

## DOCTORAL THESIS IN BRIEF

NGUYỄN NGỌC MAI. **Going into trance in new circumstances (Case Studies in Northern Vietnam)**

*Specialization: Culture Studies*

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Going into trance or mounting the medium is a ritual of spirit mediumship connecting with Đạo Mẫu – Vietnamese mother goddess religion, particularly in Northern Delta. It is a cultural event that attracts the interest of many scholars. Today, mounting the medium is not only a kind of cultural activities but also meet the certain demands of people in new time. Other aspects of this event, however, are not systematically clarified as well as lots of questions are raised about its existence. This pointed out the necessary to have a completed research work which fully describes about going into trance and receiving incarnations of deities since the Reformation.

With the expectation of answering all above questions, Nguyen Ngoc Mai picked up the issue on “Going into trance in new circumstances” with case study in Northern Delta as her thesis.

The thesis includes Introduction, 4 chapters and Conclusion.

In Chapter I (page 17 to 49), the author provided a summary of going into trance and receiving incarnations of deities in Northern Delta as well as some viewpoints on current studies.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, going into trance and receiving incarnations of the deities had a fast growth in Northern Delta. These kinds of old magic were only done by young kids who were innocent and pure. Later, mediums have turned into grown

up and special ones. Basically, this is a type of communication with God through followers of Saman religion. It is believed that God could incarnate the medium in order to forecast, eliminate spirit evils, heal and bless for the incense and disciples. When incarnation happens, medium are no longer themselves but the god embodied into them.

Author outlined three main viewpoints about going into trance and receiving incarnations of the deities as following:

- *Empathy phenomenology*: It is the most popular concept, or exactly the idea of those followers of both religions as the medium. They considered the medium don goes into trance is when the empathy happened; therefore their activities are God’s at that moment. Also, going into trance in Northern Delta is a kind of empathy religion which belongs to Shaman religion.

- *The psychology of religion*: Representative of this viewpoint is Mr. Nguyễn Duy Hinh when he considered that “going into trance is an ancient phenomenon which was lately learnt and developed into a part of religious beliefs by another religion, for example, ancestor worship, Taoism, Shamanism”. He also offered a viewpoint of going into trance is an in-normal phenomenon of a normal person when he/she is incapable of controlling his own behavior. And, this mechanism only appears in some special ones who have ability called “căn Đổng”.

- *Cult phenomenon*: The most specific example of this concept was reflected through press activities in

1930s. It is the secret of going into trance and the belief system is not based on any doctrines, has result in the difficulties of controlling and monitoring and led to the negative views on this phenomenon.

“Going into trance” in Northern delta of Vietnam are remnants of an ancient type of magic. The progress of giving up rooting factors and receiving new elements to survive has made it turn into a complicated phenomenon of culture with spiritual identity. Rather than a religious ritual practice of incarnation, “going into trance” today has been tended to be a type of performance for those who wish to have a self freedom, do business or connect social relationship of groups of people, author confirmed.

Chapter 2 (page 50 to 107) has analyzed this phenomenon in the new circumstance of Northern Delta in accordance with impacts of the market economy.

The market economy has created significant changes in all fields such as politics, economy, society, culture as well as Vietnamese people’s spiritual and psychological life. Going into trance has been in same situation when it has become more metamorphosis and tends to restructure into a synthetic form of spiritual culture, rather than a simple practice of religious rites. Although it keeps the religious appearance but there are changes of type and concept of “going into trance” today. For example, they are transformation in physiology of entities as well as the purpose of this activity.

*Concept:* Today there is only few of Medium who is skilled in hypnosis; therefore they basically use music with many instrumentals which improve the

function of promoting human emotion rather than invoking the Holy Spirit. Also, the presence of Spirits is mostly expressed through costumes. The way of showing Spirits’ power, for example slitting blades, and the ability to heal diseases of medium are fading away and only exist as a symbol.

*Form:* The scale of rituals are much bigger while the way of organization is more diversified, more local with higher frequency.

In this chapter, author has analyzed the positive and negative sides of “going into trance”, as following:

*Positive sides:* The boom of this activity in Mother temples has generates incomes which support for the restoration as well as charity works as helping homeless or orphans. Those temples which have relationship with organizations have even contributed to the local budget and improved the economic and social standards. This not only revive the cultural and historical monuments, but also facilitate the foundation for the growth of spiritual tourism. On the other hands, the boom of “going into trance”, which depends on the supply and demand, has contributed to the employment and stable income for some social groups.

*Negative sides:* Due to the open characteristic and the origin related to the economy and commerce, “going into trance” has turned into “spiritual services”. This activity has not managed by any specific mechanism yet. In addition, the low ability to understand about Spirits and their use has led to the opportunity for fake medium to cheat on people. It does not stop at the lost of individuals but also led to another

consequences such as the disorder of behavior and personality.

Chapter 3 (p.108-168) describes the mental, biological, and socioeconomic life of modern day mediums.

The paper attempts to study the effects of entering trance on the personal lives (mental, spiritual, and socioeconomic lives) of mediums, as well as the impact that socioeconomic factors may have on spiritual communication. The author delves into the personal lives of mediums and familial influence, and societal influence to which they are subject. Five categories of people can be defined: category 1: highly religious families; category 2: homosexuals; category 3: workers, traders; category 4: troubled families; category 5: those affected by serious diseases or exhibit symptoms of insanity. While in trance, not only do all members of the above categories benefit psychologically, but they also receive a form of intangible protection afforded by those of similar circumstances, which will allow them to regain composure and peace of mind. Many mediums act in their own interest by drawing disciples into trances, causing a waste of human resources, assets, and other negative health effects.

In Chapter 4 (p. 169-201), the author takes into consideration the role and significance of trance and forms the following summary:

*1) Entering trance to reflect society in the North Coast Delta.* Just like any other form of religion or belief, spiritual communication and trance can provide quite a lot of information on Vietnamese society at the end of the XVII century and the beginning of the XVIII century.

In addition, Northern Vietnamese society during the period from 1930 to 1986 is reflected at each step of the ritual. Since the advent of mediumship, there have been many changes to the ritual, which are indicative of the evolution of Vietnamese society.

*2) Spiritual communication and trance are indicative of societal instability in the North Coast Delta.* The increase of religious followers and prevalence of rituals, including mediumship, expose the insecurity that plagues today's society. It is this lack of security that calls for spiritual support and protection: poor physical and mental health (desire for cure); poor economic conditions and market risks (desire for fortune); uncertainty with regard to the deceased (desire for proper burial);

*3) The author points out a number of the purposes of spiritual communication and trance, including: 1/With regard to mental and spiritual life:* entering trance allows for peace of mind and serenity; while in trance, mediums are able to reveal their competencies, positions, and mental states... *2/With regard to cultural life:* the fluid combination of trance, the atmosphere, costumes, and dances has turned spiritual communication into quite a spectacular "cultural performance." Entering trance is much akin to a very interesting play and is associated with so much profound information on folklore. Mediumship casts light on historical and cultural vestiges.

The thesis was defended successfully and approved by the State Thesis Commission, Academy of Social Sciences, in March 2011.

*Introduced  
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