese value

even makes the aura more intense in terms of historical value, which does not originated in the object itself, but from some social and historical factors surrounding it.

As Voi Phục, Voi Ré, and Ngọc Sơn Temples are all under the state's administration and patronage, I claim that the legends, coupled with the installation of the animal representations, are a part of the Vietnamese state's nation-building project. The objects and the re-narrated stories benefit the state in stimulating a collective feeling of nationalism among Vietnamese people. I intend to suggest, in addition to their traditional roles in religious and spiritual spheres, that animal commemoration also plays a role in the nation-building process as it can be viewed or connected with politics and the idea of nationhood.

Folk Narratives: A Basic Factor of Aura and Agency Construction?

Throughout this paper, I have argued that the aura and the agency of an object do not originate in the object itself, but are created by complex and relative social factors (Adorno 1997; Gell 1998), especially sacred environments and folk narratives to which the certain object is attached. As many of my informants describe the significance of the elephant statues and how they are worshipped with the statement, "The legend told that…," I then realize that folk narratives play a big part in creating the meaning, value, and sacred aura of an object. I suggest that the narratives help transfer the agency from other sacred objects in the surrounding environment to the elephant statues by connecting those elements together.

First, historical narratives or legends make the elephant statues visible and meaningful to many Vietnamese people. In the case of the elephant statues at Voi Phục

and Voi Ré Temples, the people revere the statues because the statues are attached to certain stories. Although the visitors at Voi Phục Temple do not know the exact legend of the temple, they perceive the statues as "war elephants" that helped the god, or the king, protect the nation. At Voi Ré Temple, Ô Long is commemorated for its loyalty to its master; the sentimental legend of its undying loyalty continues to touch locals and visitors. The legends influence the people's attitudes toward the elephants. Without these legends and historical narratives, the elephant statues would not be so culturally significant.

Secondly, folk narratives help transfer sacredness or agency from object(s) to object(s). In other words, folk narratives connect all objects together in one story. For instance, the legend of Voi Phục Temple connects the war elephants with Linh Lang, the main god. Therefore, when the people worship Linh Lang in the temple, the agency of Linh Lang is transferred to the elephant statues. Then, the people also worship the statues as the statues are relevant to the sacred god. The same phenomenon can be found at Hai Bà Trưng Temple where people worship the elephant statues because they were the vehicles of Hai Bà Trưng, the two famous and revered Vietnamese heroines, narrated in historical records.

In sum, besides temporal and spatial factors, I consider narratives or legends important factors of an object's aura and agency. The narratives work with other social factors to create the agency of an object because they considerably influence Vietnamese people's attitudes toward things, especially symbolic figures. Going beyond the statues, narratives reflect political, historical, and cultural conditions of people in each society

(Nguyễn 2017; Roszko 2010). They represent what people value and remember (Pentikainen 1973). I thus suggest that folk narratives should be one basic factor to consider when studying the relationship of people and objects.

Concluding Notes

“You are a good girl. You know what to do.”

Xuân, the caretaker of Voi Phục Temple, said to me after I paid respect to the elephant statues at the temple front gate before I left. Her statement reminded me of some of the questions with which I entered my first day of fieldwork: What makes Vietnamese people commemorate the war elephants? What is the role of elephant commemoration? At that time, when I saw the elephant statues with the incense burners in front of them, I suddenly noticed that I should pay respect to these statues too. I did not exactly know why-- perhaps because of the location of the statues, or because of the legends I had read on the internet, or because of the invisible ‘aura’ of the elephant statues.

‘Aura’ is a controversial and debatable concept. According to Benjamin (1969), whose theorization of the aura I use as the theoretical framework of this study, the aura is a powerful force that resides in an individual authentic object with no any other social factors involved. The existence of aura is supported by two key factors: place and time. He presents that the originality of an object leads to the creation of aura. The object with aura can be traced back to its origin, history, and the change of ownership. Similarly, many scholars who study ritual arts and sacred objects (Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn 2010; Tambiah, 1987; Vũ 2008) propose that efficaciousness and sacred aura can be found in

the original objects made by sacred figures. In other words, the aura resides in a particular object itself.

Departing from Benjamin, I argue that the aura does not exist inherently in the objects themselves, but rather, is created by their spatial and temporal dynamics coupled with other external factors (Adorno 1997; Errington 1993; Gell 1998; Lin 2015). In this study, I illustrate that the agency and the aura are also tied to a place like a sacred temple, and time like relevant historical narratives, as evidenced in the case of war elephant commemoration practices. In terms of place, the location of an object and the surrounding environment affect the creation of the sacred aura in that particular object. As for time, I note that national history shapes the way people see an object. Moreover, folk narratives like temple legends play a big role in the construction of aura and agency since they greatly impact Vietnamese people's attitudes toward things (Nguyễn 2017; Pentikainen 1973; Roszko 2010). These narratives help create not only the aura, but also a sense of nation among the people as a tool of nation-building process (Pelley 2002; Roszko 2010; Schwenkel 2018) that supports the state's political power.

'Agency' is a complex concept whose definitions point to the social relationship and socio-cultural contexts (Gell 1998, 16) of each society. In my study, the people at Voi Phục Temple, as recipients, interpret the meanings of the elephant statues by connecting their war imaginaries with the indexical statues. This process results in the creation of agency. The concept of agency is context-dependent, limited to a particular community. That is why it took me a while in the field to understand *chào*, another level

of commemoration that shows inequality of status between human god's agency and the elephants' agency (McLennan 2018; Snyders 2015).

Although animal commemoration practices can be found throughout Vietnam, the practice of elephant worship is still limited, making the topic an interesting one for further study. Elephant commemoration in this study allows us to rethink the concept of aura and agency as well as the complex relationship between humans, religious objects, place, and time. The issue also encourages us to reconsider the importance of folk narratives in this contemporary world. I therefore hope that this research can contribute to the academic field of Vietnamese Studies, Southeast Asian Studies, folklore studies, and anthropology of art. The limitations of time, space, and language mentioned earlier in the study make it slightly difficult for me to discuss some issues in more detail. Lastly, I suggest that further comparative studies between animal commemoration practices in Southeast Asian countries as well as studies of gender in ritual spaces in relation to folk narratives need to be done in the future.

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Appendix

List of Notified Informants' Profiles

Throughout this paper, I used pseudonyms to protect the personal identities of the informants in my field research. Scholars and officers whom I identified by their real name, if any, are not included in this table. I also provide a short profile of each notified informant to help give the readers context. Each pseudonym is a common Vietnamese name that I determined based on the informant's gender and age.

Pseudonym	General information
Bùi	A 28-year-old female regular visitor of Voi Phục Temple in Thủ Lệ who can communicate in English. Working in an international bank, Bùi is familiar with the temple and seems to pay respect to every single sacred object with a careful manner.
Hà	The drinks stall owner at Voi Phục Temple in Thủ Lệ. She was born in 1961, having no children or husband. Besides drinks, she sells offerings and worship sets like snacks or incense sticks. She operates her stall every day, except during rainy days, from around 6 a.m. to 3-4 p.m.
Hùng	A male temple caretaker serving in a worship building at Huyền Trân Temple. He knows the legends of many temples in Huế, including Voi Ré Temple.
Lan	The 71-year-old female caretaker of Voi Phục Temple in Thụy Khuê. She has twenty-five years of experience working in the temple.
Long	A 70-year-old male visitor of Voi Phục Temple who always dressed in Vietnamese clothing. As he mentioned during our interview, he has visited many temples that possess elephant statues in different countries. He visited Voi Phục Temple in Thủ Lệ with his wife for the ceremony on the first day of the lunar month.

Pseudonym	General information
Minh	A security guard at Voi Phục Temple in Thủ Lệ, in his fifties. He has been hired by the state to take care of the temple. He works with younger security guards.
Phương	The female owner of the hostel where I stayed in Hanoi, aged around 50. With the exception of a nine-year period during which she worked abroad, she has lived in the old quarter of Hanoi her entire life.
Sơn	The 87-year-old male caretaker of Voi Phục Temple in Thụy Khuê with thirty years of experience working in this temple. He has been hired by the state to work as a caretaker.
Thanh	A 26-year-old part-time English tutor who graduated with a degree in tourism from the University of Huế. Her parents are historians working in the imperial city and the royal cemeteries in Huế. Her uncle is a historical writer. Because of her family's background, she has a detailed knowledge of Vietnamese history and Huế's history.
Tuyến	A museum curator with eight years of experience in Vietnamese history, who is responsible for the ethnic-cultural village section at the Vietnamese Museum of Ethnology, Hanoi.
Tý	An 87-year-old male visitor whose house is located next to Voi Phục Temple, Thủ Lệ. Claiming that he has been visiting the temple since he was a child, he told me of the changes that the temple has undergone over the years.
Xuân	The 73-year-old female caretaker of Voi Phục Temple in Thủ Lệ. Her duties are to clean the worship building and to assist the people in their religious activities from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day. She receives a monthly salary of 2.5 million VND (equivalent to 110 USD). Her husband was sent to the army during the Vietnam War.
Vân	A female caretaker at Voi Phục Temple in Thủ Lệ, in her early sixties. She works with Xuân in a worship building.