

## THE TRANSFORMED PROCESS IN THE CULT OF ÔNG BỒN OF VIETNAMESE - CHINESE IN THE SOUTH VIETNAM

**Abstract:** *In the process of settling in Vietnam, the Chinese community has shown the diversity, creativity, flexibility and transformation when they settled in the new land. In the religious domain, they mostly worship Guan Gong (Quan Công), Matsu (Thiên Hậu), etc. There were shrines to worship Ông Bồn in places where the Chinese settled such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam in particular. The cult of Ông Bồn marked their immigration in the new land. In the process of expanding, there was a transformation from natural god to personal god and finally to natural god in the cult of Ông Bồn that met the Chinese religious needs in the context of industrialization, especially in Hồ Chí Minh City. The cult of Ông Bồn helped to confirm that the Chinese considered their settlements as their homeland. It also proved the trend of transferring from immigrants to become Vietnamese citizens.*

**Keywords:** *Cult, Ông Bồn, Chinese, South, Vietnam.*

### 1. Introduction

Chinese<sup>1</sup> is one of 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam with the fairly early immigration process and settlement. They belong to many dialects such as Fujian, Cantonese, Teochew, Hainanese, etc. During the process of living in Vietnam, the Chinese have modified their religious life. Religions of the Chinese are one of the criteria to determine the racial cultural identity. Thus, the research on religion, especially on the cult of Ông Bồn, has contributed to learning about the immigration process and settlement of Chinese in Vietnam, as well as the social context of the international integration, industrialization and urbanization in the South Vietnam (Nam Bộ). This article focuses on studying the position, role

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and change of function of the cult of Ông Bồn of Chinese communities in the South, especially, in Ho Chi Minh City in the current period.

## **2. The cult of Ông Bồn of Chinese from the myth to reality from myth to reality**

Religion has an important role in the Chinese spiritual life. Chinese believes that everything has a soul, so their worship's objects are presented in the Heaven (Thượng giới), the World on the Earth (Hạ giới), and the Lower World (Âm giới). Each object of worship meets a certain extent in the Chinese life. Some deities are worshipped both in the family's house and in community places of worship such as Quan Thánh (Guan Gong), Thiên Hậu (Matsu), Ông Bồn. Based on the concept as much worship as much happiness and fortune, so the Chinese are not afraid to diversify the worship of divines in their family as well as at the community places of worship.

Along with the deities that were brought from their native country as Quan Thánh, Thiên Hậu, the cult of Ông Bồn was worshiped the indigenous deities who governed the new land where the Chinese settled. Therefore, when mentioning the folk-worship of the Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, it cannot help mentioning the cult of Ông Bồn. There are many different opinions about the identity of Ông Bồn. There are some main ideas about this deity as follow:

*Ông Bồn is Ch'eng-huang (the patron god of the city):* Chinese think that *Thành* (City) where many people live, it is surrounded by walls; *Hoàng* is the trench around the City (it is called *Trì* if it has water) which help to protect the City. The ancient Chinese believed that *Thành* and *Hoàng* were protected by a deity which was the Ch'eng-huang (the Tutelary of the City). This deity did not just protect the City/Citadel, blessed people in the region (so called Bồn Đầu Phúc Thần), but the deity also played a role in supervising all activities of the city's residents and every year the deity had a comment of merit, guilt, reward, punishment, then it was submitted to God.

In China, the Patron God of the city that protected the urban residents appeared in 555, in the Northern Qi. Then, in the Tang dynasty, each time of establishing new administrative structures, they were built the Patron God of the city temple. Next, in the Song dynasty, the worship of the Tutelary was listed in the typical worship. Finally, in the Ming dynasty,

the worship of the Tutelary of the city reached the peak. Thus, the Patron God of the city was the natural God, which was personified in the historical characters such as mandarins, writers, poets, etc.).

*Ông Bồn* is *T'u-ti* or the God of the land and the God of Wealth (*Thổ Địa - Thần Tài*): Chinese conceive that *T'u-ti* is the God that governs the land, helps humankind has fortune in business and a happy life. The God of Wealth brings fortune for the family. Therefore, the God of the land and the God of Wealth are revered by the Chinese. There is a couplet (Chinese poetry): “the God of the land brings white jade, the God of Wealth brings gold” in the shrine of these Gods. For the Chinese, the God of the land is one of the Gods of Wealth. In other words, the agriculture has played an important role in history, the land and the other farm products that have originated from the land, so the God of the land is the God of Wealth. In addition, the God of the land has functioned as the God of Wealth because it originates from the Five Elements theory “The earth generates the metal”.

According to the Five Elements theory, “The earth generates the metal”, the God of the land is homogenized of the God of Wealth. Therefore, the Chinese use the image of an old man with silver hair and beard, wearing a hat, granting gold to people as the idol of the God of Wealth. The image of this deity is worshiped at the shrine of the God of the land and the God of Wealth of the Chinese<sup>2</sup>.

It should be noted that the doctrine of the God of the land of the Chinese is fairly diverse and complex, because they are referenced to different theories. At the places of worship of the Chinese in the South, *Ông Bồn* is also understood in many meanings. For example, *Nhị Phủ* shrine (known as *Ông Bồn* pagoda) dedicated to the God of the land of *Chợ Lớn* area, at 5 District, Ho Chi Minh City. According to the plaque that wrote the official name of God “*Nhị Phủ Miếu Đại Bá Công*”, it is homogenized *Ông Bồn*. The horizontal image hanged in front of the *Nhị Phủ* Temple wrote: “I am the God of the land” (*Ngô Thổ Địa Dã*). It shows this is the God of the land, the God of Wealth, and the personal God. In fact, this is *Thổ Phủ* God, one of five territorial deities, that protects storage of goods, and then it is interpreted broadly as the God that protects markets, especially *Chợ Lớn* area. In addition, there are shrines which just dedicate to the God of the land (*Phúc Đức Chính*

Thần) in areas of the Chinese residents. The other places of worship also dedicate to the God of the land with the functions of protecting for temples. At home, the God of the land is often worshiped in the front door with a simple altar, is called Môn Khẩu Thổ Địa Tiếp Dẫn Tài Thần. So, this God has the function of bringing fortune to the owner.

Moreover, the Chinese also worship the other Gods of Wealth like Cai Bo Xing Jun (Tài Bạch Tinh Quân). Cai Bo Xing Jun is a group of 5 Gods, Long Hổ Huyền Đàn Chân Quân (or Triệu Nguyên Soái/ Triệu Công Minh) as the leader and 4 other assistants such as Chiêu Bảo Thiên Tôn Tiêu Thắng, Nạp Trân Thiên Tôn Tài Bảo, Chiêu Tài Sứ Giả Trần Cửu Công, Lợi Thị Thiên Quan Diêu Thiểu Tư.

At the front door of Chinese often place an altar for Môn Khẩu Thổ Địa Tiếp Dẫn Tài Thần, inside the house; there is a larger worship room to worship the God of the land and the God of Wealth. The Chinese consider the God of the land as the Lord of the land that brings the product to human being. This God has the responsibility to protect the peace of the inhabitants and creatures which are living in the territory.

*Ông Bồn is a personal God:* According to the work *Gia Định trảng Phật tích cổ* of the author Lý Văn Hùng, Ông Bồn was a mandarin of the Yuan dynasty (1269 - 1368) named Chu Đạt Quan. He was a historian and a famous travel diary writer, participated in the Chinese Embassy in many Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam; he had a chance to meet many oversea Chinese here. After returning from Chân Lạp, he wrote *Chân Lạp phong thổ ký*<sup>3</sup>, it described the customs, land and inhabitants of the Indochina in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps the diplomatic corps was accompanied by the immigrants, so he was respected by Chinese community as Ông Bồn, the immigrant forefather. In Vietnam, the temple Nhị Phủ, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City is one of the worship places dedicated to the mandarin Chu Đạt Quan (Đại Bá Công).

According to the conception of the Cantonese Chinese, among the immigrants in the new land, the first dead person was buried in the cemetery called Đại Bá Công, the second called Thứ Bá Công. These people have a duty to look after the tombs; thereby they also protect the new land. Therefore, Ông Bồn is also Đại Bá Công. The bell of Nhị Phủ temple registered “Nhị Phủ Đại Bá Công Ất Dậu trọng thu cát đán...” (1765).

The Fujian Chinese also worship Đại Bá Công. They consider him as the God that has the ability to eradicate disasters and epidemics. He was the 13<sup>th</sup> son of the Trần family. Under the reign of Vĩnh Lạc (1403 - 1424), the king sent off a cruise boat led by Zheng He to across the Southeast Asian countries to spread the Chinese culture and brought to the Ming Dynasty the precious treasures from India, Siam, Burma, Cambodia, Đại Việt, Champa, Tân Gia Ba (Singapore today), and Indonesia. As an explorer, researcher, diplomat, linguist, etc., so Zheng He brought the Chinese to settle or he regulated orderly at the places where the Chinese had settled. After his decease, thanks to his merits, the oversea Chinese worshiped him as a God, the king ordained him as Tam Bửu Công, also called Bồn Đầu Công or Ông Bồn.

A part of the Chinese in the Philippines considered Ông Bồn as Bạch Phi Hiên, a mastermind of Zheng He in the Southern Sea expedition. Arriving on the Philippines' island, Bạch Phi Hiên lost communication and lived on the island. Thus, he had great contribution to the Chinese on the island; after his decease, he was regarded as the God, also called Ông Bồn.

In addition, the God of Wealth “Phúc Đức Chính Thần” was considered as Trương Phúc Đức, was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> of the Second month (according to the lunar calendar) in the Zhou dynasty. When he was 36 years old, he served the court as a mandarin who took care the collection of taxes. When he was incumbent, he loved people as his children and understood their suffering, he had deeds to help poor people, and so he was admired and respected by people. He died at 102 years old in the third year of the King Mu of Zhou. After his death three days, his face kept constant color with rosy skin, people were astonished and they respected him as the God. Since then, he often helped people, so people worshiped and adored him. The Court honored him as Phúc Đức Chính Thần. Chinese built shrines to worship him everywhere<sup>4</sup>.

### **3. Transformation of the Ông Bồn cult of Chinese in the South Vietnam**

As mentioned, the Nhị Phủ shrine, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City has the worshiped plaque “Nhị Phủ Miếu Đại Bá Công”. In this case, Đại Bá Công was considered as Chu Đạt Quan, a courtier of the Yuan dynasty who arrived Chân Lạp (the South region). The main function of this deity is

patronage of wealth. It should be added that Nhị Phủ temple also printed the wooden picture of Ông Bồn and the sentence “Nhị Phủ miếu Bồn Đầu Công trấn trạch bình an”. Thus, Bồn Đầu Công has the other function as a doorkeeper as well as housekeeper<sup>5</sup>.

While the Nhị Phủ shrine of the Fujian Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City only was dedicated to Ông Bồn, many other shrines of the Cantonese, Chaozhou Chinese in the South worshiped Ông Bồn and Bà Bồn. The worship this couple showed the cosmos view on Yin-Yang of the Chinese such as the Thiên Hậu Cung shrine, Thủ Dầu Một town, Bình Dương province; the ancient temple Thất Phủ, in Bạc Liêu town, Bạc Liêu province, etc.<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, the God Phúc Đức Chính Thần at the Nhị Phủ shrine has the function of land protection (personal god), bestowal fortune (natural god). Annually, this place of worship takes place many large festivals, especially on 15<sup>th</sup> of the First month and on 15<sup>th</sup> of the Eight month (according to the lunar calendar) that are the date of birth and the date of death of Ông Bồn. The offerings include roast pork, raw pork, boiled chicken, fruit, incense, lamps, etc.

There are four shrines dedicated to Ông Bồn at Cầu Kè district, Trà Vinh province such as Minh Đức Cung (the first pagoda of Ông Bồn), Vạn Ứng Phong Cung (the second pagoda of Ông Bồn), Vạn Niên Phong Cung (the third pagoda of Ông Bồn), Niên Phong Cung (the fourth pagoda of Ông Bồn or Cây Sanh pagoda). The Chaozhou Chinese at Trà Vinh thinks that Ông Bồn is Zheng He. There are four words “Bồn Đầu Phúc Thần” at Vạn Niên Phong Cung shrine (the third pagoda of Ông Bồn). It shows that Bồn Đầu Công and Phúc Đức Chính Thần is the one.

In the main image of the ancient temple Thất Phủ that worships the God Phúc Đức Chính Thần at Biên Hòa city, Đồng Nai province has the tablet in the Vietnamese language “Ông Phước Đức”; however, it also has the worshiped plaque inscribed the Sino characters “Bồn Đầu Công Linh Ứng”. “Ông Phước Đức” is the common name of Phúc Đức Chính Thần (Trung Ương Mậu Ký Phúc Đức Chính Thần), means the God of Land of houses and temples. Thus, we can understand why the God at the ancient temple Thất Phủ has two names as “Ông Phước Đức” and “Bồn Đầu Công Linh Ứng”. Phúc Đức Chính Thần is the God that manages the land of temples<sup>7</sup>.

The Hòa An temple in Sóc Trăng province is dedicated to Mr. Trịnh Ân (Cảm Thiên Đại Đế), the God blessed villagers, called Ông Bồn.

Therefore, in the development process, the image of Ông Bồn of the Chinese communities in the South has been transformed from a natural God (the God of Land) → to a personal God (Zhou Daguan / Zheng He) → to a natural God (God of Fortune). This transformation was attributed to Ông Bồn as a natural God; the God of Fortune bestowed much wealth on people. This phenomenon is associated with the current context of urbanization and industrialization of the country, especially, in Ho Chi Minh City, where the majority of Chinese are traders who engage in economic activities.

Currently, according to the Chinese (in the South) opinion, Ông Bồn is a deity with multi-functions. They worship this God to seek the peaceful life, much money, health and happiness.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Ông Bồn has been a special deity of the Chinese community in the South. The image of Ông Bồn marked the settlement of the Chinese in the new land. Initially, it was a natural God in the immigrant Chinese consciousness that had originated from their homeland worship such as the Patron God of the city (Thành hoàng), Bồn Đầu Công, the God of Fortune (Thần Tài), the God of Land (Thổ Địa). In the process of the Chinese settlement, the natural God has gradually been personified to transform into a historical character as Chu Đạt Quan, Zheng He, Bạch Phi Hiển, Trương Phước Đức, Trịnh Ân. Although this God was established on any image, the Chinese community in the South considered this God as Phúc Đức Chính Thần, the God of Fortune (Thần Tài), a natural God.

Thus, the image of Ông Bồn of the Chinese community in the South transformed from the natural God to the personal God and finally the natural God. In the process of settling in the South, the personification of deities helped the Chinese immigrants had an awareness of the examples of sacrifice, help the community. Thereby, the personal God was worshiped because they thought that this God had empathy and support them. It helped the Chinese had more mental resources to overcome difficulties, to establish a new life in their new land. The multi-functions of Ông Bồn led to the popular worship of this God in the Chinese

community in the South Vietnam. The worship of Ông Bồn also showed that the Chinese considered Vietnam as their homeland. This proved the trend of changing from the Chinese immigrants to Vietnamese citizenship./.

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**Notes:**

- 1 There are five criteria for determining the oversea Chinese such as Chinese origin or assimilated, settle or live abroad, have citizenship of the host country, not assimilated, identified themselves as Chinese.
- 2 Sở Văn hóa và Thông tin Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, Ban Quản lý Di tích Lịch sử - Văn hóa và Danh lam Thắng cảnh (2001), *Di tích lịch sử văn hóa Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh: Một số cơ sở tín ngưỡng dân gian*: 112. [Department of Culture and Information of Hồ Chí Minh City, the Management Board of Monuments of History - Culture and Attractions (2001), *The Historical Cultural Monuments in Hồ Chí Minh City: Some Folk-worship Places*: 112]
- 3 Chu Đạt Quan (Hà Văn Tấn dịch, 2011), *Chân Lạp phong thổ ký*, Nxb. Thế giới, Hà Nội. [Chu Đạt Quan (Hà Văn Tấn trans., 2011), *A Writing of Chân Lạp's Land, Climate and Inhabitants*, Hanoi: the World).
- 4 Nhiều tác giả (2012), *Phim tư liệu về Ông Bồn*, Tư liệu Ban Dân tộc Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh. [Authors (2012), *Documentary Film about Ông Bồn*, Document of Ethnology Board of Hồ Chí Minh City).
- 5 Ban Trị sự Thất Phủ Cổ miếu (2010), *Thất Phủ cổ miếu*, Nxb. Đồng Nai: 123. [Executive Board of the Thất Phủ Cổ miếu (2010), *The Ancient Temple Thất Phủ*, Publisher: ĐồngNai: 123]
- 6 Trần Hồng Liên (2005), *Văn hóa người Hoa ở Nam Bộ: Tín ngưỡng & tôn giáo*, Nxb. Khoa học xã hội, Hà Nội: 57, 113. [Trần Hồng Liên (2005), *The Chinese Culture in Vietnam: Faith & Religion*, Hanoi: Social Sciences: 57, 113].
- 7 Ban Trị sự Thất Phủ Cổ miếu (2010), *Thất Phủ cổ miếu*, sđd: 123. [Executive Board of the Thất Phủ Cổ miếu (2010), *The Ancient Temple Thất Phủ*, Publisher: Đồng Nai: 123]

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