

DISTRIBUTING *LỘC*: FLOWS OF GIFTS AND FORTUNE IN VIETNAMESE FOUR PALACE MEDIUMSHIP

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Whenever Vietnamese religious believers visit a shrine, temple or Buddhist pagoda in order to worship and make wishes, they present offerings offering to the deity (or deities) enshrined there. A basic set of offerings consists of some fruit, flowers, incense, and votive paper money. These items are carefully arranged on a little plate borrowed from the temple and then placed on the altar. When the worshipping ritual is completed, the devotees linger around for a while and then reclaim the edible items, now transformed into *lộc* - “divine gifts” from the deities. These gifts are sometimes consumed on the spot, shared among the group (for example during a pilgrimage) or taken back home for consumption and distribution among friends and family.

During a *hầu đồng* ritual, this practice of making, reclaiming and distributing offerings takes on a different dimension. Each time I participated in a ritual performance in honor of the Mother Goddesses and the Four Palace deities during my research on urban spirit mediumship in Hanoi (between 2001 and 2006), I carried home with me a huge plastic bag of *lộc*, containing cans of beer, soft drinks, biscuits, bags of candy, instant noodle soup, bags of Ajino Moto (MSG), sugar, cigarettes, green tea, mangos, oranges,

and some areca nuts. I usually kept the beer and some fruit for myself and distributed the rest among neighbors and friends (Endres 2011).⁽¹⁾

In this essay, I focus on the religious gift economy in contemporary urban Four Palace mediumship. In his landmark essay on the gift, first published in 1924, Marcel Mauss viewed the gift as a ‘total social phenomenon’ that gives expression to the religious, legal, moral and economic institutions in society. He identified three distinct obligations in the process of gift exchange: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate. Mauss also mentions ‘a fourth obligation’ – that is, the obligation of human beings to make gifts to the gods and to the persons who represent them (which, as in the example of the potlatch, may even compel the gods to give in return more than

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(1) This article is largely based on Chapter 4 of my book *Performing the Divine. Mediums, Markets and Modernity in Urban Vietnam* (NIAS Press, 2011). Preliminary research was carried out between 2001 and 2004, followed by an intensive year for fieldwork in 2006 as part of a research project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). I am grateful to the people and institutions that made this research possible, and to the Four Palace mediums who generously shared with me their knowledge and insights.

they were given). However, Mauss did not elaborate much further on the role that ‘gifts to the gods’ and ‘gifts from the gods’ play in the wider context of social relations and community building.

In the following sections, I first elaborate on the Vietnamese concept of *lộc* and discuss its multiple meanings and manifestations. I then briefly recall some basic ideas about ritual possession in Four Palace mediumship, before narrowing my discussion down on the practice of making offerings to the Four Palaces deities and the rules and particularities of (re)distributing them as *lộc* in the course of the *hầu đồng*-ritual. By way of conclusion, I argue that the art of distributing *lộc* during ritual possession not only contributes to ensuring the flow of *lộc* between the human world and the supernatural realm, but also plays a key role in negotiating social status and consolidating relationships within the ritual community.

The Vietnamese concept of *lộc*

The term *lộc* is a Sino-Vietnamese word that, in ancient times, referred to the salary of a mandarin-official, that is, a position in the imperial bureaucracy and a key to prosperity and social status. Both in China and in Vietnam, *lộc* (in Chinese: *lu*) is closely associated with the words *phúc* (fu) happiness and *thọ* (shou) longevity. Together, this triad of concepts denotes the three attributes of a good life.

In contrast to a salary that is earned through hard work and diligence, *lộc* – in the sense of a person’s fate-fortune in life –

is commonly conceived of as bestowed by Heaven (*lộc trời cho*) – which means that wealth and prosperity are seen as part of a person’s fate cast down by Heaven’s decree. But this does not mean that there is no room for improvement of one’s destiny, for example through self-cultivation, dedication, and a virtuous lifestyle. Moreover, a person’s fate-fortune can be positively influenced by paying respect to and making offerings to the a vast pantheon of deities and ancestors. According to Vietnamese belief, the latter are mindful of human needs and aspirations, and respond to the attention of worshippers by bestowing upon them ‘divine gifts’ - that is, *lộc*.

These divine gifts can take two forms. First, they can take the rather tangible form of a talisman or lucky charm, for example a souvenir bought during a pilgrimage to a religious site or, as mentioned earlier, a sacrificial object reclaimed after worshipping (Soucy 2006). Such an object, imbued with the potency of *lộc*, may also be passed on to others, which is said to enhance the *lộc* of the giver even further. *Lộc* is thus transferable and as such part of larger social processes of care-giving, reciprocal exchange, and relationship construction. Second, *lộc* may take the form of good luck in business, in achieving career goals, or in winning the lottery. Whatever the case, *lộc* is directed entirely towards this-worldly material concerns, in particular towards financial success and wealth accumulation. Wealth and prosperity are therefore also thought of as a material manifestation of divine benevolence.

Such divine benevolence may be further enhanced by proper moral conduct in the sphere of economic practice. My more recent research on social relations in the marketplace reveals that observing proper standards of commercial morality is seen by many traders as a means of securing *lộc* that can be passed on to one's offspring, whereas Heaven may withdraw its favor from a trader who does not comply with the social norms and moral values that regulate trading relationships.

Material wealth, however, also obliges a person to fulfill his or her ritual obligations with proper sumptuousness. An often-cited Vietnamese phrase says 'wealth gives birth to ritual form' (*phú quý sinh lễ nghĩa*), which in common usage means that ritual expenditures depend on each person's economic means. Generosity in ritual spending is therefore an important part of the obligation to repay the (moral) debt one owes to the ancestors and divinities (Jellema 2005).

To sum up, *lộc* may be safeguarded by moral virtue, enhanced by ritual practice, reciprocated in ritual exchange, distributed among kin, and transferred to future generations. *Lộc* is thus in constant circulation: from Heaven to humans, from humans to deities and ancestors (in the form of lavish offerings), and from deities and ancestors back to humans.

Hầu đồng ritual practice

Spirit mediums of the Four Palaces perceive the world as divided into four distinct domains or palaces (*phủ*): Heaven

(Thiên Phủ), Earth (Địa Phủ), Water (Thủy Phủ), and Mountains and Forests (Nhạc Phủ) that are 'supervised' or governed by the Mother Goddesses. Associated with these palaces is a pantheon of male and female deities that is ranked in a hierarchical order: Great Mandarins, Holy Ladies, Princes, Princesses, and Boy Attendants (Ngô, Đức Thịnh 2006). The legends and defining characteristics of the Four Palace deities have been orally transmitted through songs for the spirits known as *chầu văn* (Norton 2009). Even more importantly, they are re-enacted through ritual performance.

Just like in other possession religions, the initiation into mediumship often relates to critical moments in human life (2007). An illness that cannot be medically cured, a streak of bad luck in business or personal affairs, or haunting dreams may indicate the spirits' calling (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2007). It is important to note that a person qualifies as a practitioner not because of his or her free will, but because that person has a so-called spirit root (*căn*), meaning that he or she is fated for mediumship. This *căn* dates back to a previous life and usually implies the idea of a debt owed one or several deities of the pantheon. This debt needs to be repaid by serving the spirits in this life and becoming a medium. As a minimum requirement, a medium has to hold one *hầu đồng* ritual per year. In theory, any medium with at least ten years of ritual experience, sufficient knowledge, and a private temple may proclaim him- or herself a master, a

đồng thầy. In contrast, a lay practitioner who has undergone the initiation ritual is referred to as a child of the spirits (*con nhà thánh*) and a follower or disciple (*con nhang đệ tử*) of a master. Because a *hầu đồng* ritual is essentially self-therapeutic in purpose, lay practitioners have to bear all costs for their ritual performances by themselves.

In general, each deity associated with the Four Palaces has his or her principal temple and many subordinate ones. *Hầu đồng* rituals are organized at those temples as well as at private shrines on many different occasions throughout the year. For each deity the medium plans to ‘serve’ (which is the literal meaning of *hầu*) during the ritual, offerings (*đồ lễ*) need to be prepared in a quantity sufficient enough to distribute one to every guest invited to attend the ritual. The ritual performance usually unfolds with the incarnation of the Five Great Mandarins, followed by a varying number of Holy Ladies, Princes, Princesses, and Young Princes. After signaling the deity’s presence, the medium throws off the red veil and remains seated until the ritual assistants have changed him (or her) into the appropriate attire. The medium then gets up, bows respectfully in front of the altar and proceeds with performing a short ritual dance that reflects the deity’s rank, gender, and personality. After the dance the medium sits down again and takes a few sips of rice wine or water from a small cup. Male deities usually smoke cigarettes while listening to the music and rewarding the musicians with some

small money. The deity then ‘acknowledges’ (*chứng*) the offerings by waving a lit stick of incense over them, and sets out allocating shares to the participants, a practice called *phát lộc*. Before or during the redistribution of offerings, participants also may come forward with a particular request for which they ask the deity’s special favors (*xin lộc*), for example a cup of ‘incense water’ imbued with healing qualities, or the deity’s prediction (and advice) about a specific issue in life. The medium then signals the departure of the deity by covering his head with the red scarf, whereupon the musicians start inviting the next deity.

By offering flowers, votive paper objects, food offerings and divine entertainment, Four Palace mediums repay their karmic debt and ask the deities to be benevolent with them. The deities respond to that attention by bestowing good fortune, health and prosperity as well as divine gifts (*lộc*). Four Palace mediumship may thus be conceived of as a gift exchange between deities and humans, with both parties engaged in cycles of giving, receiving, and repaying each other.

But in fact it is a bit more complicated. First of all, the deities do not physically take the offerings to their realm; they are instead redistributed to the ritual participants and taken home for consumption. The redistributive nature of gifts to deities thus reveals the existence of a different type of gifting relationship. In reciprocal gifting in the Maussian sense, the giver expects delayed reciprocity from the receiver. It is a

dyadic relationship between the two parties only. In contrast, in the religious gift economy of the Four Palaces, the gift, although dedicated to a deity, is ultimately presented to another human. Yet something important is missing in this picture, namely that the gifts have been transformed through the ritual act of first offering them to the deities, as they are now no longer just a simple gift, but a divine gift, that is, *lộc*. One could perhaps argue that the medium actually represents the deity, which would render the medium-as-human irrelevant in this exchange. But as I shall elaborate below, this is not the case.

Distributing *lộc*

Let me now elaborate a bit further on the practice of making offerings to the Four Palaces deities and (re)distributing them as *lộc*. First of all, before the start of the ritual, each participant is expected to hand an envelope with a monetary contribution to the medium. These contributions in no way cover the costs, but, like in weddings and funerals, they are important for the consolidation of the relationship between the invitee and the guests. Second, the (re)distribution of the offerings (as *lộc*) follows a number of rules according to the hierarchical order within the ritual community as well as the hierarchy of functions or roles during the ritual.

The basic rules are as follows: First of all, the temple owner, the spirit priest (who performed the necessary ritual acts preceding a *hầu đồng* ritual), the musicians, the assistants,

the kitchen staff in charge of preparing the festive meal (*cỗ*) that is shared communally after the ritual, and the 'deity's chair', that is the performing medium, all receive their due shares. In the latter case, the medium usually places the offerings on a little plate and hands it to one of the assistants, who then puts them into the cardboard box prepared for the recipients. Next, the medium allocates special shares to individual participants by pointing to the recipient who then has to come forward to receive the 'divine gift' (often accompanied by an extra) directly from the deity's hands.

The medium first has to look around to see if any other master mediums or temple mediums (*đồng đền*) are around who have to be addressed. Next, he or she must address other fellow mediums in the group, the oldest one first, then down to the younger ones. Here, it is important to note that it is not the actual age of the medium that counts, but the number of years this person has been a practicing medium. For example, if there is a woman who has been a medium for ten years, she needs to be addressed before a woman who has been a medium for only seven years. Moreover, the general social norms related to age are overruled by the distinction between mediums and non-mediums, which means that younger mediums in the group need to be addressed before older non-mediums among the ritual participants.

Next, the performing medium has to make sure that each of the remaining

participants receives fair treatment. This means that the medium also has to take into account how much each of the participants has contributed to the ritual.

The monetary contribution to the costs of the ritual is usually handed over in an envelope to the medium before the start of the ritual. The amount is specified by each group and averaged on 100,000VND in 2006. Some groups have imposed their own rules, for example that half of the amount presented in the envelope has to be returned to the invitee in the course of the entire ritual. This is easy if everyone sticks to the 100,000VND-rule, as the medium can then in advance prepare little red lucky money-envelopes with 50,000VND-notes. If, however, a participant contributes more than the expected, then the medium has to keep track of how much he or she owes to each of her guests. The distribution of offerings is therefore a complicated matter that constitutes an important mechanism of building and consolidating relationships between the performing medium and his or her invitees: friends, relatives, fellow-mediums, followers (if the performer is a master medium), or between a follower and his or her master.

The same is true for the part of the ritual during which individual participants may approach the deity directly with a particular request. This practice is called *xin lộc*, asking for blessed gifts, and involves a direct exchange transaction between the petitioner and the deity: The petitioner kneels down beside the deity, politely

presents some money bills spread out on a plate, and puts forward his or her request in polite, ritualized speech. The deity (embodied in the medium) receives the plate, 'acknowledges' the offerings, then takes some of the bills away and puts some smaller denominations, plus maybe a little extra back, such as a flower, a phoenix-shaped areca nut, or a cigarette. Sometimes, the petitioner receives a little bit more than he or she offered, but usually it is less.

When the special treats have been passed out, the medium signals with a quick movement of his or her hand that the remaining offerings may now be distributed to the commonalty. This task is taken over by one or two helpers who have to ensure that everyone present receives a piece. If the offerings in kind are not sufficient, they must be replaced by the approximate equivalent in cash. Whereas the gifts received directly from the hands of the medium are the most prized and usually not shared with - or distributed further to - other people, the gifts received during the final redistribution phase may even enhance the *lộc* of the recipient if he or she passes it on to other people outside the ritual community.

More than anything else, the amount and quality of redistributed offerings - and, for that matter, the number of guests invited - in the course of a *hầu đồng* ritual are an index of a medium's prosperity and prestige. As objects that convey a sense of beauty and luxury, they are employed both to contribute to the overall sumptuousness and aesthetics of the ritual and to effectively

assert a claim to a certain social status. They are thus instrumental in the 'strategies of distinction' (Bourdieu 1984) employed by wealthy mediums. Moving from the altars of the deities into the plastic bags of the ritual participants, the offerings take on a social life of their own (Appadurai 1986). They are scrutinized and commented upon, praised for their quality or sneered at for their cheapness, and used as measures to set new or enhanced standards for the ritual community.

The socio-economic transformations that mark Vietnam's post-*Đổi mới* era, along with its growing abundance of new and attractive consumer goods, have prompted an explosion of ritual expenditure and significantly changed both the range and the amount of sacrificial offerings in urban Four Palace mediumship. Contemporary ritual aesthetics demand that these products must, most of all, have an attractive packaging that matches in color with the deity's costume. This new sense of ritual aesthetics make the silvery cans of Diet Coke or Halida Beer a perfect offering for the Third Mandarin and the Third Prince associated with the Water Palace, whereas blue cans of Pepsi or Tiger Beer may be used as offerings for the Fifth Mandarin or the Seventh Prince. Some of the Lady and Princess deities are offered colorful packages of instant noodle soups or biscuits. White items such as Ajino Moto, sugar or small cartons of milk may be presented to the Third Princess. The ethnic female deities associated with the 'natural' environment of

the Mountains and Forests, on the other hand, are usually offered non-processed produce such as areca nuts, immaculate fruits such as mangos, apples, oranges, star fruit, etc. Whereas some spirit mediums reject modern consumer goods as offerings (as being against tradition), others point to the pragmatic side of sacrificial practice: "We have to choose tasty things as offerings," a male master medium told me, "things that can be taken home for consumption instead of being given away to outsiders" (conversation with author, 24 March 2005).

No matter whether an object is regarded as valuable (in terms of its usefulness or its good taste) or as trifle, the offerings distributed during a *hầu đồng* ritual are intensely coveted must-haves even if the receiver will give them to the poor neighbors first thing upon returning home. As one Master explains, this is because 'the jealousy of husband and wife cannot compare with the jealousy of mediums' (*ghen vợ ghen chồng không bằng ghen đồng ghen bóng*). It is therefore imperative that a medium always prepares sufficient quantities of offerings lest any of the participants may be left empty-handed.

All these ritual transactions - who receives *lộc* directly from the hands of the deity, how many extras are given and to whom, how much is taken from the plate of the petitioner, how much is given back - are a matter of close scrutiny, debate and gossip. Among the various skills that are required of an adept medium, the 'art of distributing *lộc*' (*nghệ thuật phát lộc*) is

crucial to ritual mastery, and the act of distributing the offerings as blessed gifts among the ritual participants requires social and interpersonal competences that reach far beyond a lavish display of wealth and generosity. Young and inexperienced mediums are generally overstrained with the complexity of the ritual performance. On the one hand, they are expected to focus their hearts and minds on the deities in order to perform them into being. On the other, they need to keep in mind all these social rules and keep track of the offerings and monetary matters in ritual exchange. Some mediums complain that the issue of distributing blessed gifts has recently taken on too much importance so that it has become more difficult for a medium to concentrate on the spiritual aspects of the *hầu đồng* ritual.

Some mediums therefore try to lessen the emphasis on *lộc*-distribution. They may prepare fewer offerings (i.e. not for each and every deity) or call less people forward for individual blessings, which is also much less time-consuming. In order to prevent the participants of rustling through their bags and fussing over their *lộc* instead of concentrating on the ritual performance, some mediums have started to separate the distribution spatially from the arena of the ritual performance by having the items filled into plastic bags ‘offstage’ and give each participant their bag on their way out. For the great majority of Four Palace mediums, however, the offerings remain their most crucial concern, as this is their principal ‘investment’ into the supernatural

world that earns them ‘interest’ in the human world - both in the sense that the deities are expected to reward them with *lộc* and bestow well-being and prosperity upon them, as well as in the sense that the distribution of offerings reinforces their bonds with other humans.

Conclusion

My discussion started out from the concept of *lộc*, a term that, taken in its abstract sense, refers to fate-fortune and prosperity, and in a more concrete sense to an object that has, by way of ritual transformation, been imbued with the potency of the supernatural realm to bring wealth and good fortune to its receiver. This transformation happens through the act of making an offering to a deity. I have conceived of *lộc* as a gift, and as Mauss and others have pointed out, gifts consolidate relations through understandings of obligatory reciprocity. In this light, as Alexander Soucy (2006:115) pointed out, *lộc* “can be understood as a material representation of the bond between two agents, supernatural or otherwise.”

Exchange relations between the world of earthly world and its divine counterpart, the otherworld, have always been central elements of Vietnamese religious belief and ritual practice (Taylor 2003:225). The supernatural realm is imagined as a reflection of the human world (*‘đương sao, âm vậy’*), which is why their inhabitants are thought of as having the same needs and desires as mortals. Transactional sacrificial practices are therefore understood as a constitutive part of the

reciprocal relationship between people, ancestors, and deities that keep the flow of wealth and prosperity in constant motion.

On a more mundane level, *lộc* also has important social functions: It generates obligations, strengthens the emotional bonds of relationships, and may elevate, yet also challenge, a person's status within the ritual community. In Four Palace mediumship, sumptuous offerings expressing a medium's fate-fortune and wealth are presented to the many deities of the pantheon, reciprocated as divine gifts and redistributed among the ritual participants as potent tokens of the deities' benevolence. Mediums engaged in market activities, for example, often feel that they receive *lộc* in terms of increased business profits as a direct consequence of their ritual service to the deities. This, however, also seems to increase the pressure to spend more lavishly on rituals in order to secure the deities unremitting benevolence. Many see this trend with critical eyes. Moreover, it is felt that lavish displays of ritual generosity are increasingly motivated by a desire to compete with other mediums in organizing ever more sumptuous *hầu đồng* rituals. Ritual ostentation and status competition among mediums were therefore at the heart of the debates regarding the commodification and commercialization of Four Palace mediumship in the early 2000s. The question whether these trends show signs of intensification or decline in the current volatile economic climate would undoubtedly be an interesting starting point for further research into the vibrant and

complex world of Four Palace mediumship in contemporary urban Vietnam.

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