

Current Practices Related to the Belief in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms in Thanh Hoa Province Today¹

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Received 27 March 2020; published 15 October 2020

Abstract: *The worship of Mother Goddesses has been developing, especially since Practices related to the Viet beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms was recognized by UNESCO as a representative intangible cultural heritage of humanity. Many shrines have been opened, temples and palaces have been renovated, and the Lên đồng (spirit mediumship) rituals have been in full bloom. Besides positive factors, there remain negative ones including mismatching, modernizing and profiteering rituals. Based on the 2019 - 2020 anthropological fieldwork, the paper clarifies the current practice of worshipping Mother Goddesses of Three Realms in Thanh Hoa province in contemporary society.*

Keywords: Beliefs in Mother Goddesses of Three Realms, Practices Related to the Viet Beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms, Lên Đồng Spirit Mediumship Rituals, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Thanh Hoa Province

1. The rise of the belief in the Mother Goddesses in Thanh Hoa province

The geo-cultural and geopolitical land of Thanh Hoa province covers many outstanding features of the national cultural development history. It is also a cradle of integration of many cultures in the North

and the South of Vietnam. There exists a unique and diverse system of tangible and intangible cultural heritages, including the belief in the Mother Goddesses which originated from the worship of goddesses, over time, becoming the belief of the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms. In recent years, the practice related to the belief in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms in Thanh Hoa province has flourished from urban to rural areas. As of 2017, there are about 1,500 historical - cultural and scenic relics that have been rated, preserved and more than 4,000 private palaces and shrines

¹ The article is under the framework of the ministry-level project (2019-2020) "Cultural management orientation on Vietnamese ritual practices related to the belief in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms" headed by Assoc.Prof.Dr. Nguyen Thi Hien, managed by the Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts.

have not been listed (in-depth interview with officials of Cultural Heritage Office, Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Thanh Hoa province).

The practices related to the belief in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms includes many components, namely, spirit possession rituals, performing arts, visual arts, and art of words, of which the first mentioned plays a key role. Singers singing Songs for the Spirits with lyrics, tune and music invoke spirits to incarnate a medium in each spirit sequence.

A consistent procedure of the spirit possession ritual is as follows. Mediums eat vegetarian food, purify their bodies in advance and wear white costumes before sitting in front of the dragon-and-phonenix-carved table at the altar to make prayer and present a letter of request to the god/goddess, then perform the spirit possession rituals. An unwritten rule for the ritual assistants is to use burning incense tags back and forth on the clothes to purify before the medium wears them. Besides, there are two or four people (must be the one who has participated spirit possession rituals before or opened the shrine) to assist the medium in dressing a scarf, preparing incense, candles, a piece of paper to ignite the fire, props and jewelry.

The colours of costumes, jewelry, props and votive offerings are all accorded with the history, merits and functions of the god/goddess in the spirit sequence. For example, in the spirit sequence of Kings of Tran Dynasty, the medium wears red costumes with an embroidered dragon robe, a pair of boots, cap for military mandarins, dances with a flag and a sword depicting when he took up arms against Mongol Yuan invasions. While in the spirit sequence

of the Third Grand Mandarin of Water Palace, the medium wears white costumes, dances with two swords, in the sequences of courtiers, princes, mistresses or masters, he/she wears costumes of ethnic groups, collar necklaces and dances with a piece of paper to ignite the fire.

During the spirit sequence, the medium covers his/her head with a red scarf which is only opened as he/she is incarnated. There's a singer singing Songs for the Spirit to praise the merits of the god/goddess as well as the medium's dance. The medium's costume, jewelry, performance and decoration of votive offerings are of high artistic value... All of these factors attract a large number of attendees to the spirit sequences. Regarding the cultural anthropology, the practice related to the belief in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms has many values in terms of history, culture, economy, politics, ethnicity, religion, belief, dance, folk knowledge, traditional customs, etc.

On December 1, 2016, UNESCO recognized the Vietnamese practice related to the belief in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms in *the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* due to its high values of culture and arts, which paves the way for the restoration of several temples and palaces, the increasing occurrence of spirit sequences and the rise of private palaces in recent years.

During the implementation of the project "Cultural management orientation on Vietnamese ritual practices related to the belief in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms" (2019-2020), we attended two spirit sequences in Thanh Hoa province. The first 80-medium sequence was held at Mo palace (Ha Thai commune, Ha Trung

district), under the Program of Cultural and Religious Space in 2019 which took place from 07-09 September 2019 by the Vietnam Institute of Religious Studies and People's Committee of Ha Trung district. The second one with 40 mediums happened on December 22, 2019 at Bà Cầu Sâng palace (Nam Ngan ward, Thanh Hoa city) held by the Thanh Hoa Cultural Heritage Association. We also used two types of questionnaire and conducted in-depth interviews with a number of cultural managers, researchers, mediums and worshippers on several issues related to the thesis¹.

2. Current practices related to the belief in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms in Thanh Hoa province

The florescence of practices related to the belief in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms in Thanh Hoa has presented both positive elements and several related changes and problems as follows.

First, the renovation, new construction and expansion of relic spaces have been thriving without a master plan, which diminishes the its values of feng-shui and relic aesthetic. It is encouraging to hear that several local communities make a cash contribution to build spacious, clean and splendid relics, meeting the spiritual needs

of the people. However, these works have partly broken the architectural landscape of various provincial and national historical and cultural relics (the case of Sòng Temple); kiosks selling paper votive offerings in front of the temple door make the landscape in a mess (Cô Chín, Ba Bông temples).

Second, the fusion of the three religions in the practice related to the belief in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms is increasingly popular. The Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva and the Jade Emperor (King of Heaven) statues are both worshipped in the courtyard and inside the palace, respectively, at most of the surveyed relics. During the spirit rituals, there still appears the cases that a shaman writes letters of request in Chinese and uses incense smoke to cast magic spells or utters incantations to keep away the bad spirits or cure diseases in spirit sequences of Kings of Tran Dynasty, the Fifth Grand Mandarin of Tranh River, the Inspector (Quan Đệ Ngũ Tuần Tranh), and Third Mistress of Water (Cô Bơ). The altars dedicated to Mother Goddesses of Three Realms has been built in several locations. Many monotheistic institutions have built an adjoining palace to worship Mother Goddesses. Even communal houses worshipping the village tutelary gods and/or temples have an altar dedicated to the Mother Goddesses, for example, communal house of Tho Son commune, Trieu Son district, Doc Cuoc temple (Sam Son town), Ba Trieu temple (Hau Loc district), temple at the sacred fish stream (Cam Thuy district), etc.

Third, the chaos of spirit sequences occurs in various places. In general, the practices related to the belief in the Mother Goddesses in Thanh Hoa province was unplanned, poorly organized and

¹ The first questionnaire sample is for the cultural managers, the second one is for those who practice the belief in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms. Implementation time is from September 4 to December 25, 2019, divided into four periods, 15 days each. The total number of questionnaire collected is 107 (sample 1: 25, sample 2: 82). In-depth interviews with a total times of 10 hours and 38 minutes, was carried out in December 2019 with researchers, cultural heritage managers, mediums, temple custodians and worshippers at the palaces.

inconsistently managed by the State from the central to local levels. *The mediumship sessions has been popular and widespread, even in pagodas and at communal houses* (in-depth interview with Mr. Pham Tu, Deputy Director of Center for Research and Preservation of Vietnamese Cultures and Beliefs).

Currently, not only local people but also senior mediums and mediumship groups from other provinces/cities participate in the ritual practices of Mother Goddesses in Thanh Hoa province, most crowded in temples of Sòng, Cô Chín, Ba Bông, Phó Cát, etc. There are even many institutions, centers and groups that request senior mediums to pay the fees for performing spirit possession rituals and issue them professional certificates. According to the cultural managers, *the organization and performance of spirit possession rituals and certificate issuance has changed its traditional cultural values from ritual to performing practices in a private market for the sake of some individuals and groups. This situation should be prohibited* (in-depth interview with Ms. Bui Thi Tuyet, Heritage Management Division, Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Thanh Hoa province).

Some mediums even performed the spirit possession rituals at private shrines in the districts of Trieu Son, Hoang Hoa, Yen Dinh... to make a profit, which falsifies the true value of the belief in the Mother Goddesses praying for good weather, good health, good crops and prosperity.

Besides, *there are cases where many centers hold mediumship performance at such places as a communal house, pagoda, ancestral home or cultural center other than temples, shrines dedicated to the*

Mother Goddesses. The fact that some groups of people have considered the belief in the Mother Goddesses their own business market has falsified and distorted it, which causes much frustration among mediums who are devoted to the belief (in-depth interview with Mrs. Bui Thi Tuyet, Heritage Management Division, Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism Thanh Hoa). Most sadly, the commercialization has occurred, *in which senior mediums asked their followers pay for their performance* (in-depth interview with medium Nguyen Thi Th., Hoang Hoa Tham ward, Ba Dinh district, Hanoi city).

The uncontrollable development of spirit possession rituals in times of market economy has smoothed the way for some individuals to make profits and change its socio-cultural values (in-depth interview, Assoc.Prof.Dr. Nguyen Thi Hien, Deputy Director of the National Research Institute of Cultural and Arts).

Fourth, there was an outrageous change in mediums, their outfit and songwriting.

Previously, only those who were supposed to have “fate” or those who were supposed to “pay off their karma” had to enter into the mediumship and/or open the palaces. But recently, there have been numerous wealthy people considering the mediumship as a means for entertainment and show-off, even take advantage of it to make profits. For example, on September 8, 2019, the medium named Bui Van H. wore jewelry worth tael of gold during a spirit mediumship at the Mo palace. *Many monks also participate in the mediumship, apply bold makeup with chalky cheeks and red lips and turn on the loudspeaker to the maximum, which makes the spirit mediumship lose its elegance* (in-depth interview with Mr. Pham Tu, Deputy

Director of the Center for Research and Preservation of Vietnamese Culture and Beliefs).

Changes and distortions in mediums' costumes, jewelry, dance or purposes for doing business/making profits have made the devoted and dedicated mediums discontent. A former medium complained that *there has been too many mediums now. Previously, it was compulsory for a medium to enter the mediumship at grand temples and palaces for 3 years before opening a palace for his/her own followers. Nowadays, many newcomers who have not had any experience have come to work, so they do not thoroughly understand the meaning and significance of the mediumship, which leads to a variety of variations and distortions in rituals and procedures. For example, they do not know which foot to step first, which foot to step after, how to walk, how to bow, etc. How bad it is to do holy work like that!* (in-depth interview with former medium Nguyen Thi H, 90 years old, Bim Son town, at Mo palace, Ha Thai commune, Ha Trung district).

The case of fake incarnation of the gods/goddesses and spreading their words also appeared in many relics in the province.

On site observation at Mo palace on September 8, 2019, we noticed that the medium Nguyen from Ho Chi Minh city entering five spirit sequences with a lifeless face does not have fate associated with holy spirits. The absolutely awkward dances of flags, swords, pieces of paper to ignite fire and the constant smiles has trivialized the sacred rituals.

The previously strict depiction of clothes, gestures, and facial expressions accorded with each spirit sequence have been changed

so far, making it impossible for attendees to recognize which saint's costume. For example, *many mediums in the sequence of the Third Princess - the Princess of Water Palace (Cô Bơ) wear skirts while they should be wearing pants, because the Princess is depicted rowing across rivers, if wearing a skirt, the wind will blow her skirt. She took refuge in the Buddha, so she often wore white robes and prayer beads; meanwhile, the mediums wear shirts and head scarf like the one in the sequence of mistresses of mountain villages, and silver or gold collar necklaces. While in the sequence of male grand mandarins, mediums wear embroidered cloud shoes that was only for female saints* (in-depth interview with medium Tran Kim H, Tien Duong palace, Nam Dinh province).

We also observed that during the spirit possession rituals at Mo palace, the medium named Th. (Phong Tho district, Lai Chau province) brought along musicians, even used music of Thai ethnic group in the Northwest and the lyrical songs in the sequence of the Mistress. Mediums Bui Van H. (Luong Son district, Hoa Binh province) and Ph. (Bim Son town, Thanh Hoa province) has had a team of backup dancers dressed in costumes of Muong ethnic group, playing gongs in the sequence of the Goddess of Thác Bờ. More disrespectful, there was a male medium (Hai Duong) in the sequence of Kings of Tran dynasty wearing costume jewelry, flashy makeup which was not in line with traditional norms of this sequence.

In the practices related to the belief in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms, there has been few followers of certain norms and standards that govern them (Vu Hong Thuat, 2016: 232).

Fifth, there exist cases of burning votive papers, intercession, fortune telling practice via shaking a full box of numbered fortune telling sticks, and burning incense that has changed and distorted the belief and affected worshipers' physical and spiritual health. *At the beginning of the year, the number of people coming to Ba Bong temple was higher than other time of year, so incense was burned a lot at that time. We recommended that burning incense should be limited, but there has been many worshippers who ignored the temple rules and regulations because it's said that the amount of incense they bought must be burn all, not brought back or thrown away* (in-depth interview with medium Nguyen Van Chung, custodian at Ba Bong temple). *They scrambled to win and traded a seat in a mediumship, dispersed and scattered votive paper offerings at the temple palace, burned too much incense that dense incense smoke was produced* (in-depth interview with medium Nguyen Thi Th, Hoang Hoa Tham ward, Ba Dinh district, Hanoi city). Typically, each god/goddess has different set of votive paper items sold for the worshipers at his/her own temple, which is so large and cumbersome that a large aluminum tray is covered. The fact that the early birds place their offerings on the altar and prolong their prayers that the latecomers wait impatiently trying to put their own offerings on top of others frustrated many people and reduced the solemnity of the worshipping places. Regardless of multi-storey shelves on both sides of the altar for offerings, it only partially meets the demand due to an increasing number of worshipers and failure of extending fixed space. Moreover, many people keep jostling

each other to burn incense and make prayers. *Often, there are cases of praying at one's own discretion and preference, prolonging praying time, praying out loud, disrespecting others... at several temples and palaces in the North* (in-depth interview with Mr. Nguyen Van H, 48 years old, a worshiper from Hanoi city).

Sixth, managing the practices related to the belief in the Mother Goddesses has not yet been unified and coordinated among departments. The lack of strict management by the relic management board and the local authorities has made the Vietnam worship of the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms somewhat abused in terms of its social functions, which can be considered one of the reasons for the chaos and the dearth of solemnity in ritual practices.

Currently, there are two models of relic management in Thanh Hoa province, namely, state management and private management associated with communal authorities. Each model has its own strengths and limitations.

State management model has been applied in Song Temple. The Relic management board of Bim Son town is responsible for supervising the budget revenue and expenditure for relic repair and staff salary, and managing annual donations of tens of billion dong. However, this model reveals such limitations as the irresponsible attitude towards common works and dearth of strict management, which makes the space inside the relic messy, leaves people to wear shoes in the temple. The cases of intercession, singing devotional songs for money still occurs at the Cô Chín and Sòng temples.

The private model associated with the communal authorities to manage the relics and festivals was applied at Mo palace, Ba

Bông temple. The communal authorities participate in operating and supervising ritual practices, organizing festivals and managing donations. The involvement of communal police security, Veterans' Association, Women's Union, Youth Union in the relic management prevents the commercialization of religious and belief activities. The temple custodian, who receives the worshipers' donations placed on the altar, takes responsibility for managing the temple, burning incense and daily cleaning to ensure the neat, spotless and solemn worship space. At Ba Bong temple, the custodian manages, supervises ritual practices inside the temple, and actively allocates funds to restore, repair, build a spacious, clean and splendid relic space, which hereby raises the worshipers' awareness of protecting, preserving and promoting the relic better than the Sòng Temple.

3. Discussion and conclusion

During the development process, the belief in the Mother Goddesses has constantly changed and absorbed new elements to adapt to the society. In the practices related to the belief in the Goddesses of Three Realms, changing costumes, rituals and offerings to suit contemporary society is an inevitable principle which is suitable to people's demands in each region; thereby enhancing a strong vitality for the belief in the Mother Goddess (Nguyen Thi Hien, 2016: 94). Regardless of certain standards and norms, in general, the worshiping practices of the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms is still unplanned and badly organized. The state management for these practices is mainly in pursuant to the Law on Beliefs and Religion in 2016, but has not yet covered all aspects of the belief. The outrageous

changes in the practices related to the belief in Mother Goddesses of Three Realms in Thanh Hoa province show that the State's interference and management is essential to filtrate and assimilate new cultural elements to diversify identities of beliefs, preventing miscellaneous, detrimental factors.

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism should issue regulations on the state management of the practice of Mother Goddess worship, which should specify the responsibilities of the representatives of the institutions and the organization of the ritual practices (relic management board); reward those who have recorded achievements in the work of properly and effectively managing and transmitting the heritage practices; strictly punish individuals and groups who incorrectly comply with the regulations, affecting the national culture in general and the Mother Goddess worship in particular.

At the same time, the relic custodians should pass specific regulations accorded with the local situation. In the long run, it is necessary to build a "Mother Goddess follower community" as a strong professional organization according to the State's regulations, thereby managing the members to operate properly in accordance with the State's regulations and policies, effectively maintaining and preserving the cultural identity of Mother Goddess worship in contemporary life. Besides, it should be strictly forbidden to hold spirit possession rituals in spaces that are not dedicated to the Mother Goddesses. Regulatory agencies and associations are not allowed to issue the certification for mediums.

To avoid making changes in the practice related to beliefs in the Mother Goddesses, it's necessary to establish regulations on

rituals, costumes, dances and music in the 36 spirit sequences, which is a basic framework to distinguish between the right and the wrong in the current practices of worshipping Mother Goddesses of Three Realms.

Currently, while the attire in spirit possession rituals is made of more attractive and beautiful materials and patterns than before, those are too modern or borrow with inappropriated foreign patterns should be avoided. Each spirit sequence has its own proper outfit. It's necessary to limit burning of votive paper offerings, incense, overspending for the spirit possession rituals. During the rituals, the dance moves must be in line with each spirit sequence; the mediums are not allowed to indiscriminately spread the words of god/goddess, or commercialize the spirit mediumship activities.

Eliminating the bad and keeping the good are also the aspiration of those who are dedicated to the belief in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms today. However, much effort must come from many parties, from the regulators to those participating in ritual practices. It is thought that as long as there are still individuals who take advantage of the relics for profit, the belief in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms will still be at risk of being preserved or transformed □

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