

ON ESTABLISHMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE WORSHIP OF MOTHER GODDESS IN THE NORTHERN DELTA IN VIETNAM: SEEN FROM POLITICAL ANGLE

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The worship of Mother Goddesses is a kind of folk belief. *It combines the worships of Goddesses, of Mother Goddesses, of Three or Four Palaces. It manifests the sacred faith in Mother Goddesses' ability that creates and sponsors human beings, universe and society.*

With specific characteristics, the worship of Goddesses manifests its vitality in historical stages. The worship of Mother Goddesses reflects social entity where it exists. It adapts and supplements strangeness to its contents so it can exist and develop until today.

Under the political angle, Marxism thinks that belief or religion is neither a supernatural phenomenon, which was endowed by deities to save human kind, nor attribute of human beings. Religion is a social phenomenon. It emerges in society of human beings. Religion and belief are similar to law and morality. They are concrete manifestations of social consciousness. They reflect social existence and it is regulated by social existence. Of course, Marxism also affirms that the form of social consciousness is independent in its shaping and developing.

With above approach, we find that the economic- social base for the birth of worship of Goddess is agricultural system. Because the worship of Goddesses is a form of social consciousness, it does not exist passively, but it always interacts with other forms of social consciousness (with present kinds of religions and beliefs).

1. On cultural, economic, social, geographical influences to the process of shaping and existing of the worship of Goddesses of Vietnamese in the Northern Delta

1.1. The influence of geo - cultural condition

It is said that in the process of existing and developing, human beings are always influenced by two main relations: the relation between human beings

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and human beings (the social relation) and the relation between human beings and nature. It means the relation of human beings with geographical condition and climatic environment where human beings are living. Because of different geographical elements human beings find different ways of living. These ways consist of mode of production, life style, customs, religions, beliefs...

In the other words, natural environment itself creates cultural identity of each region. If we want to learn about and study a certain type of belief or religion, we should study geo - cultural element of region where the type of belief or religion comes into the world.

The Northern delta is an important region in the development of economy, culture and military in the past and at present. The Northern delta was formed by alluvia systems of the Red River and Thái Bình River. The Northern Delta consists of many provinces and cities such as Hanoi, Hải Phòng, Thái Bình, Hưng Yên, Hải Dương...

The basic feature of the Northern delta is low and sloping from Northwest to Southeast. The silt of Red River and Thái Bình River has raised the level of the Northern Delta so its land is very rich. It is suitable for wet rice cultivation⁽²⁾.

The climate also influences wet rice cultivation in the Northern Delta. The climate in the Northern Delta is divided into four distinguished seasons, its annual average temperature is about 22.5 - 23.5 degree Celsius and its annual average rainfall is about 1,400 - 2,000 ml.⁽³⁾ Because of tropical climate, in the Northern delta there are forests.

However, the tropical climate obstructs peasants who cultivate rice. The irregularity of climate influences the productivity of rice. That is why Vietnamese peasants are very hard working and economical. The wet rice cultivation is depended upon climate, so Vietnamese peasants look for many types of belief such as the cult of nature, the cult of tutelary god, the cult of Mother Goddess.

1.2 The influence of economic - social condition

The Geo - cultural condition contributes to establish cultural feature of community. It indirectly shaped the foundation for the birth of worship of

² Diệp Đình Hoa. *Vietnamese in the Northern Delta*, Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 2000, p. 26.

³ Vũ Tự Lập (Chief Editor). *Culture and Inhabitants in the Red River Delta*, Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 1991, p. 11.

Mother Goddess. The mode of production is direct element that helps the establishment and development of the worship of Mother Goddess.

It is said that the economic base, which rules the establishment and development of the worship of Mother Goddesses, is the wet rice cultivation. The paternal family in Vietnam was similar to the paternal family in China. However, size of Vietnamese paternal family was different from Chinese family's size. Chinese family was often large. Some generations lived in same house. Vietnamese family was often small. Because of climate and terrain, Vietnamese peasants often depended upon nature. They prayed all invisible power to have good crops. The State's ownership of lands, fields and low labor production created many classes in traditional economy in the Northern Delta. People had to exploit and take advantage of the diversity of terrain and living environment for their life

Besides agriculture production, other economic activities such as cattle breeding, home craft, trade also play important roles.

Because of small farmer economy, women play important roles in their families as well as in society (although, in the past Vietnamese family in North followed patriarchy). They not only look after fieldwork but also manager their families. Vietnamese proverb "The order of boss is not important as mistress's order" implies the role of women in home affairs and foreign affairs. In religious and belief activities, Vietnamese women also play an important role (unlike Chinese women). Vietnamese women have right to inherit cult portion and practice the worship of ancestor. According to the regulation of feudal law (in 1471) "but for son, daughter can replace son in the management and preservation of worship" or "they will entrust the eldest son or the eldest grand son with the management and preservation of worship. However, for the eldest son or the eldest grand son, they will entrust the younger son or the younger grand son with this task. But for the younger son or the younger grand son they will entrust the elder daughter with this task"⁽⁴⁾.

When getting married, Vietnamese women still keep their family names. They see affairs of both their family and their husband's family. Vietnamese people have tradition to worship women (grandmother, mother, aunt, sister when they die). Many researchers think that this tradition respects women.

⁴ Đỗ Trinh Huệ. *Culture and Belief of Vietnamese family in View of L. Cardiere*, Thuận Hóa Publishing House, Huế, 2000, pp. 228-229.

In Vietnam, the “mother principle” is respected and it roots in all aspects of social life. Vietnamese women not only play important roles in family but also in social community. They not only undertake economic, educational, religious activities but also political ones. There are many wonderful images of women such as Bà Trưng, Bà Triệu, Ý Lan, Bùi Thị Xuân... The “Mother principle” takes root in character, psychology and lifestyle of Vietnamese people. Therefore, we can explain why the worship of Mother Goddesses can be born and preserved for a long time.

2. The influence of the religious and belief form on the establishment and existence of the worship of Mother Goddesses in the Northern Delta

The form of social consciousness is the result of social reflection and decided by social existence. However, religion and belief have their relative independence when they influence social existence as well as the form of social consciousness. Therefore, we should examine the features of Vietnamese culture, religion and belief when examining the establishment and existence of the worship of Mother Goddesses. Of course, the other forms of social consciousness also influence to some extent the establishment of the worship of Mother Goddesses. This influence is not worth considering. In case of influence, it is carried out by means of socio - economic bases or the concrete religious and belief forms.

When remarking on spiritual and cultural life of Vietnamese people, L. Cadiere compared finely Vietnamese religion and belief with thick forests in Trường Sơn ⁽⁵⁾. Vietnamese take part in many cultural, religious and belief activities. This article only deals with the establishment and development of the worship of Mother Goddesses - the natural cult, fertile belief, the beliefs of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism

2.1. The natural cult and fertile belief

The natural cult was established and developed quite early in Vietnamese community in the Northern Delta. The subjects of this cult are natural elements that are respected by people. Because people think that, these elements have supernatural forces and they can rule people’s life. According to Marxism - Leninism on the origin of religion, the weakness of productive force, the limitation of awareness and psychological elements create religious and belief phenomena, including natural cult.

⁵ Ibid p. 79- 81

When cultivating wet rice, Vietnamese depend upon weather and nature. Vietnamese usually pray Gods and Goddesses such as Goddess of Rice, Goddess of Thunder, Goddess of Rain, and Goddess of River... because they hope to have good crops.

The cult of Gods who originate from nature makes polytheist belief in Vietnamese religious belief. Polytheistic belief and animistic view came into the world early and have existed until today. They have not only existed in Vietnamese society but also influenced other religious beliefs including the worship of Mother Goddess.

When developing, the cult of Mother Goddesses has accepted many contents of natural cult. The first recognition was to feminize Gods. Many Gods were feminized to be Goddesses such as Goddess of Forest, Goddess of Tree, and Goddess of Rice... The process of feminization of Gods took place gradually with different reasons, but the elements of agricultural production ruled this process.

When the worship of Three or Four Palaces came into the world, many Goddesses were generalized into four Holy Mothers: Mẫu Thượng Thiên (it means the Goddess in Heaven who manages natural phenomena relating to airspace); Goddess of Mountain (who manages natural phenomena relating to forest); Goddess of Water (who manages natural phenomena relating to water); Goddess of Land (who manages natural phenomena relating to land). In the natural cult, people pray many gods but in the worship of Mother Goddess people only pray four Mother Goddesses. These goddesses represent natural elements relating to Vietnamese people's life. However, we still see the altars of Monsignor Snake and of Ông Hổ (Tiger) in the temple.

The aim of agricultural culture is directed toward prosperity and growth. Besides the development of polytheistic belief and animistic view, the fertile belief of Vietnamese came into world and developed early.

The fertile cult is manifested in the worship of genitals and in copulation. In legend, the secret parts were magnified to show the respect of the fertile cult.

We can see that silhouette of genitals appears vaguely in everywhere. For example, the stick that pricks holes in the ground for sowing is symbol of male genital; the stone pillar in Dạm pagoda; the stone pillar in Vũ Ninh, Ninh Bình... Each symbol has its own significance, but all of them represent fertile philosophy.

Because of penetration of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, the fertile belief gradually lost its first fertile feature. It stylized, changed, and sheltered in other forms of religion and belief. It also sheltered in the worship of Mother Goddess.

The first stamp of fertile belief in the worship of Mother Goddess was the term “Mother”. “Mother” in the worship of Mother Goddess not only denoted parturition of woman but also manifested the development of all things.

Vietnamese in ancient time did not explain the natural change, but they could explain the development in their community by their observations-mother who gave births to children. From there they could explain the change of natural world. According to them *Mẹ Cây* (Mother of Tree) gave the births to many fruits; *Mẹ Cá* (Mother of Fish) gave the births to fishes... The word “Mother” shows the fertile significance. When falling in line with the worship of Mother Goddesses, the stamp of fertility is not carried out by the worship of genitals or copulation.

The second stamp of the fertile cult in the worship of Mother Goddess is to praise of female feature. We know that the most important elements for peasants are land and water. These elements are considered to have “female features”. Vietnamese peasants often pray agricultural genii, especial Earth Genie. This genie is feminized.

Besides Goddesses, there are Gods to be worshipped in the pantheon of Mother Goddess

2.2 Buddhism

Buddhism was brought to the Northern Delta from the first years of the 1st century by two routs. The first way, Indian monks came to Vietnam along with traders by sea. The second way, Buddhism reached Vietnam from Chinese people by road.

Unlike Confucianism, Buddhism came to Vietnam peacefully. The ideas of the four kinds of boundless mind (boundless kindness, boundless pity; boundless joy and limitless indifference) in Buddhist dogmas are very dear to the traditional morality of Vietnamese. Therefore, Buddhism has promptly fallen in the line with Vietnamese native beliefs especially with the agricultural beliefs. The worship of Mother Goddesses or the worship of Goddesses becomes an important part in the spiritual life of Vietnamese peasants.

The Buddhist acceptance and influence on the worship of Mother Goddess are manifested in some following contents.

In legends:

We can see the interference of Buddhism and the worship of Mother Goddesses in the legend of *Man Nương* and *Liễu Hạnh*.

The image of *Man Nương* in *Cổ Châu Phật Bản Hạnh* reflects the clever combination of Buddhism and the worship of Mother Goddess. The agricultural Goddesses were Buddhized to become Bodhisattvas (Four Dharmas): Goddess of Cloud, Goddess of Rain, Goddess of Thunder and Goddess of Lightning.

If *Man Nương* has been an image of clever combination of Buddhism and the worship of Mother Goddesses in the first stages, the image of *Liễu Hạnh* has been also a combination of Buddhism and the worship of Mother Goddesses of Vietnamese people in the 16th century.

In popular consciousness of Vietnamese, *Liễu Hạnh* is one goddess of four immortals and a leading feature in the belief of Three or Four Palaces. According to the legend, *Liễu Hạnh* was saved by Sakyamuni when she lost in Sông Sơn battle. Since then, *Liễu Hạnh* became a Buddhist as her statement “*I am Quỳnh Hoa princess in fairyland. I find Buddhism to be merciful. I would like to follow Buddhism*”⁶. Perhaps so, altar to Mother Goddess is frequent in Vietnamese pagodas.

In the place of worship:

According to architectural type *Tiền Phật Hậu Mẫu* (Buddha is in front, Mother Goddess is at rear) many pagodas have a hall reserved for the worship of Mother Goddesses. Therefore, the relation between worship of Buddha and the worship of Mother Goddesses meets the spiritual need of Vietnamese. There is a statue of Avalokitesvara in the pantheon and temple where worship Mother Goddesses.

In the rites:

On the rite, the worship of Mother Goddesses is influenced by Buddhist rite. Mother Goddesses are worshipped on the first day and the 15th day of the lunar month. *Chầu vãn* songs mention deities of Buddhism.

The worship of Mother Goddesses and Buddhist belief influence each other. This influence aims to meet the rich spiritual need of peasants in the Northern delta. This influence helps the worship of Mother Goddesses and Buddhist belief to coexist and develop in the great change of Vietnamese society in the past and at present.

⁶ Bùi Hạnh Cẩn and Lê Chân. *Viêng Market and Phú Festival*, Education Publishing House, Hanoi, 1993, p. 81.

2.3. Confucianism

Confucianism is political theory. It was born in the Spring and Autumn period (722-481 BC) and Warring State period (403-221 BC) in Chinese history. Confucianism has dealt with socio-political idea but not theological idea.

Along with the development and expansion of Chinese territory, Confucianism was introduced into Vietnam. Confucianism had not been suitable to Vietnam when Vietnamese society had hardly been born in clanship (from the 1st century to the 10th century). Thus, Confucianism could not be disseminated widely. When Vietnamese social structure more or less had features of feudal state, Confucianism was used and propagated in Vietnamese society.

Because of social needs as well as the needs of machinery of feudal government, Confucianism integrated into Buddhism and Taoism to establish three religions in the same origin. At the same time, Confucianism combined with the traditional beliefs. Confucianism influenced the worship of Mother Goddess. This influence showed clearly in two contents:

The first, because of the close regulations of Confucianism, people responded strongly to the feudal society. The image of *Liễu Hạnh* was the symbol of this respond. It expressed the thirsty for freedom, equality and justice of peasants in general and women in particular. In other words, the closeness and severity of Confucianism were one of many reasons to create the worship of three palaces or four palaces (Marx affirmed that "Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and protest against real suffering")⁽⁶⁾

The second, the Confucian influence on the worship of Mother Goddess manifests in arrangement of pantheon of Mother Goddess. If in the feudal society there was king, in the shrine there was a king together with Goddesses; Society had mandarins, so had shrine; Society had princes and princesses, so had shrine.

2.4. Taoism

Taoism was born early in China. It inherited and developed mystical elements in Taoist ideas. Taoist ideas gave prominence to nature; Taoism led people to fairy world, happy and permanent life. Taoism looked for the immortality in the world. Taoism was introduced into Vietnam early and it quickly took root in Vietnamese inhabitants.

⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel. *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, National Politics Publisher, Hanoi, 1995, p. 570.

It is said that Taoism has had close relation to native popular belief. It combined with animism and magic methods of native inhabitants in the ancient time. When having condition, it became the native belief with Taoist features. Some scholars think that the worship of Mother Goddess is a manifestation of Vietnamese Taoism. Phan Ngọc writes, "The worship of Mother Goddess (...) may be considered the manifestation of Vietnamese Taoism"⁽⁷⁾. Nguyễn Hồng Dương thinks, "The worship of Mother Goddess is influenced deeply by Taoism and it is a variant of Taoism."⁽⁸⁾ Ngô Đức Thịnh writes "basing on the popular worship of Mother Goddess with the influences of Chinese Taoism, the cult of four palaces was established. It is the special Taoism of Vietnam"⁽⁹⁾.

We think that the notable features in cultural history and development of Vietnamese are combinations of religions and culture. Basing on native religious belief (the cult of agricultural Goddesses, natural cult...) Vietnamese had have received and adapted some contents of Taoism that corresponded with Vietnamese religious beliefs. Taoist images have been manifested clearly in the places for worship of Three or Four Palaces.

Although the worship of Mother Goddess has been influenced deeply by Taoism, the contents of the worship Mother Goddesses has given prominence to the role of Mother, of Goddesses. People pray Mother Goddess and Goddesses to have happy family, prosperous life... In a certain aspect, we find that Taoism and the worship of Mother Goddess can not homogenize (they are different from each other on rite of worship, subjects of worship and the aim of believers).

In short, under the philosophical angle, we find that the establishment, existence and change of the worship of Mother Goddesses have been influenced by objective reasons of society not by subjective elements of individual or community. We should bring out this problem so that we should not remark the worship of Mother Goddesses unilaterally and extremely, especially in present stage. /.

⁷ Phan Ngọc. *The Identity of Vietnamese Culture*, Literature Publisher, 2002, p. 348.

⁸ Nguyễn Hồng Dương. *Religion in the relation with Culture and Development in Vietnam*. Social Science Publisher, Hanoi, 2004, p. 204.

⁹ Ngô Đức Thịnh. *Hát vắn*, National Culture Publisher, Hanoi, 1992, p. 22.