

ENGENDERING EMOTION AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN VIETNAMESE MEDIUMSHIP

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This chapter examines how musical performance is bound up with displays and exchanges of sentiment in Vietnamese spirit possession rituals, known as *len dong*. I will show how the expression of emotion is culturally mediated through ritual practice and musical performance by exploring the affective modalities of mediumship from new perspectives.⁽¹⁾ I consider the ways in which emotional expressions in ritual practices are inflected by gender relations to the environment and discuss how the exchange of “sentimental relations” (*tin h cam*) among musicians and between musicians and their “audience” is a highly prized ideal during mediumship rituals.

Deeply felt sentiments are mediated, shared and expressed in mediumship practices in numerous ways. The process of “coming out” as a medium, the special relationships mediums develop with certain spirits, the bodily experience of spirit possession, the enactment of ritual acts, divine utterances, and the music and dance performed during rituals, are all invested with emotional associations and meanings.⁽²⁾ To explore these affective meanings, I examine the symbolic, bodily and social aspects of ritual experience and performance, and consider the religious framework of mediumship as a complex system of affect.⁽³⁾ In this system, linkages between emotion, the environment, gender and ethnicity are encoded in the

sonic and mythical identities of the spirits. Through expressive musical performance and ritual practice, a range of emotions and particular environments in the natural world are related to the ethnicity and gendered characteristics of incarnated spirits. I begin with a symbolic analysis of the expressive potential of the religious system and then consider how spirit possession embodies emotional differences according to the types of spirits being manifest and the gender identity of the performer. Furthermore, I demonstrate how the call to mediumship for women and men relates to gender identity, emotional temperament and a background

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(1) My previous writing on Vietnamese mediumship (Norton 2009) has addressed some of the emotional dimensions of spirit possession. This chapter is adapted from the publication “Engendering Emotion and the Environment in Vietnamese Music and Ritual” in Fiona Magowan and Louise Wrazen’s edited volume *Performing Gender, Place, and Emotion in Music: Global Perspectives* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013: 17-37).

(2) In this chapter I do not adopt the distinctions that some theorists have made between sentiment, emotion, affect and feeling. I use them interchangeably following everyday English understandings. When referring to Vietnamese concepts relating to sentiment, such as “having heart” (*co tam*) and “sentiment” or “sentimental relations” (*tin h cam*), I make this clear by retaining the Vietnamese phrasing.

(3) Other ethnomusicological studies that explore various issues relating to symbolic, bodily and social aspects of musical affect include Feld (1990), Tolbert (1990), Turino (1999), Henderson (1996), Wolf (2001), Becker (2004) and Magowan (2007).

of personal crises. The combination of these elements shapes how music is intertwined with the bodily feeling and emotional arousal of possession. Finally, I discuss how the affective dimensions of mediumship music, known as *chau van* extend through the musicians and listeners to facilitate the development of sentimental relations.

Introduction to *len dong*

Len dong rituals hold a central place in the system of religious beliefs known as the Four Palace religion (*Dao Tu Phu*) or Mother religion (*Dao Mau*) (see Ngo Duc Thinh 1996). The pantheon of spirits, which forms the backbone of the religious system, consists of a hierarchy of ranks of spirits: the mother spirits (*mau*), General Tran Hung Dao (and some of his family members), mandarins (*quan*), ladies (*chau*), princes (*ong hoang*), princesses (*co*) and young princes (*cau*). Within each rank, spirits are numbered as “first,” “second,” and “third,” and so on, with the exception of some regional spirits, which are not always named with an ordinal number. During *len dong* a medium usually incarnates several spirits from each rank in sequence according to the hierarchy of the pantheon. When a spirit is about to be incarnated, a red cloth is placed over the medium’s head by assistants (usually two or four) who surround the medium. Following the onset of possession, the assistants remove the head cloth and dress the medium in the special clothes of the spirit incarnated. The medium then performs a conventional sequence of ritual acts and dances. Although some individual spirits carry out distinctive acts and have their own dances, the ritual

sequence for each spirit rank exhibits some similarities. Prestigious male spirits such as the mandarins, for instance, “offer incense to the altar” and “wave incense” to ward off evil spirits before performing vigorous military dances with swords. After the military dances, the medium sits down in front of the temple altar, and then drinks rice wine, smokes cigarettes and interacts with ritual participants. In contrast to the typical ritual sequence for the mandarins, the lady spirits do not perform the ritual acts with incense and their dances utilize objects such as fans and small ropes set on fire, rather than swords. When the incarnation of each spirit draws to close, the assistants throw the red cloth over the medium’s head once again.

Mediums usually arrange at least two *len dong* a year – either in public temples (*den*) or their own private temples or shrines in their homes (*dien*) – on auspicious dates, such as the death anniversaries of spirits, *ngay gio*, or on dates around the beginning and end of the year or the changing of seasons.⁽⁴⁾ *Len dong* are held to “serve” (*hau*) the spirits and they are a vehicle through which divine advice and healing is sought for issues or difficulties mediums and their disciples face in their everyday lives.⁽⁵⁾ When possessed, the medium “transmits”

⁽⁴⁾ Many mediums also hold *len dong* during large festivals such as the Phu Giay festival in Nam Dinh province about 100kms south of Hanoi, which is held annually in the third lunar month.

⁽⁵⁾ The therapeutic aspects of mediumship as a form of folk healing have been explored by several scholars (e.g., Endres 2011; Nguyen Thi Hien 2008; Nguyen Kim Hien 2001). In this paper I concentrate on the emotional dimensions of rituals, which are I consider to be key to the efficacy of rituals and their therapeutic role.

(*truyen*) - through ritual acts and divine words - the advice and blessing of the spirits. At certain stages of the ritual progression disciples approach the possessed medium to consult the spirits incarnated on a wide range of issues such as bad health, work and financial matters, or difficulties in interpersonal relations with friends and family.

Chau van music, which is played continuously throughout *len dong*, is known for its vibrant, catchy melodies and infectious dance rhythms. *Chau van* songs are strophic and a short instrumental section known as *luu khong* (lit. “flowing without [words]”) is played between each verse. *Chau van* bands typically consist of two to five male musicians who usually both sing and play instruments. All bands in northern Vietnam include a player of the two-stringed moon lute (*dan nguyet*) and a percussionist who plays a set of percussion instruments including the clappers (*phach*), drum (*trong*), a small cymbal (*canh*), and a small gong (*thanh la*). To this core band, other instruments such as the *dan tranh* zither and various bamboo flutes (e.g., *tieu* and *sao*) may be added. Some temples have their own resident *chau van* bands, but most musicians travel around to perform at different temples at the request of mediums. Bands perform distinctive sequences of songs, which I refer to as “songscapes” (see Norton 2009), for each spirit incarnated. The songscapes performed by bands during rituals are codified by the *chau van* musical system as certain songs must be performed for particular ritual actions and spirits.

Some songs are performed for several spirits and ranks of spirits, but others are reserved for specific spirits (or ranks of spirits) depending on the spirit’s identity. Understood as a musical entity narrating the progression of each possession, songscapes tend to be unique for each spirit. There is also some flexibility, at certain points during possession, for musicians to choose different songs to suit the moment and the preferences of ritual participants.

It is the medium holding the *len dong* who organizes all aspects of the event, including inviting friends and disciples to attend and paying for the musicians. The number of people who attend depends on the size of the temple and the popularity and renown of the medium, but usually about thirty to forty people participate in rituals. The majority of mediums and disciples are female, although there is a significant minority of male mediums and religious devotees. Potentially any religious adept may be initiated as a medium, but in order to become a medium he or she must be recognized as having a “destined aptitude” or “spirit root” (*can*) by an experienced “master medium” (*dong truong*) or a “spirit priest” (*thay cung*).⁽⁶⁾ Mediums are numerous in cities, towns and villages throughout Vietnam, but they are especially prevalent in northern Vietnam. Drawing on field research between 1996 and 2005, in this paper I discuss mediumship practices in

⁽⁶⁾ Spirit priests (*thay cung*) are usually *chau van* musicians who are skilled in a wide range of spirit invocations and other forms of spirit “worship” (*cung*).

northern Vietnam where I conducted research.⁽⁷⁾

The affective system of mediumship: music, gender and the environment

The religious framework that modulates mediums' emotional relations with spirits might be thought of as an "affective system," a term used by John Leavitt (1996: 532) to refer to "collective symbolic productions," which "may be observed to provoke typical reactions in a group of people" who share the system. By employing the term "affective system," I mean to suggest that the religious system of mediumship, which is primarily constituted through the practice of spirit possession, affords a certain repertoire of emotional possibilities for religious followers. These emotional possibilities are, to a great extent, delineated by the typical attributes of the spirits, but they are not defined by them. The affective system is formed by religious followers' knowledge and understanding of the spirits' characters, temperaments and powers, yet the symbolic identities of spirits are sufficiently ambiguous and multivalent to enable mediums to forge their own pathways through the system. Ritual participants become sensitized to the emotional propensities of spirits and become inculcated to the affective system of mediumship through listening to *chau van* songs and through interactions with embodied spirits, such as offering and receiving "blessed gifts" (*loc*) and verbal exchange.

Associations with particular emotions are an important aspect of the identity of spirits incarnated during *len dong* (see also Fjelstad and Maiffret 2006). The identities of spirits are influenced by various factors including gender, place, ethnicity, status,

and age, as well as the individual histories and myths of the spirits that are recounted in the poems used as song texts. The emotional associations accorded to spirits are quite broad and are often understood and enacted by mediums in different ways. Particular spirits do not represent a single, fixed emotion. Rather they are known for having a propensity for certain types of emotional expression. Although there is insufficient space in this chapter to discuss all the spirits incarnated during rituals, in this section I examine some of the interconnections between music, gender, emotion, and the environment in the religious system of mediumship. I illustrate how the "process of 'engendering'" (Sugarman 1997: 253) during ritual performance - a process by which shared understandings about gender become naturalized - relates to emotional expression and environment.

The emotional associations and behavior of spirits are connected to their "place" and environment both in the "yin" other world and the "yang" human world. In the religious system of mediumship, most of the spirits incarnated during rituals belong to one of four "palaces" (*phu*) or domains in the celestial world: the sky (*thien phu*), mountains and forests (*nhac phu*), the water

⁽⁷⁾ It should be noted that there are differences in the music and ritual practices of mediumship in northern, central and southern Vietnam. Field research on *len dong* and *chau van* in Hanoi and other parts of northern Vietnam in 1996-1997, 1998 and 2004-5 was funded by scholarships and grants awarded by the British Academy, the School of Oriental and African Studies, the Central Research Fund of the University of London and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

palace (thoai phu) and earth (dia phu).

In the cosmological scheme of the Four Palace religion, there are correspondences between the palaces where the spirits reside in the “yin” other world (*coi am*) and the natural landscape of Vietnam in the “yang” human world (*duong tran*). These correspondences are especially prominent in relation to the yin dyad between the Mountains and Forests Palace and the Water Palace, which has parallels with the yang pairing in the human world between the lowlands or “downstream” (*mien xuoi*) and the “mountainous regions” (*mien nui*), upstream. This yang polarity is prominent in conceptualizations of the Vietnamese nation and its geography. One of the Vietnamese terms for “nation,” *nui song* (lit. “mountains and rivers”), for instance, points to the contrast between the mountains in the north and centre of Vietnam, and the country’s delta regions, i.e., the Red River delta in the north and the Mekong delta in the south. In the cosmology of the Four Palace Religion, this geographical polarity has gendered, “ethnic,” and affective dimensions, which relate to conceptions of the environment and ethnicity in Vietnam.

Many of the most popular spirits belonging to the Mountains and Forests Palace are female and some are categorized as “ethnic minority” spirits. Several of the ladies, for example, are identified with ethnic minority groups who live in mountainous regions in Vietnam⁽⁸⁾; these include the First Lady (Dao ethnicity), the Sixth Lady (Nung ethnicity), the Tenth Lady (Tay ethnicity), and the Lady Thac Bo (Muong ethnicity). The affective associations of female mountain spirits - in both the lady and princess ranks -

are predominantly happiness and cheerfulness, although these are mixed with flashes of tempestuousness and truculence. These associations are enacted performatively through vivacious dancing and lively songs belonging to the “Xa” group of melodies. The “otherness” of the ethnic minorities and the “naturalness” of the mountains are evoked when mountain spirits are incarnated. For instance, mediums dress up in clothes that imitate the “ethnic” dress of minority groups and distribute “natural” products such as betel nut and fruit. Sonically, the otherness of mountain spirits is constructed through the use of the “Xa” group of songs, which participants said evoked the “atmosphere” (*khong khi*) of the mountains. The lively “Xa” songs have distinctive melodic phrasing, rhythms, and instrumentation (such as the inclusion of the Hmong flute (*sao Hmong*) and the use of an inverted small gong with keys placed inside). In the song texts for mountain spirits, remote forests in mountainous areas are depicted as abundant with produce and teeming with wildlife, and this feeds into the representation of the mountain spirits as “ebullient” and “wild.” The following song text for the Second Lady (Chau De Nhi), which refers to her “tempestuous” character, is typical of the poems dedicated to mountain spirits:

The lovely spirit from the magnificent forest,

⁽⁸⁾ According to official classifications, there are “fifty-three ethnic minority nationalities in Vietnam making up about 14 percent of the population” (Taylor 2008:3). For further information on issues relating to ethnic minority groups in Vietnam and relations with the “Viet” majority and the State, see the 2008 special issue of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Volume 3, Issue 3.

Her character is tempestuous.

The light of the candles flicker on the mountain shack,

The Second Lady dances with two lit-rope for the mother spirits.

She has power over the forests.

On the horizon, the clouds and river valleys meet,

The Lady frolicking among the cinnamon and peach trees.

The moon and stars flicker in the dispersing clouds,

She wears a conical hat and a basket of flowers is slung over her shoulder.

When going to Tuan Quan one must cross the Gium mountain,

Return to Pho Vi and Suoi Ngang waterfall [in Northeast Vietnam]

When it is peaceful and the sky is calm,

She sits on the mountain peak teasing the moon.

She stops playing musical instruments and begins to sing

She talks clearly in the Man and Muong languages and in Vietnamese

This song text describes the natural environment and refers to historic, sacred places in Vietnam that are sites of pilgrimage. The Tuan Quan temple and the Suoi Ngang waterfall, for instance, are in the northern mountainous provinces of Yen Bai and Lang Son respectively. Through the “textual poesis of placename paths” (Feld 1996:114), *chau van* songs take ritual participants on sacred journeys through the Vietnamese landscape. The references to the Man and Muong languages in the song text connect the Second Lady to those minority groups who live in the northern

mountainous regions and during possession mediums sometimes imitate the style of speech and the languages of ethnic minority groups living in Vietnam. At one ritual, for instance, the medium spoke Vietnamese with a regional “ethnic minority” accent when possessed by the Second Lady. On this occasion, the spirit’s divine utterances were light-hearted and joyous: the medium asked for strong Laotian tobacco to smoke and teased the musicians by criticizing their performance of the “Xa” songs.

The mountainous regions, then, are largely the domain of female spirits, who are associated with “ethnic minority” groups.⁽⁹⁾ By contrast, male spirits who belong to the “Viet” (or “Kinh”) ethnic majority feature more prominently in the spiritual geography of lowland areas. For instance, some of the most revered and frequently incarnated spirits in the mandarin and prince ranks, such as the Third and Fifth Mandarin and the Third Prince, belong to the Water Palace. These “warrior scholar” (*van vo*) spirits are renowned for their military prowess, and scholarly and artistic talents. As powerful figures of authority they are typically stern and serious, and when incarnated they usually perform military dances with swords and spears. Musically, the seriousness and prestige of warrior-scholar spirits is depicted through

⁽⁹⁾ Some male spirits belong to the Mountains and Forests Palace, such as the Second Mandarin (*Quan De Nhi*), The Seventh Prince (*Ong Hoang Bay*) and the Little Young Prince (*Cau Be*). However, they are not as closely connected to the environment as female mountain spirits, and the “Xa” group of songs which musically evoke the atmosphere of the mountain are not performed for these male spirits.

performance of the “Phu” group of songs. This group is distinguished from other *chau van* song groups, such as the “Xa” and “Con,” through the use of long, melismatic, rhythmically fluid and high syncopated vocal phrases. The poems used as lyrics for “Phu” songs also employ unusual poetic meters and are typically sung with a more “serious” (*ngkiem tuc*), more intense vocal quality when compared with other *chau van* songs. In general, the behavior of prestigious male spirits tends to be more restrained compared with the vivacious conviviality of female mountain spirits. Some of the warrior spirits, such as the Fifth Mandarin, are known for having short tempers, although the anger of mandarins is typically thought to be more frightening and severe than expressions of petulance by female mountain spirits.

The Water Palace is not exclusively the domain of male spirits, but female lowland spirits, like their male counterparts, are “Viet” rather than “ethnic minority” spirits and they have a different array of emotional associations than female mountain spirits. The Third Princess (*Co Bo*), for example, who is the most renowned female spirit of the Water Palace, is known for her compassion for the suffering of humanity and is reputed to be one of the saddest spirits in the pantheon. One medium remarked, “whoever has difficulty in love and is ‘sad’ (*buon*) serves the Third Princess... if someone hasn’t married a wife or husband then they have a ‘destined affinity for the Third Princess’ (*can Co Bo*) because she doesn’t live with anyone she is alone.” In keeping with the Third Princess’ character, some of

the songs performed for her such as “Van” and “Con Oan,” are sung in a slow tempo with a soft singing style, and religious devotees said these songs evoked feelings of sadness.

Notably, female spirits, both “lowland” and “mountain,” are more closely associated with the natural world and the environment than male spirits. In general, the natural world is anthropomorphized most strongly in the female form, and this is evident in the frequent use of honorific titles for female spirits which connect them to the environment. For example, the Third Princess and Little Princess spirits are often referred to as the “Third Princess of the Water” (*Co Bo Thoai*) and the “Little Princess of the Mountains” (*Co Be Thuong*). In a comparable way to the female mountain spirits, the ritual actions of the Third Princess connect her to the environment. When incarnated, she performs a rowing dance with oars for which the musicians sing a special song called “Cheo Do” (Boat Rowing). As the following extracts illustrate, the song texts for the Third Princess depict her drifting around the country in a rowing boat and they describe her power to alleviate human suffering:

The Third Princess carries the mother deities across the river in a boat,

She saves all mortals from hardship and danger.

Travelling everywhere,

The Third Princess is drifting, heave ho, in all four directions.

The wind in the pine trees and the clouds,
The Princess rescues the mortals.

Who is in the boat, heave ho, that drifts on the edge of the river?

The boat of the Third Princess of the Water Palace, heave ho, rowing to the temple.

Once the rowing dance is finished, the medium sits in front of the altar and interacts with religious devotees. Shortly after the rowing dance at one ritual I attended, the Third Princess showed discontent and unhappiness by making the possessed medium feel cold. The medium called out, "The Third Princess is freezing! I'm frozen to the core, please burn an incense stick. I can't stand it any more. Dead people are always cold, cold in and cold out. I can cause death straight away if you do not make things better. Why die? People in the human world are blind and deaf." Shortly after these words, the possession ended abruptly, and the medium left the temple leaving the ritual participants to wonder what was going to happen next. After a break of about ten minutes, the medium came back into the temple and consulted the spirits as to whether or not she should continue the ritual. She did this by tossing old "yin yang" coins, and on the second throw, the coins gave a positive response, so she continued the ritual and was then possessed by the Seventh, Ninth and Little Princess, and the Third Young Prince.

When the Seventh Princess (*Co Bay*) was incarnated, the spirit explained why the Third Princess had made the medium's body cold. The utterances of the Seventh Princess included the following:

The Third Princess scolded, but I have returned to rescue. You didn't make any offerings at all! Offer the Third Princess these clothes!

Today I 'transmit' and then you can tell

the future... Your husband said that "tongues have no bones and there are many twisty roads" so the Third Princess scolded and punished [you].

Why was nothing given to the Third Princess, yet [votive offerings] are presented to me? For several days I have told everyone to concentrate "with one gut" [i.e., completely] on the spirits. Don't imitate stupid people of the mortal world, otherwise the Third Princess will scold and punish.

These words make clear that the Third Princess "scolded" and "punished" because she was unhappy with the devotion and offerings of the religious devotees. In discussions with the medium several days after the ritual, the medium also said that her husband had criticized her religious activities because he did not "believe" (*tin*) in the spirits. The phrase "the tongue has no bones and there are many twisty roads" is a reference to his criticisms.⁽¹⁰⁾ Incidents such as this one demonstrate the Third Princess' tendency to express negative sentiments when she is incarnated.

In addition to sadness, rituals also often involve humor. Outbursts of laughter among ritual participants most commonly occur when female mountain spirits and child spirits are incarnated. The most frequently incarnated child spirits are the Little Lady (*Chau Be*), the Little Princess (*Co Be*) and the Little Young Prince (*Cau Be*), all of

⁽¹⁰⁾ Writing on Vietnamese mediumship from the late colonial period (e.g., Long Chuong 1990 [1942]), suggests that antagonism between female mediums and disapproving husbands has been a recurring issue in the history of mediumship, and some female mediums today hide their ritual activities from their husbands. For further discussion see Norton (2009).

whom belong to the Mountains and Forests Palace. Like other mountain spirits, these spirits tend have a cheerful disposition, but because of their young age they are often emotionally changeable in a similar way to a child. They may joke and tease one moment and be stubborn and have tantrums the next.⁽¹¹⁾ One medium I spoke to said that her two daughters, who were soon to be initiated, had the “destined aptitude for the Little Princess” (*can Co Be*) because they often sulked and had tantrums.

During a possession by the Little Young Prince that I witnessed, the medium playfully joked around with ritual objects. Using a “baby” voice and mispronouncing the consonants of words as a child might, the possessed medium commented that the headscarf she was wearing was ugly and out of shape. She then jokingly compared a bent incense-stick, which had been presented as an offering by one of the disciples, to the shape of an old lady. She declared, “This incense stick is shrewish and bent like an old lady! Coddling me, hey!” provoking much laughter among other ritual participants. There was also amusement when the medium turned to me and challenged me to guess how many bills of Vietnamese currency she was holding. If I guessed correctly, I would be given the money as a blessed gift; I said sixteen bills when in fact there were only fourteen, so the money was distributed to the medium’s disciples instead.

This section has provided a sketch of the affective system of mediumship and changing emotional flow or “emotional texture” (Wolf 2001) of rituals. In his writing on Kota funerals in South India, Richard Wolf has

used the term “emotional texture” to describe the way in which the affective character of funerals changes as the ceremony unfolds. In Wolf’s words, “Emotional texture is a way of talking about the changing configurations of affective meanings that Kotas... assign to rituals” (2001:382). The emotional texture of *len dong* changes as spirits with different emotional associations are incarnated, and each ritual occasion is unique. In general terms, however, rituals usually start in a controlled and reserved manner during the possessions by mandarin spirits, and the “liveliness” and “happiness” of rituals usually reaches a peak when the “mountain” lady spirits are incarnated. After the ladies, when the medium is possessed by princes and princesses, the emotional texture is often more mixed and sad sentiments are sometimes expressed. The end of rituals is usually light-hearted and jokey, as mediums are possessed by “cheeky” child spirits. Throughout rituals, musical performance plays an important role in modulating the emotional texture of rituals and engendering ritual participants. *Chau van* songs are associated with particular sentiments, and different songs are performed at each stage of possession to match the flux of ritualized emotion.

Initiation, gender and somatic expressions of emotion

In interviews I conducted with mediums,

⁽¹¹⁾ Based on their research with Vietnamese mediums in the Silicon Valley in America, Karen Fjelstad and Lisa Maiffret similarly note that the Little Young Prince, one of the most popular spirits among mediums in the Silicon valley, is an especially expressive spirit who “often acts like a two year old, laughing one moment and crying the next” (2006:119).

it was striking how often they referred to their emotional temperament or disposition when discussing the reasons why they were initiated. Most female mediums said they were “hot-tempered” (*nong ruot/nong tinh*) and “difficult” (*kho chiu*), which meant they were prone to turbulent moods and emotional outbursts in their everyday lives. Within mediumship circles, hot-temperedness is understood as a typical character trait which predisposes certain women to become mediums. Such women are often drawn to spirits who share their emotional subjectivity such as tempestuous lady spirits or angry mandarins, because these spirits are sympathetic to mortals who are emotionally volatile. When possessed, mediums may express anger or impatience through impetuous ritual acts and divine utterances, and many said they felt more at ease and calm after “serving the spirits.” Some male mediums also said they were hot-tempered, but for men their calling to mediumship was more commonly explained in terms of their effeminate gender identity. Male mediums are referred to as “effeminate” (*dong co*), and because of their “strong femininity” (*nang ve nu tinh*) they were usually recognized as having the “spirit root” of one of the female spirits.

Emotional volatility, hot-temperedness and effeminacy predispose individuals to become mediums, but the calling to mediumship is typically marked by a traumatic event or crisis. If the crisis is diagnosed by a master medium or spirit priest as an affliction caused by the spirits, then initiation is prescribed in order to satisfy the spirits and alleviate the affliction. The crises mediums

experience often take the form of an illness or a bout of “madness” (*dien*). In interviews, mediums said they experienced illnesses such as severe tiredness, weakness, headaches and backaches, which could not be alleviated through Western biomedicine. They typically described their “madness” in terms of an involuntary possession by malevolent spirits that resulted in the loss of bodily control, erratic behavior and a breakdown in core relationships with family and friends.

In her study of health and family planning in a Vietnamese rural community, Tine Gammeltoft argues that one of the ways Vietnamese women communicate distress to others is through “somatic expressions” (1999:227). Gammeltoft develops a persuasive argument that women’s somatic complaints are closely bound up with social and emotional distress, and that physical suffering may be one of the most effective means available for women to draw attention to and alleviate stressful social circumstances. In a similar way, the physical symptoms mediums experienced often seemed to be related to emotional disturbance and social suffering. When talking about their afflictions, many mediums referred to difficult circumstances or a tragic event in their lives, which meant they were “forced” to “come out” as mediums. For example, some described how terrible working conditions had made them ill, while others related their initiation into mediumship to tragic events such as the death of one of their children or to a bout of madness that made them neglect their children. Afflictions such as these were cited as evidence of punishment by the spirits that could only be alleviated through initiation.

The emotional turbulence of the crises mediums experienced prior to initiation reveals the gendered nature of emotional expression and mediumship. More women than men are drawn into mediumship because of emotional turmoil in their lives and the men who experience such turbulence and become mediums are understood to be “effeminate.” Heightened emotional arousal is central to possession and the crises mediums experience might be understood as a kind of preparation for the “performance” of sentiment during rituals.

“Having heart”: the body, possession, and music

The sensory presence of spirits is grounded in the body. During rituals, mediums adopt a particular “somatic mode of attention” (Csordas 2002), which facilitates bodily engagement with the spirits. Spirits “enter the body” (*nhap than*) and mediums experience somatic changes when they embody spirits. During interviews mediums made clear that the primary site of embodiment is the “heart” (*tam*). There is a dialectical relationship between the heart and spiritual forces. In order for possession to occur, mediums said that they must “have heart” (*co tam*) or have a “true heart” (*thuc tam*), and that they must be devoted with “one heart” (*nhat tam*) to the spirits. They said that the spirits “entered” or “inscribed” the heart and affected the “innermost feelings” of the heart. In return, the spirits “witness the hearts” (*chung tam*) of followers and “premonitions” (*linh cam*) and “miraculous responses” (*linh ung*) guided by the spirits are felt in the heart. In a similar way to the heart, the “heart-soul” (*tam hon*) is also affected by

the presence of spirits: mediums said that their heart-soul felt different than normal; one medium remarked that her heart-soul “floated-up” when possessed.

While the heart featured most prominently in mediums’ descriptions of the feeling of possession, the heart and the stomach/gut were used interchangeably in some expressions. For example, “true gutted” (*thuc long*) and “one gutted” (*mot long*) were used synonymously with “true heart” and “one heart” respectively. In Vietnam, the heart and guts are understood as seats of emotion, and this is evident in numerous Vietnamese emotion terms that refer to the stomach and heart.⁽¹²⁾ Singers may also say that they “sing in the stomach” (*hat trong bung*) when referring to the vocal expression of emotion (see also Meeker 2013). However, the heart and the guts are not just connected to feeling; they are also closely intertwined with cognition. A medium, for instance, remarked that her heart “thought” (*ngghi*) about the spirits. In Vietnamese, it is also possible to say that one, “thinks in the stomach” (*ngghi trong bung*) (see Gammeltoft 1999: 211).⁽¹³⁾ When I asked mediums how they “felt” during possession, it was hard to find an appropriate way to phrase the

⁽¹²⁾ For example, one of the terms for guts, *long*, appears in expressions such as “to fall in love” (*phai long*) and “to hurt someone’s feelings” (*mech long*), and the heart appears in compound words such as *tam tu*, which refers to somebody’s innermost feelings or thoughts.

⁽¹³⁾ The merging of heart with mind, feeling and cognition is also evident in Vietnamese translations for English words such as intellect (*tam tri*), psyche (*tam nao*), psychology (*tam ly*) and mental illness (*tam than*) which all include the term Vietnamese term for heart, (*tam*).

question, and in everyday Vietnamese speech it is more usual to inquire about somebody's feelings by asking what they "think," rather than what they "feel." From a Vietnamese perspective, then, feeling involves thinking and thinking involves feeling, and the body is implicated in the expression of both thought and emotion.

Musical performance stimulates the heartfelt emotion-thought necessary for the embodiment of spirits through making mediums "animated" (*boc*) and "impulsive" (*boc dong*). The term *boc* literally means "to rise up"/"emanate" (e.g., smoke, vapour), but it is also used metaphorically to express "excess," "heat" or "animation" regarding a person's behavior or character. *Boc* then may be used to describe a person's "fiery" or "tumultuous" character (*tin h hay boc*) or the "rising up" (*boc len*) of emotion. The compound word *boc dong* - which I have rendered as "impulsive" - is commonly used to refer to the impetuous character of mediums and their behavior when possessed. Mediums also refer to having a "heavy energy" (*nang luong manh*) and say they receive this abundance of energy from the spirits (see Pham Quynh Phuong 2009:109).

Numerous mediums I spoke to linked their impulsive behavior during possession and the "rising up" of emotion to listening to *chau van* songs. According to mediums, *chau van* songs induce high energy, euphoric emotions such as "happiness" (*vui*), "joy" (*sung suong*), "elation" (*phan khoei*) and "intoxicating passion" (*say me*). For example, one medium remarked that, "listening to *chau van* is profoundly moving, it makes me joyous", and another said, "when I

listen to *chau van* I find that I am charmed, my heart-soul is charmed, then the spirits enter me". Prior to the onset of each spirit possession, *chau van* bands perform "Thinh Bong" (lit. "Inviting the Spirits"). The soaring vocal phrases of "Thinh Bong" invite the spirit to "descend" to the human world and are accompanied by loud percussion rhythms and fast instrumental phrases on the moon lute and other instruments. Reflecting on listening to "Thinh Bong", one medium said that, "when I hear the invitation to the spirits before the spirit enters, my heart-soul flies, I feel elated." This comment gives an indication of how music intensifies the euphoric emotions felt in the heart and heart-soul, which are necessary to facilitate the onset of possession. Such states of emotional arousal are commonly experienced in numerous spirit possession rituals around the world, and Judith Becker has argued that high-energy, high-arousal emotions are "fundamental to the triggering of trancing" (2004:52).

Following the onset of possession, music continues to shape ritual action and modulate the emotional texture of rituals as different songs with different affective associations are performed during the course of the possession. In some cases, songs are directly linked to specific ritual actions. For example, the "Sai" melody, which is known as a "strong" and "serious" melody, is always performed when prestigious male spirits like the mandarins and princes "wave incense" in front of the altar. An example of a text that is often used when "Sai" is performed for the Tenth Prince is as follows:

The bunch of incense is a powerful pen,

It makes the army generals return to protect,
It orders the ministries of war.

Through such song texts, the ritual actions of the medium are narrated in song, and the efficacy and power of the incarnated spirit is affirmed.

In addition to the interconnections between songs and specific ritual actions, religious devotees used a specific term to describe the effect of music on dance: they said the rhythm of songs “incites” (*kich dong*) dance. Female spirits dance to the heavily accented and “lively” (*soi noi*) “one-beat rhythm” (*nhip mot*), whereas male spirits usually dance to the “stately” or “majestic” (*oai nghiêm*) “three-beat rhythm” (*nhip ba*). In their most basic versions, the one-beat rhythm consists of a quarter note followed by an eighth note rest and a heavily accented eighth-note “up beat”, and the three-beat rhythm consists of a quarter note, a quarter note rest, and two more quarter notes. When performing the dances of female spirits, mediums invariably follow the beat of the one-beat rhythm. A core movement of many of these dances is a “jogging step”, which consists of bouncing from one foot to the other in time with the pulse of the rhythm played on the set of percussion instruments. The dances for male spirits, however, do not necessarily follow the pulse of the three-beat rhythm. During the military dances of mandarin spirits, for example, mediums usually wield swords while “bobbing up and down” in a vertical plane, by bending their knees without lifting their feet completely off the ground. This vertical movement is not usually linked to the pulse of the music: it usually slips in and out of phase with the

percussion rhythms.

At different stages of possession, then, musical performance contributes to the affective system of mediumship. The music performed by *chau van* bands helps stimulate the emotional arousal of possession, it narrates the progression of ritual action and it incites dance. Through performing a songscape that evolves as each possession unfolds, musicians aim to create a “spiritual atmosphere” (*khong khi tam linh*) for ritual participants.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, Judith Becker has coined the term “habitus of listening” to emphasize the culturally diverse ways in which listeners develop tendencies to experience and respond to music in particular ways. In Becker’s words:

A ‘*habitus of listening*’ suggests, not a necessity nor a rule, but an inclination, a disposition to listen with a particular kind of focus, to expect to experience particular kinds of emotion, to move with certain stylized gestures, and to interpret the meaning of sounds and one’s emotional responses to the musical event in somewhat (never totally) predictable ways (2004:71).

During *len dong* mediums exhibit a habitus of listening which predisposes them to listen and respond to *chau van* songs in particular ways. Mediums are culturally expected to experience emotional arousal during rituals and to listen to *chau van* in a way that increases the “rising up” of emotion. The inclination to respond to music and the presence of spirits in this way would seem to be strongly influenced by the crises mediums experience prior to initiation. Other ritual participants are not expected to be animated by ritual music in the same

way as mediums, but the performance of *chau van* helps focus attention on the embodied spirits and ritual activity.

Music performance assists in establishing “sentimental relations” (*tin h cam*) between musicians and between musicians and listeners. The concept of *tin h cam*, which may be glossed as “sentiment” or “sentimental relations,” refers to the sharing of feelings between people and is a highly prized ideal that lies at the heart of many aspects of social life in Vietnam. Shaun Malarney (2002), for instance, demonstrates how sentimental or *tin h cam* relationships are central to Vietnamese funerals and are developed through morally-charged exchanges. Importantly, *tin h cam* is relational and inherently social as it depends on interaction and exchange between people. As Gammeltoft notes, “the term *tin h cam* has slightly different connotations than ‘feelings’; it usually refers either to feelings between people or to the capacity to feel for others rather than to an individual’s inner emotional life” (1999:206).

Although funeral ceremonies are quite distinct from mediumship and do not involve mediums, *len dong* is also a site where *tin h cam* relationships flourish. Through the interactions that occur at rituals – the intimate muttering of wishes and prayers when disciples approach the possessed, the fun and jocularly of receiving the gifts of the spirits, the sharing of thoughts and gossip with friends – participants are able to show solidarity and sympathy for one another. Listening to *chau van* music together, and at times clapping along to the beat when mediums are dancing, also encourages the ritualized

performance of sentiments to be shared by all religious devotees.

Sentimental relations between musicians are required for a performance to have meaning and feeling. The members of *chau van* bands must have respect and understanding for each other, otherwise musicians said the music would “not have heart” (*khong co tam*), and it would “not have soul” (*khong co hon*).

Chau van musicians discussed the emotional associations of songs and stressed the importance of sentimental relations in performance. For example, the *chau van* master Le Ba Cao discussed the sentiment of three of the main “Phu” songs – “Phu Dau,” “Phu Noi” and “Phu Binh” – in the following terms:

All the “Phu” songs ‘manifest our sincere emotions’ (*the hien len chan tin h cua nguoi ta*). For example the “Phu Dau” melody manifests sadness... “Phu Noi” expresses a sincere feeling in the guts, for example *tin h cam* between people, and “Phu Binh” is fresh and bright and manifests happiness in people’s guts. (Le Ba Cao, pers. comm. 2004)

In order to convey such sentiments, Le Ba Cao emphasized the importance of having a genuine and sincere emotional disposition. He said that, because *chau van* music was a “manifestation of the heart-soul” (*the hien cho tam linh*), musicians should not perform if they were irritated, sad, or worried about something.¹⁴ Rather, they must “have heart” when they perform at rituals, just as mediums must devote their hearts to the spirits.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed Vietnamese

mediumship as a forum in which sentiments are felt, performed, and shared through ritual practice and music. I have suggested that mediumship may be understood as an affective system in which emotions are embedded in a spiritual and human landscape, which relates to the ethnicity, gender, and place of spirits. Mountain spirits mark out a territory that is feminine, “ethnic,” natural, lively, wild, happy, humorous, and tempestuous. In both the “yang” human and the “yin” spirit world, the environment of the mountains and forests is opposed to the lowlands and rivers, the latter being represented as more masculine, controlled, powerful, and prestigious than remote mountainous regions. Spirits associated with the lowlands may exhibit a range of emotions ranging from sadness to anger. In this way, the process of engendering during rituals is based on interconnections between gender, emotion, and the environment.

The emotional terrain laid out by the religious system of mediumship is navigated by possessed mediums and is performed in song by *chau van* bands. When mediums embody a sequence of spirits during rituals, they engage in a multisensory conceptualization and embodiment of place, which is evoked sonically, visually, and through bodily practice. Possession rituals provide mediums with scope to “perform” emotions associated with spirits through a range of ritual practices, including dancing and listening to music, the distribution of blessed gifts, and divine utterances. The emotional texture of rituals changes as the sequence of spirit possessions progresses, and mediums draw upon and enact the emotional associations of spirits in different ways.

The emotional arousal of possession is felt in the body and listening to music with a sensibility, a particular habitus of listening, which “animates” emotion. Mediums develop a propensity to experience the heightened emotions of possession through the crises and suffering they experience prior to initiation. Notably, women rather than men are culturally expected to become mediums and this is related to dominant conceptions of women being emotionally volatile and hot-tempered. The few men who become mediums are known for having feminine characteristics, for being effeminate. This suggests that emotionality is related to femaleness and that the display of affect is strongly gendered.

In Vietnamese conceptions, the heart and guts is the seat of the emotions, and emotions are both felt and thought. Mediums embody spirits through a particular somatic mode of attention, a bodily process of feeling and thinking about the spirits rooted in the heart, gut, and heart-soul. Both music and the spirits stimulate emotion-thought, which is felt in the heart, gut, and heart-soul, to effect the transformation of possession. Through the sung narration of ritual action, *chau van* performance draws ritual participants into the sacred script of possession and it also aids in the fostering of *tin h cam* or sentimental relations. For a musical performance to “have heart,” that is to have meaning and feeling, it must be inspired and it must help foster enduring sentimental relationships.

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